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Geraldine McCaughrean, Illustrated by Gustavo Mazali
Excerpt
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• CHAPTER ONE •

*Keeper of
the White Elephant*



Once, in the kingdom of Siam, there was a king who was very rich indeed. He was born rich and he grew richer, chiefly because he never, ever gave anything away – no, not so much as a used tea-leaf. Unless you count his white elephant, of course.

White elephants are very rare. Few people have ever seen one. Far fewer have ever owned one. The king did not especially like his elephant, but he liked to own things that nobody else owned, and he liked to show off how rich he was. So he dressed the elephant in a saddle of scarlet velvet with golden tassels and a pink parasol to keep off the sun. There were gold bracelets for her ankles, a red leather hood and, around her neck, a silver chain.

He had a palace built for her, and ordered his servants to gather her food and fetch her water, to scrub her back and to fan her on hot days. Musicians and singers were sent to entertain her. Visitors to the palace marvelled at the wonderful beast, and the king was known on five continents as The King with the White Elephant. He liked to be famous. He was a vain man.

He was also spiteful. If one of his noblemen or advisors or generals annoyed him – did not bow low enough, forgot his birthday, lost a battle – he would smile and say, ‘I shall make you my Keeper of the White Elephant. Take great care of her now, won’t you?’ It sounded like an honour. It was not.

That nobleman or advisor or general would have to take away the elephant, clothe her, feed her, build her a palace, entertain her and keep her clean. The cost would be terrible. The nobleman, advisor or general’s money would soon be all gone. He would have to borrow from his friends, but would not be able to pay them back. His wife and children would go hungry. He would not sleep for worrying. He would grow shabby and ill. Finally, he would have to beg the king to take back his gift, then flee the country, shamed and penniless.



One day, the king tripped on the steps of his palace. Perhaps it was the fault of the steps. Perhaps the hot sun was to blame. Perhaps his big stomach unbalanced him, since he was very large. His courtiers squealed. His servants wailed and beat the steps with twigs.

Courtier Preecha helped the king to his feet. 'Your Majesty must rest,' he said, gently.

'Do you dare to say what the king must do?' blared the king.

'No, of course not. But your Majesty does not look well. I am sure a sleep would make you feel better,' and Preecha offered his arm for the king to lean on.

