NAZNEEN AHMED PATHAK

CITY OF STOLEN MAGIC

PUFFIN

PUFFIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Puffin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

www.penguin.co.uk
www.puffin.co.uk
www.ladybird.co.uk

Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2023
001

Set in 11.5/15.5pt Bembo Book MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–56748–7

All correspondence to:
Puffin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

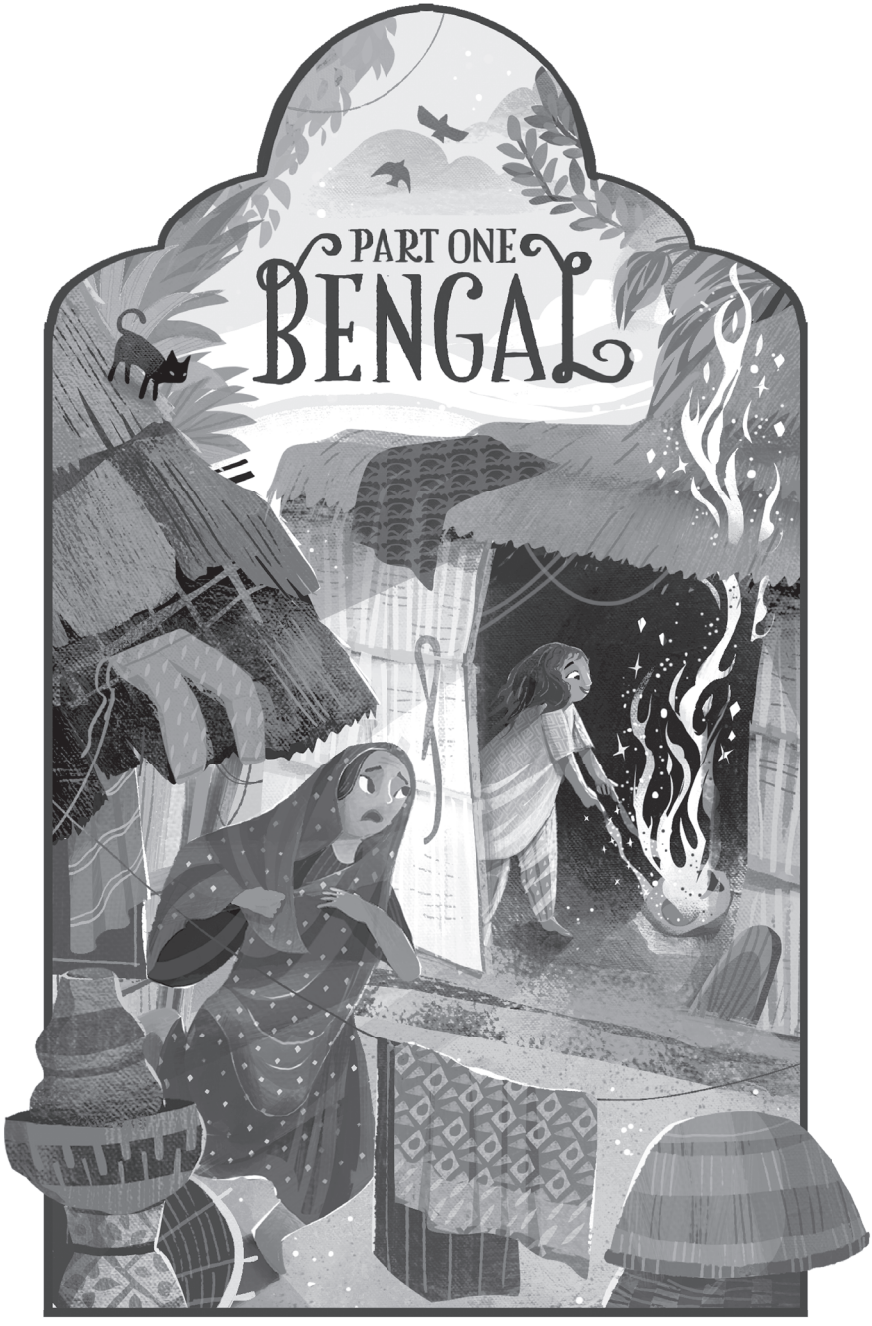
For Roshan, the light of our lives

‘We are here, because you were there.’

