



PUFFIN BOOKS

*the
wishbird*

OTHER BOOKS BY GABRIELLE WANG

The Garden of Empress Cassia

The Pearl of Tiger Bay

The Hidden Monastery

The Lion Drummer

A Ghost in My Suitcase

Little Paradise

The Race for the Chinese Zodiac

Our Australian Girl series

Meet Poppy

Poppy at Summerhill

Poppy and the Thief

Poppy Comes Home

the
wishbird

GABRIELLE WANG

Illustrations by the author

PUFFIN BOOKS

PUFFIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (Australia)
707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Group (USA) Inc.
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada)
90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Canada ON M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Books Ltd
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL England
Penguin Ireland
25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland
(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd
11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ)
67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd
Rosebank Office Park, Block D,
181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Johannesburg, 2196, South Africa
Penguin (Beijing) Ltd
7F, Tower B, Jiaming Center, 27 East Third Ring Road North,
Chaoyang District, Beijing 100020, China
Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London, WC2R 0RL, England

First published by Penguin Group (Australia), 2013

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Text and illustrations copyright © Gabrielle Wang, 2013.

The moral right of the author/illustrator has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

Cover and text design by Tony Palmer © Penguin Group (Australia)

Illustrations by Gabrielle Wang

Cover illustration background © Nella/Shutterstock

Cover title script © Danny Rash/Shutterstock

Colour separation by Splitting Image Colour Studio, Clayton, Victoria

Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group, Maryborough, Victoria

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

ISBN 978 0 14 330752 5

puffin.com.au



For Mum with love

PROLOGUE



In the ancient Banyan tree, the Wishbird lay still and silent. His breath was thin, the thread between the King and himself growing ever weaker. Soon it would break, and when that time came, both would die, and so would the city, for its heart would be lost forever.

But death did not worry the Wishbird. He had lived for a thousand years and more. And he would go on living, in another shape, another form – in the clouds, in the earth, in the lakes and seas.

What did worry him was Oriole. Sweet Oriole.

1

LITTLE THIEF



On the edge of the Borderlands, in the City of Soulless, a small figure crouched in the shadow of the old wooden drum tower.

His name was Boy, a name given to him by Panther who had plucked him off the streets. Being an orphan he had no idea how many years old he was. Somewhere between eight and ten winters, Rabbit had told him.

Boy stood suddenly and, slipping from shadow into light, fell into step behind an elderly man. The man wore a hat with the brim low over his face, but it didn't quite hide the hook-shaped scar down his left cheek. He stopped to buy a stick of candied cumquats, then paid the vendor and placed his drawstring purse back inside his sleeve.

Now. Boy bumped the man as if by accident. At the same moment, his hand glided inside his wide sleeve and withdrew the purse with a touch as light as air.

‘Excuse me, Uncle,’ he said politely, slipping the purse into his pocket and melting away into the crowd.

Panther won’t cane me this time, he thought, feeling the pleasing weight of the coins against his leg and wincing as the large red welts on his back twinged. Boy knew he should return to the shack where Panther would be waiting. But what if there was something else inside the purse – a small treasure that he could keep for himself?

Every so often he found strange and beautiful objects when he light-fingered people’s pockets. The head of a cat made from glowing amber. A silver ring with a tiny blue stone like a mouse’s tear. And once a piece of red cloth edged in the finest gold thread. He had fifteen of these treasures buried in a box in the dirt beneath his bedding.

So Boy walked past the well where women were washing clothes, under the archway that led into the market square, and along Palace Road. Finally he turned down Burnt Water Lane.

At the sound of his footfall, a rat as big as a soldier’s boot scurried along a shallow ditch of putrid water. Boy glanced around, then slipped into a narrow passageway between two wooden buildings.

With his back against one wall and his belly against the other, he sidled along until he reached a spot where several large foundation stones had fallen away, forming a little cave. Boy crawled inside and sat down cross-legged. Then he tipped the contents of the purse into his lap.

Suddenly he grew very still. His breath caught in his throat as if someone had punched the air right out of him.

There amongst the coins was a small, thin silver box. The lid was attached by two tiny hinges and at the front was a gleaming pearl clasp. He carefully snapped it open.



Even more beautiful than the box was the object inside it. The thing fitted perfectly into its container and was a brilliant turquoise blue. He lifted it out carefully. On either side of the almost transparent shaft were soft filaments that separated at his touch then returned to their original shape.

As Boy turned it slowly in his fingers a strange thing began to happen. A face appeared, drifting up from his memories. It was only faint, as though Boy was looking through the finest rice paper, but there it was – smiling eyes, soft, rose-coloured lips, gleaming black hair and a jade-coloured earring. His heartbeat quickened.

Panther often told Boy the story of how he had found him on the streets, dirty and starving, and in the goodness of his heart had taken him in. But one day Rabbit, Panther's friend, had shown him a house in a little laneway in a forgotten part of the city, and told him a different story.

He told of how Panther had heard that yet another family had been taken away. It was good news. It meant an empty house and easy pickings: food and belongings left behind as if the family had rushed off and would soon return. But those who had been taken never returned.

Panther and Rabbit had hurried to the house before the news spread. But when they were gathering the

belongings they heard crying. It was Rabbit who found the small boy hidden in a trunk in one of the bedrooms and convinced Panther to take him in, convinced him how useful he would be when he was old enough to light-finger.

Boy's memories had always been like a constantly shifting mirage, a pebble dropped into a pond where the waters had grown muddy. Now, as he stared at this beautiful object in his hand, the memories gradually grew clearer.

For the first time he felt hope that his mother and father might still be alive.

'Your ata was called Master Rui,' Rabbit had told Boy the first time he showed him the house where he had been found. 'And your ana, she was Madame Naa.'

'What happened to them?' Boy had asked. 'Why did they leave me behind?'

'Soldiers came an' took them away in the Song Stealer's Cart,' Rabbit had replied.

'What did they do wrong?'

'I dunno. But we thought you was dumb or something 'cos you didn't make a noise for weeks. Just sat in the corner like a scared little mouse.' Rabbit had laid his hands on Boy's shoulders. 'You mustn't tell Panther I brung you here. Swear in the name of the God of Honourable

Thieves that you won't tell Panther or he'll punish me.'

Boy had taken the oath and kept the secret close to his heart. But he often visited the house and stared up at its grand façade where weeds sprouted through the tiled roof like the bushy eyebrows of an old man.

Once, with the edge of his sleeve, he had wiped the dirt off a small bronze plaque attached to the wall by the front door. Slowly, three characters had emerged. Boy had never learned to read or write so he asked Rabbit what they said.

'*Golden Note Studio*,' Rabbit had replied.

'What does that mean?' Boy asked.

Rabbit had shrugged.

Those few strange words were all that were left of his parents.

A wind blew down the narrow passageway like an angry dragon lashing out with its tail, and Boy suddenly realised that the sun had dipped below the city wall, leaving the small alcove where he'd been sitting cold and dark. He had stayed too long.

Panther will be furious. But at least I have a purse full of money. That should keep him happy . . . for a while anyway.

He slipped the silver box with its precious treasure inside one of the many pockets deep in his sleeve and hurried back to the shack at the bottom of Ratskin Alley.