

*A Tale Magnolious: The Adventures of An Orphan, Her  
Elephant, and Some Rather Unusual Seeds*

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## Chapter One

# In Which a Thief and a Pachyderm Vanish

Nitty Luce wasn't born a thief. She wasn't born to rescue elephants. Or to make miracles. Nobody ever told her that, though, so she never had reason to doubt. If she'd doubted, none of the bamboozling goings-on in Fortune's Bluff that spring might ever have happened.

But they *did* happen.

The morning started much like any other, with Nitty's empty stomach. It was near on two weeks since she'd run away from Grimsgate Orphanage, two weeks fighting pigs for the slop in their troughs and waiting for breadlines to empty out to scrounge a few dropped crumbs. She wouldn't stoop to begging, not after Headmistress Ricketts's stories of police tossing street urchins into lockup. Just yesterday she'd caught sight of her reflection in a store window, and oh, was she a shambles! Her tumbleweed hair poked out

in all directions, crispy with days-old dust. There was a film over her sun-toasted skin and her flour-sack dress, too, so in the glass she appeared more as a dirt smear than a ten-year-old girl.

“You’ll bunk in prison with the likes of Cutthroat Cob,” Miz Ricketts had told them at the orphanage. She always gave this sinister warning before lights-out, in case any of her wards got ideas about running away at night. “Or worse, Fang-Toothed Lou.”

Nitty didn’t believe a word of it. At least, not during daylight hours. Still, she didn’t like the idea of fangs of any sort, so whenever she caught sight of police officers, she kept her distance.

But this particular morning, she was doing battle with her hunger again, and it was being a downright bully. When she wandered into the heart of a city, a solid piece west of Grimsgate and north of nowhere, she was too light-headed to worry over police. In fact, on reading the poster nailed to a lone withering tree on Main Street, Nitty had to steady herself against a nearby lamppost.

COME ONE, COME ALL!

WITNESS THE DEATH OF A MURDEROUS FOUR-TON BEAST!

PUBLIC HANGING IN THE SQUARE AT HIGH NOON

A GUSTO AND GALLANT SPECTACLE NEVER TO BE FORGOTTEN.

Below the words was a gruesome cartoon drawing of a circus elephant trampling a man, with a small caption: GREAT MAGNOLIOUS KILLS TRAINER IN COLD BLOOD.

Nitty leaned closer, studying the fangs and claws drawn on the elephant, the steam pouring from its mouth and trunk, the glittering rage in its eyes. The picture was nightmarish, the sort of sensational rubbish Miz Ricketts loved to read about in the *Daily*

*Tattler*. Nitty didn't think too harshly of the *Tattler*, though. In fact she often rescued old editions from the fireplace before they became kindling. They offered the most entertaining reading at Grimsgate.

Now the crowd gathered about the poster was nodding and whispering, heads bobbing like the wind-up tin clowns Nitty had once seen in a toy shop.

"Savage business," one man declared, while two young women fretted about needing to procure smelling salts before the hanging. "The Gusto and Gallant Circus is well rid of the monster. I feel its devilry in my very bones. It would kill again, mark my words."

"Yes," one woman twittered. "I heard its eyes are red as Beelzebub himself."

Nitty frowned. What did these people know about this elephant? Not a speck more than she did, probably. She'd never seen an elephant before, and she doubted any of them had either. She'd once read an account of an elephant in the *Tattler*, a "Just So" story by a man named Rudyard Kipling, that said the animals had an "insatiable curiosity." "Insatiable" made her think of eating chocolate, which would be delicious and wonderful, if there were any chocolate to be had. Which there was not. But if "insatiable" made her think of the delicious and wonderful, then an elephant's curiosity must be those things as well.

Elephants must surely be like orphan girls, she decided: creatures sorely misunderstood and blamed for a host of troubles they had nothing to do with.

She nudged her way through the crowd, glimpsing food carts and tinkers' wagons lining the edges of the square. A barbershop quartet sang at one corner, while a clown at another sold balloons. The square had the jaunty atmosphere of a carnival, which seemed

even worse than backward to Nitty, given the occasion—especially once she spotted a towering crane rising up from its center. The crane, she guessed, was how they meant to hoist Magnolious from her feet. It was every kind of awful. A chain fashioned into a noose hung from its arm, swaying as a forceful gust of wind hit it.