Ambalavaner Sivanandan


Badruddin's house
JUNGLE
Chompa and Ammi's home
RIVER
HIGH COURT
LALBAGH FORT
BURIGANGA RIVER


RACECOURSE
NEW DACCA
THATARI BAZAAR
UNIVERSITY OF DACCA
OLD DACCA
OLD DACCA CHOWK BAZAAR
LIBRARY QUARTER
Farhana's stall
THE WRITING-MAGIC PRESS
DACCA RIVER PORT


PART ONE
BENGAL

Prologue

Chompa wrinkled her nose as her mother ran the wooden comb firmly through her ever-knotted mass of hair, and dipped her toes into the river to distract herself. Ammi teased at a particularly large knot, and Chompa let out a little grumbling snort.

'If you looked after it, Chompa, we would not have to do this every morning.'

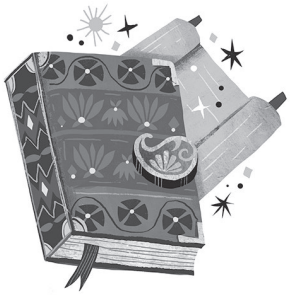
But her hands became gentler while the comb and pins hovered like hummingbirds.

Eventually, Ammi rested her chin upon her daughter's head, and they gazed into the river at each other's faces, one propped on top of the other. The sounds of the jungle became muted around them, and the water stilled, as if the world was holding its breath. It was Chompa's favourite moment of the daily ritual.

It wouldn't last, of course. Soon everything would spring

back to busy life, and her hair would quickly follow. It was wild, stubborn, and twice the thickness of any other girl's hair in the village. It was why, Chompa thought, the village children disliked her so much.

That and the fact that she and her mother were witches.



Chapter One

Or rather Ammi was a witch. Chompa was *trying* to be one.

Chompa had always known she could do magic. She knew she could move and transform things, little things, if she focused hard enough and channelled that focus through her index finger. But whenever she raised that finger to show her mother what she could do, Ammi would fold her hand round her daughter's and gently forbid it.

'You mustn't, Chompa. It's dangerous, and it's not real power,' she would say, pushing Chompa's book towards her. 'Please, learn your Farsi letters so you can help me write these charms.'

Letters. Why did she have to learn them when her finger-magic was so much faster, so much stronger? But Ammi insisted; and it was Ammi's writing-magic that put food on their table. And so Chompa sat in the shade of the mango tree, grimacing and grunting as she bent over her book to make sense of the words in front of her.

On the left were the neat blocks of Bangla, all hanging from straight lines, with little curved tails underneath, and umbrella loops over them. Their meaning came clear and fast to her.

On the other side of the page, though, was the slanting, looping lace of Farsi. It flowed like the river they lived by, carrying the meaning of the letters away from her before she could catch it.

She blew air from her cheeks in frustration.

'You just need patience, Chompa. It will come,' Ammi called from the cooking hut. 'Just as I need patience with this stove forever going out!'

Chompa heard Ammi click her teeth in frustration, smelled the bitter smoke of burning straw as her mother relit the fire.

Chompa crossed her arms. 'Why do we have to use Farsi to do writing-magic, anyway? Why can't we just use Bangla? No one even speaks Farsi here. No one speaks Farsi for about a thousand miles! It doesn't make any sense.'

Ammi laughed as she came back out of the hut with a brass bowl tucked in the crook of her arm. She placed a palm upon her daughter's head, smoothing the wild hairs down.

'Seven ancient languages alone have the power to speak with djinn. You know that. Farsi is the closest one we have, and people did use to speak it here, centuries ago. You could try one of the others? Let me see, there's Kikuyu, Ge'ez, Hebrew, Middle Chinese, Norse, and Ancient Egyptian. But the grammar formation of Ancient Egyptian is a bit tricky, and the Elder Futhark characters in Norse have multiple

meanings, so they take years to even begin to interpret correctly.'

Chompa's head swam. She sighed. Farsi it was.

'I don't think I'll ever get the hang of it,' she grumbled, staring down miserably at the page.

Ammi stroked her daughter's shoulder. 'Achaa, achaa, not today, then. What about your English studies?'

Chompa scrunched up her nose as if there was a bad smell. Every day, Ammi would go on at her: Farsi, English, Farsi, English. If anything, English was even worse. It didn't even make any sense. And it sounded horrible.

'No one speaks it in the village, so why do I? What's the point?' Chompa sighed. 'I know, I know, we're *different*. "Each of the five fingers of a hand is not identical".' Chompa waggled her fingers and rolled her eyes.

Ammi laughed. 'Clearly I have to come up with some new sayings. Fine. Make yourself useful and peel these onions.'

Chompa took the bowl filled with little pearl and purple-coloured bulbs from her mother. Ammi padded back to the cooking hut, a rickety bundle of bamboo sticks with a straw-thatched roof that was attached to their main room by a roughly cut doorway in the clay wall. A soft hiss came from inside as she threw spices into the hot pan to temper. The green scent of cardamom mingled with the warmth of cinnamon and bay, all wrapped in the buttery scent of frying ghee. Chompa's jaw ached with the anticipation of her favourite smell: the sweet, mellow scent of the onions frying with slivers of garlic.

She kept peeling and staring out beyond the courtyard,

towards the river, edged by swaying fronds of rice paddy, wondering, as she always did, what marvels might lie at its end: in Dacca, the great city. But that was something Ammi never liked to talk about.

The sound of a cough made her swivel her head back to the tangle of forest that stood like a dark wall between their home and the village.

A small, thin woman with silver hoops in her ears was standing there. Jamila, Chompa thought her name was. She twisted the loose end of her ragged sari between her fingers, like a protective charm.

'Is your mother home?' she mumbled into her sari veil.

Chompa couldn't count the number of times she'd heard that question. Always mumbled in an attempt to conceal the desperation beneath. She nodded and got to her feet, padding over to the cooking hut.

'Ammi. Someone.'

That was all she needed to say for her mother to wipe her hands on her sari end and get to her feet, because no one came to see them – ever – unless they needed magic. Not for tea, not for gossip. Just magic.

As Ammi came back into the room, Chompa seized her chance.

'Let me help her, Ammi. Your charms take so long, but my finger-magic could change things straight away –'

Her mother pushed Chompa's hand down hard, her eyes serious and her voice firm. 'No, Chompa. Be a good daughter – make some tea and bring it through. You may stay and watch, and learn.'

Ears burning with indignation, Chompa stirred the tea to urge it on, the dark leaves swirling in the pale milk. Her finger twitched. Magic never worked with tea, Ammi said, because it was too subtle an art, though Chompa was sorely tempted to try.

All of a sudden, the little bubbles swelled into a thick cinnamon foam. She sploshed the tea into two tin cups, slammed them on to a tray, and hurried back into the main hut.

Jamila was weeping quietly, perched on their bed next to Ammi. She narrowed her eyes at Chompa.

Ammi waved a hand at her daughter. 'Sister, do not worry. My daughter has no magic. She will tell no one of our meeting. You've come for my help, and only I will help you.'

Chompa darted a scowl at her mother as she settled herself down in the corner.

'Achaa, sister, tell me: what's the matter?' Ammi asked in a low, warm voice, placing her palm gently upon Jamila's wrist.

Jamila shook off Ammi's hand as if it had burned her. Chompa hissed inwardly, but, as if nothing had happened, Ammi pushed the tin cup towards Jamila. 'Drink, and be calm.'

The woman hesitated, then picked her cup up, sipped tentatively at first, and then gulped, as if it was cool lime water, and she'd been walking in the summer sun for days. Chompa's rage deflated a little as she wondered when Jamila had last tasted sugar.

Finally, Jamila lowered the mug, her shoulders slumping.

'My husband . . . if he knew I was here . . .'

Ammi nodded lightly. 'I won't tell, sister.'

Jamila clutched her empty mug. 'We – we're running out of food. Last season, we were persuaded to turn our rice fields over to indigo – but I fear we were tricked. Men came to harvest the crops, but we've been paid nothing. We cannot buy food, and we cannot eat indigo. Now my husband wants to switch back to rice, but nothing at all will grow in our soil.'

Ammi opened her tattered spellbook and flicked through the pages. Then she reached for a small silver box. From it, she removed a tiny scroll of fine cream paper and her silver rule, quill, and inkwell. Using the rule, she drew a rectangle, and then a diamond shape within it. She murmured questions to Jamila about the placement of the fields and the birthdates of her family, and, as Jamila responded, Ammi wrote on various parts of the diagram in tiny, looping Farsi script.