Nitty shielded her eyes from the grit blasting her face, and others around her held kerchiefs to their mouths and scanned the sky. They were worrying over a dust storm, waiting for the telltale mud-colored clouds to barrel down on them with the force of a bison stampede.

Nitty held her breath, scoping for alleyways where she might take shelter, but the gust soon wheezed out.

She turned away from the crane. She wouldn't watch the hanging, a gawker like the rest. It would be too cruel. But—her stomach whined at wafting scents of roasted peanuts and cotton candy—she would stay close by, in case somebody spilled popcorn or dropped one or two precious peanuts. Most any food had a sandy aftertaste these days anyway, so it wouldn't much matter if she got it from the ground.

She was heading toward the peanut cart when a sudden spark of green caught her eye. She swiveled her head and spotted a wooden wagon. A slatted board in its side was propped open to display an array of colorful oddities. Puppets dangling from strings, jewel-toned bottles full of mysterious potions or exotic perfumes, glass globes holding miniature kingdoms so real-looking that Nitty half expected to see ant-sized people popping out of their cottages and castles. The sign painted along the wagon's side read THE MERRYTHOUGHT WINDOWSHOP.

Nitty stepped closer, and again a glitter of green flashed. She traced it to a small open pouch full of the strangest objects she'd ever seen. Shaped like question marks no bigger than a fingernail, they were the greenest sight in town. Maybe in the whole county—or state, for that matter. Their bright hue was so cheerful, so incandescent, that Nitty had the urge to climb into the pouch with them.

Her heart reached out to them, rising snugly and pleasantly into her throat. Being inside that pouch would be like being in a proper jungle—a jungle so full up with trees and plants that she could wrap herself in hammocks of leaves and weave herself a home of vines. Nothing would be brown in that jungle. Even dirt and rocks would grow lovely, fuzzy moss.

“I know that look, girl.” The tinker—mostly hidden by a threadbare cloak—leaned out over the window. Nitty couldn't see the eyes appraising her, but she felt them spinning her stomach like a whirligig. The voice inside the hood echoed like water over stones. “That's a hungry look,” it continued. A knotted hand passed over the pouch. “If it's food you're after, I have none to offer.”

“I don't want food,” Nitty blurted. She had wanted it, badly, only a minute before, but now . . . She couldn't take her eyes from the green glow of the pouch. “That there in the pouch—”

“These?” The tinker's eyes glittered from the cloak's shadows. “These are seeds. They came from the very first garden on earth. The one that grew before anything else. Before people or animals.” The tinker leaned closer. “Before hate and cruelty, before kindness was forgotten. Back when there was only love. And hope. Before time itself.”

“There wasn't any such garden,” Nitty scoffed.

The tinker smiled, a smile that despite its toothlessness was strangely buoyant. “Oh, but there was, and it was greener than spring grass after a rain, so green that being in the garden was like sitting inside an emerald. It held every dream and every promise of what could be, of what the world wanted to become.” The tinker’s voice was lullaby soft now, and Nitty felt it again, the urge to be sitting in the midst of that green.

“How much? For the seeds?”

The tinker huffed. “You can’t afford them. Few people can.”

“But . . . what do they grow?” She couldn’t stop staring at the shimmering pods. The longer she stared, the more they looked like they were quivering in the pouch, wanting to be free.

With a crooked finger, the tinker beckoned her closer. “That, girl, depends on the farmer. What do you *need* them to grow?”

Nitty stalled, her thoughts a tangle. She hadn’t been thinking about planting them, only keeping them. She felt her Gleam Jar pressed against her side, tied around her waist with twine, and thought how lovely the seeds would look inside. It was only a plain mason jar she’d filched from the Grimsgate kitchen on canning day, but what was inside it . . . well . . . those objects gleamed in all the ways, and with all the colors, that the world—in these days of dust and doldrums—didn’t. If Nitty had a second heart, her Gleam Jar was it.

Nitty felt the tinker’s hooded gaze, and wanted to be out from under it. She lifted her chin and fixed the tinker with a glare. “I don’t need anything.”

The tinker straightened with a crowlike cackle. “Ah, but you do. More than you know.” Just then, a wisp-thin woman with a passel of knee-high children approached the wagon, asking about cough tonics, and the tinker’s focus shifted to her.

Nitty’s fingers tingled, itching for that pouch. The wind picked up again, and there was a static hum to the air, the sure sign of a dust storm brewing. Murmurs of excitement suddenly rippled through the crowd, and Nitty turned to see a path being parted by police officers in the square as an enormous creature ambled down the street.

“Great Magnolious!” one of the knee-high boys near her cried out. He yanked on his mother’s hand, trying to pry her away from the Merrythought wagon. “Hurry up, Mama, or we’ll miss the hanging!”

Nitty stretched onto tiptoe for a better view. The elephant was shackled in chains that gave her a shortened, awkward gait. Her folds of skin bore crisscrossing scars, some puffed and gray like the rest of her, others pink, raw, and fresh. Her head hung low, her long-lashed eyelids half closed in tiredness, or sadness. For no logical reason at all, Nitty longed to go to her, to take her enormous head in her hands and press her face against her trunk. She imagined it feeling tickly with bristles, wrinkled as a raisin but altogether lovelier to touch.

Nitty’s fists clenched as jeers and taunts burbled in the crowd. *Poor Old Mag*, she thought, *there’s nothing beastly about you.*

“Mama!” the boy beside Nitty shouted. “Come on!”

Nitty’s attention turned back to the Merrythought wagon and to the seed pouch. She’d had enough of this town and would be on her way. Any town about to kill such a strange- and wonderful-looking animal was too ugly to stay in, even if there were food

pickings to be had. But . . . she hesitated. The seeds. She couldn't leave them. She reached out her hand, fingers buzzing with yearning.

A small dirt devil swirled through the square, making everyone lower their heads just long enough for Nitty to snatch the pouch and scurry into the crowd.

She glanced back once, and she could've sworn the tinker's hood swiveled toward her in a knowing way. Seconds passed, though, without anyone coming after her. She slowed, wrestling a jab of guilt. The truth of it was, she wasn't cut out for stealing. No more than that elephant was cut out for cruelty. Nitty had goodness in her, she was sure of it. Even if nobody else was.

"Nothing but a scrappy, selfish babe you were, from the moment I set eyes on you," Miz Ricketts liked to remind her. "No wonder you were dropped at Grimsgate's doorstep. Who else would have you? What, with that rat's-nest hair and those peculiar eyes?"

Nitty didn't think her eyes were peculiar. They were simply *very* green. Greener than the seeds she'd just stolen. Greener than the tree frog that Nitty had once hidden atop Miz Ricketts's best Sunday hat. (This might've been the best trick Nitty had ever played on the headmistress, except she wasn't positive the poor frog had ever recovered from the broom beating Miz Ricketts gave it afterward. Nitty herself had been sore for a week from that broom, and she was much sturdier than a frog.)

"Highly suspicious," Miz Ricketts said whenever the subject of Nitty's eyes came up (and she made sure the subject came up daily). "Suspicious and very probably dangerous."



Miz Ricketts expected nothing but the worst from Nitty, and that disapproval stuck faster than a burr to a bear. It had spread through the Grimsgate staff and the other orphans until Nitty was blamed for every turn of rotten luck that happened at the orphanage. When the children took sick, it was Nitty's "contagion" that had caused it. If a mouse was discovered in the pantry, it was because "that impish child" had put it there. (Of this offense, Nitty was often actually guilty.) Even if Miz Ricketts's bunions took to swelling, it was because Nitty had given it her "evil eye."

For ten years, Nitty'd taken the blame when she was (mostly) blameless. Ten years nearly to the day, and now she hurried through the square with the stolen pouch of seeds. Maybe she'd give up on goodness altogether, since it wasn't being generous with offering her chances to claim it. But then she'd be proving Miz Ricketts right.

Nitty stopped mid-step in the swirling dust, deciding to return the seeds to the Merrythought Windowshop, when an eerie whine rose up from the north. She lifted her eyes to the sky. A telltale wall of toast-colored clouds was charging toward them. Within minutes the square would be choked in dust as thick as pudding. No matter how you tried to catch a gasp of clean air during one of these dusters, none would come. Every breath felt like sucking up a mound of chimney soot.

A shudder passed through the crowd, and some hurried for motorcars, carriages, or storefronts, searching for shelter. Nitty's eyes were scouting for someplace to wait the storm out when a police whistle shrilled the air.

"Stop that girl!" An officer across the square jabbed his stick in her direction. "She's a thief!"