Chompa's brain fizzed with questions. She knew some of the characters, but couldn't decipher the meaning of the words yet. She wondered what the shapes meant, why they were placed exactly so. Why had Ammi drawn a rectangle and a diamond where sometimes she drew circles, or eyes, or palms? Chompa knew she had to learn her Farsi before Ammi would explain. If only it wasn't so boring, so hard, so slow.

Ammi finished the tiny diagram, sliced the rectangle out of the paper carefully with a sharp sliver of a knife and began to roll the paper between her finger and thumb. Then she reached into the box again and took out a cylindrical silver locket the size of Chompa's finger joint. A taviz. Crafted by Ammi's own hands.

Ammi snapped it open, tucked the little scroll into it. Then she closed it again and handed the capsule to Jamila.

'Sister, you need to make a hole in the earth in the field and place this taviz by the indigo roots. Can you do this?'

Jamila nodded.

'It will take a season. After monsoon. Have faith.'

Chompa gasped. A season! That would be one hundred and fifty whole days! Chompa's magic was so quick – and here Ammi was, asking a starving family to wait an age when Chompa knew she could help them straight away. Why had Ammi lied about her magic? She seethed and bristled.

Jamila pushed a bundle of coins towards Ammi, but Ammi pushed them gently back. 'Sister, I could teach you letters if you like, and then you could write the charms yourself? No charge,' she said, waving a hand at the silver box and pen.

Jamila frowned, shook her head once, and then darted from the house like a fleeing mongoose.

Chompa rounded on her mother. 'Ammi! How could you? You told her I didn't have magic, but I could have helped! My finger-magic is so much faster than your charms – you know it is! Jamila will have to wait a whole season! They could die! I could do something much quicker –'

Ammi grabbed Chompa's wrist so hard that Chompa gasped.

'You mustn't, Chompa. Whatever happens, you mustn't use your finger-magic. Promise me.' She spoke in a hoarse whisper.

Chompa's rage wavered. 'Why? Why can't I use it?' she asked uncertainly.

Ammi's grip tightened. 'Promise.'

Chompa was almost frightened for a moment. She nodded.

Ammi released Chompa's wrist and rose. She turned away, and Chompa felt the rage surge again.

'You didn't answer me! Why mustn't I use it?'

'You're not ready,' Ammi said softly.

It was the answer she always gave, and it wasn't enough any more.

Chompa scrambled to her feet. 'When will I be ready? When?'

Ammi didn't reply.

Chompa raised her finger in one sharp movement. Ammi's spellbook flew into the air and swirled round the room before slamming to the floor at Ammi's feet.

Ammi swung round at the sound, her eyes flashing with anger.

'Chompa, the magic at your fingers is too quick and easy, and that makes it dangerous. And finger-magic always leaves a trace, and always comes with a price. I fear what that price might be.'

She picked up the spellbook and carefully dusted off its edges as she spoke. 'Writing-magic is powerful in a way you cannot appreciate now, but you will. It's careful, thoughtful. It requires us to consider what is needed, and why: and ultimately it doesn't change things; it only asks for them to be changed for us. Jamila will plant that taviz, and next season the crops will not fail, and her children will not starve. That's what we're here to do. To listen, ask, and wait.'

'I don't want to wait! I don't have to! How do I even know that what you're saying is true? Maybe you're just scared that my power's stronger than yours! You don't even know what I could do if I put my mind to it!'

Ammi looked surprised for a moment, and then tired.

'Chompa, I've asked you before to trust me, and be patient. Now, please – I have much to do. Either return to your studies or go outside and play.'

Chompa stomped sullenly out of the house, turning her resentments over in her mind. Ammi didn't have any faith in her magic. The little things Chompa had done before were silly – making leaves into butterflies, summoning ripe guavas from the highest branches down into her palm. But if she did something useful, something *big*, then Ammi would see for herself.

The cooking hut door was ajar. There was the feeble flame – already going out again. They had to spend so long gathering straw for the stove. It went out all the time, and there was so much smoke. And now monsoon was coming it would be nothing but trouble.

An idea came rushing to her.

She stepped inside, closing the door behind her quietly.

Chapter Two

Chompa gazed at the tiny glowing embers, pale little red lights among the black ash. She raised her finger and pointed at them. She wasn't sure what would happen. When she'd done her silly pieces of magic – before Ammi had forbidden her – all she'd had to do was look at something and think hard about what she wanted. Now she wanted the red lights to grow, become stronger, and stay like that forever.

So she kept pointing and urging the red sparks on.

Grow, grow.

And they did. The flickers of pale red started to grow brighter, bigger, like flowers blooming in the ashes. Chompa almost gasped with joy, but knew she had to stay focused.

Grow. Grow.

Now sparks spread to the coals, turning them to red glowing jewels.

She had done it! The fire would never go out, not even in monsoon!

Chompa turned round to fetch Ammi. But Ammi was already in the doorway, with her eyebrows raised. Getting her daughter into the cooking hut was usually a very difficult business.

'Look, Ammi!' Chompa stuck her hands on her hips and lifted her chin in triumph.

Ammi peered over Chompa's shoulder.

'Chompa, what did you do?' she said, her voice trembling.

'I enchanted the flames! Now they won't ever go out!'

'Get out of the way. *Now!*'

It was then that Chompa noticed the beads of sweat prickling on her skin. She swung round and gasped.

It wasn't just the coals now. The clay stove itself was glowing a pale scarlet, too, and the heat from it was immense. The red light was spreading up the walls of the hut, making it glow like a hurricane lamp. Then the light reached the thatched roof, and in a moment it was alight.

Ammi shoved Chompa out of the hut, and they staggered backwards. And Chompa saw that the red light was spreading further still – across the earth, towards the trees. Towards the village.

Suddenly there was a cry. 'Hai Allah! Badruddin Saheb!'

Chompa's stomach sank as the villagers called for the chief. She could see a cluster of figures standing on the riverbank, pointing towards their cooking hut, now a column of pure, blazing red. Among them, Chompa noticed with a scowl, was Jamila, looking down at her feet.

Ammi grabbed the pail of milk from the side of the hut and threw it at the wooden planks. The glowing wood

consumed the liquid, the fire not even dimming for a second.

Chompa shrieked with horror. Ammi stood absolutely still.

'It's enchanted flame. It needs to be cancelled out by a stronger enchantment.'

'But there's no time! We can't get the paper or the quills!'

Ammi's mouth set grimly. 'No, charms won't work. I have to do this. I have to. There isn't another way.' She seemed to be talking to herself more than to Chompa.

And Ammi raised her finger.

Chompa's eyes widened. She'd never seen her mother do finger-magic before, only writing-charms. She didn't even know Ammi *had* the same kind of magic she did, and her heart raced with a confused excitement.

She felt the strangest sensation of heavy, thick coldness on her face, pushing away the heat from the flames. She looked up and saw clouds clustering together above them into a thick, flat blanket.

Ammi's eyes and finger focused on it.

Suddenly heavy rain thundered from the cloud-quilt. Ammi drove the rain harder. Within seconds, Chompa was drenched to the skin, rain in her eyes, her ears, her mouth. She felt like she was drowning.

But the downpour was dimming the light, too. The scarlet flame began to blacken at the edges. Her finger still trained on the cloud, Ammi walked steadily towards the hut, and drove the rain down hard upon it. Chompa saw the glowing lights in the coals shrinking, getting smaller and smaller, until there were just tiny dots blinking out one by one like eyes, and then . . .

And then it was just raining.

Chompa shivered uncontrollably.

Ammi raised her finger again, and the cloud and the rain shrivelled to nothing. The water spilled away from the remains of the hut, darkening the scorched earth beyond.

Chompa's stomach lurched as she surveyed the devastation she'd caused. The hut was gone, burned to nothing, just a few fragments of scorched wood remaining. The dug-out hole in the earth that used to hold the stove was now a pitiful pool of water and mud.

And yet her heart felt full.

Ammi had the same kind of magic as Chompa, after all.

She'd always thought that writing-magic was Ammi's skill, and finger-magic was hers. Every time she'd asked about finger-magic, Ammi had changed the subject, or told her she would explain when Chompa was old enough. And always: '*You mustn't use your magic*.' Mustn't. Mustn't. Mustn't.

Ammi had collapsed on the verandah, her sari sodden, her hair in dripping tendrils. She looked at Chompa, and Chompa was silenced even before she could speak, before she could even demand an explanation.

Ammi was trembling, her eyes heavy with fear.

Then she rose, turned away from her daughter, and walked slowly into the house without uttering a single word.

Chompa finally understood why her mother had stopped her from using finger-magic all this time. The fear in Ammi's eyes said it all.

It wasn't the magic that was dangerous.

It was Chompa.