Nitty sprang, darting jackrabbit quick between elbows and legs, slipping through grabbing hands. There was only one spot in the entire square where no crowds dared gather. She headed straight for it, heart clattering. Magnolious stood under the crane with two dozen officers surrounding her. Encircling her neck was a chain as thick around as Nitty's leg. The elephant's feet alone were twice the size of Nitty's head. She remembered the poster, and the man crushed under those feet.

Then another thought struck her. This animal was friendless, as was she. This animal was unloved, as was she.

Surely Magnolious wouldn't hurt a body so like herself?

"Mag!" Nitty cried out, when what she really meant was *Help me*.

The words flew to the elephant's ears. Her drooping eyelids opened; her head lifted. She'd been called many names in her life and remembered all of them. There'd been Great Magnolious, which she'd never liked, because it was usually followed by unnerving cheers and applause. There'd been "beast," "cow," and some others that didn't bear repeating, and, most recently, "murderer." That last was the most loathsome because it was said with tones of such anger, such hatred. She'd never, until this moment, been called Mag. It was the way the name was spoken, in desperation and in kindness, that made her raise her head to see the scrawny girl pushing her way through the crowd.

"Mag," Nitty said again as she broke through the circle of officers surrounding the elephant. A collective gasp swept over the onlookers, and whispers broke out.

"The girl's mad."

"She'll get herself killed."

"Girl! Get back from that beast!"

Nitty ignored them, lifting her eyes to Mag's.

The girl and the elephant regarded each other for a long moment. Then Mag gave the smallest toss of her head and lifted her trunk, and Nitty scooted between her front legs and into the safety of Mag's underbelly.

Stillness fell as everyone watched, waited, and feared the worst.

Mag shifted and straightened her legs over Nitty's crouching form, feeling a new purpose and an odd but not unwelcome responsibility for the charge beneath her.

Nitty peered out at the officers from under Mag. Would any of them get up the gumption to come after her now?

None did.

Not ten seconds later, the duster hurtled into the square, bellowing heat and spitting grainy sand that pricked the skin and blinded the eyes.

The world turned russet, and Nitty could only see the crowd as ghostly shadows passing through streams of flying earth. Mag's body loomed large above her. Shielding her eyes, Nitty crawled out from under the elephant and to her side, then reached for her ear.

Mag bent her head low in response.

"You're good, Old Mag, aren't you?" Nitty said quietly, holding an open hand out to the elephant. "Nothing like they say you are."

Mag blinked, and the tip of her trunk swung to Nitty's hand, flexing as it explored her fingers and palm.

The trunk brushed ticklishly against her hand, and Nitty felt strangely comforted by it.

“I’m leaving here,” Nitty said. “Come with me.”

Dirt churned around them, growing thicker. At last Mag gave Nitty the gentlest nudge with her giant head, as if to say, *Step back*. Once Nitty was well clear, Mag rose onto her hind legs and, without much effort at all, pulled the chains that bound her from the ground. Then, with her chains loose and dragging, she lowered herself until she rested on her back haunches with her belly nearly brushing the ground. She bent her front left leg at the knee, as if it were a stepping stool, then stilled. Nitty thought she understood, and she stepped onto Mag’s awaiting knee and used it for a boost to clamber behind Mag’s head. Mag’s spine beneath her was hard, her skin rough and prickly, and Nitty’s legs stretched so far across the immensity of Mag’s neck that her feet stuck out comically. Nitty took hold of the chain about Mag’s neck so she’d have something to keep her steady.

As the sky darkened and dust rained down, Mag began walking. Nitty pulled the collar of her shift up over her mouth and scooted farther down on Mag’s back, leaning slightly to one side so that her head was behind one of Mag’s flapping ears. The ear shielded her from the worst of the dust.

She felt the pouch of seeds hanging on her twine belt, safe alongside the Gleam Jar; she felt the long, lumbering strides of Old Mag beneath her. She felt the dirt pelting her back, legs, and shoulders. She felt a welcome easing in her feet. They were tuckered out from weeks of running. So was she. In fact she was sapped from living as a stray.

She’d never go back to Grimsgate, but . . . where *would* she go?

What she needed right now, and maybe what Old Mag needed too, was for this day to turn out differently from the others that had gone before it. To turn out better, for once.

She pressed her cheek against the bumpy ridges of Old Mag's back and closed her eyes, wanting to believe that something wondrous could happen. Maybe even something miraculous.