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LIZARD'S TALE

WENG WAI
CHAN

'I loved this WWII spy story laced with wit,
humour and thrilling escapes.' Leanne Hall



A decorative border at the top and sides of the page features stylized tropical leaves and flowers in shades of grey and white. The leaves have various patterns, some with veins, and the flowers are simple five-petaled shapes. The border is composed of several overlapping elements, creating a lush, tropical feel.

CHAPTER ONE

Suite Seventy at Raffles Hotel

Tropical rain drummed on the red clay roof tiles of Raffles Hotel in Singapore. A skinny boy watched from below the balcony, hidden in the shrubbery, as a white-jacketed waiter hovered over the tables on the covered verandah. Silverware gleamed in the lamplight.

The boy beneath the balcony was called Lizard. The cool night rain soaked him right through, but he was used to that. At least it kept the mosquitoes away.

He watched his friend Roshan standing nervously beside the waiter. Roshan had just been promoted to dining room junior waiter, and he was terrified of making a mistake. Lizard winced as the waiter smacked Roshan's head.

‘No, no, stupid boy!’ said the waiter. ‘The dessert spoon goes above the cake fork! Always, no exceptions. How many times must I tell you? Tonight’s guests are very important—everything must be perfect!’

‘Sorry, sir. I’ll remember, sir,’ stammered Roshan.

‘*Tchab!* Go inside. I’ll do this table myself.’ The waiter gave Roshan a little push and Roshan scuttled off, past the large portrait of King George VI of England. It was 1940 and George VI had been king for three years.

Lizard hunched his shoulders, blinked the raindrops from his eyelashes and settled down to wait. He tucked his satchel close to keep it as dry as possible. He was thinking about how much he could make if he took just one of those gleaming forks to the Thieves’ Market in Sungei Road, when finally he saw them come in and be shown to their table: Mr Sebastian Whitford Jones, general manager of the New British East India Company, and his wife, Jemima.

Lizard knew who they were, because he’d seen them arrive in their chauffeur-driven motor car

earlier that afternoon. He had been waiting for them to come to dinner so that he could be sure they were not in their hotel suite.

‘Jemima, darling, we’re not too close to the rain here, are we?’ asked Mr Whitford Jones, in a very loud, very English voice.

‘Oh, no, Sebastian. This rain is so refreshing after the heat of today,’ said Mrs Whitford Jones with a sigh.

Lizard was up and off, sprinting through the splatting raindrops. He sped through the wet blackness of the garden on bare feet, to suite seventy in the Palm Court wing. The Palm Court wing was double storey, but luckily suite seventy was on the ground floor. He ducked under one of the arches to the covered walkway. In a shadowy corner, he took his shirt off and squeezed it out, then used it to dry himself as best as he could. He shivered as he put the clammy shirt back on.

He peered through the half-opened window into an empty sitting room. Light filtered in from the overhead lamps of the passage way outside. His heart

hammered as he opened the window further and slipped inside.

The wooden floorboards were smooth underfoot. He waited a moment, listening. A steady thrumming of ceiling fans came from the bedroom beyond. After a few more steps, his feet sank into plush Turkish carpet. He rubbed them on the soft pile, and ran his fingertips along the top of the plump brocade sofa as he moved past it.

He was looking for a bible-sized, plain teak box. Where could it be? Still in one of the leather-and brass-trimmed travelling trunks stacked up in the corner? He hoped not, because all three were padlocked. He tapped gently on their sides. They sounded hollow.

The antique Chinese sideboard? He pulled out a few drawers. Empty.

Maybe the writing desk? The drawers held only a fountain pen and some paper.

He glanced into the bedroom and saw two beds, each draped with mosquito netting that trembled in the breeze from the fans.

Lizard was about to creep in there to search when he remembered something. He looked back at the writing desk. Roshan had once shown him a secret drawer in a desk in a fancy suite just like this. Lizard crept to the desk, moved the heavy chair out of the way and crouched down. His nimble fingers explored the crevices under the desk, and he found it. He pressed the hidden catch and pulled out the drawer that appeared underneath. Here it was—a sturdy, oiled teak box. A thick metal ring held it shut.

That was easy. Maybe too easy.

Something nagged at him, telling him things weren't quite right. Best to get out quick, then, he thought. He shoved the box into his satchel and closed the secret drawer.

As he slipped out from under the desk and moved towards the open window, he realised what was wrong. The ceiling fans in the bedroom. Why would they be on if no one was in?

He didn't see the girl standing in the bedroom doorway watching him.

'Dinesh?' said the girl. 'Is that you, Dinesh?'

Lizard jumped. He whirled around just as she turned on the electric light. He blinked in the glare.

‘Oh,’ she said, looking at the skinny, soggy boy standing before her. ‘I thought you were my friend, Dinesh. But you’re not.’ She stared at Lizard, as though blaming him for not being Dinesh. She had long, wavy, copper-coloured hair, large blue eyes and smooth pale skin. Lizard had never seen anyone so marvellously...clean.

‘I’m terribly sorry,’ Lizard gulped, though he wasn’t quite sure what he was apologising for.

The girl’s eyes widened, then narrowed. ‘Well, you certainly don’t sound like Dinesh, even though you dress like him,’ she said, tilting her head. ‘You sound more like...me.’

Lizard looked down at his old wet shirt, his too-large shorts and his dirty feet. His satchel hung in front of him and he clutched it tight as shame at his shabbiness bloomed hot in his chest.

‘My friend Dinesh is Gujarati,’ the girl said. ‘He’s the gardener’s son back home in New Delhi. I’m not allowed to play with the servants’ children,

but they're the most fun. You're not Indian, though. What are you?'

'I'm...I don't know.' Lizard stared at the polished dark wood floor. He was leaving drops of water on it.

'You don't know?' The girl stifled a snort of laughter. 'Well, Master You-Don't-Know, how do you do? My name is Georgina Amelia Whitford Jones. I was just in bed saying my prayers and asking for a friend, preferably Dinesh. I suppose you will do.' She drifted over to a leather armchair and settled into it, her long white nightgown puffing around her. 'Why are you here?'

'I came to find something to eat,' said Lizard, the lie coming easily to him.

'Oh?' Georgina arched a sceptical eyebrow. 'Don't you have a home?'

'I used to live with my uncle, but not anymore. I'll go now,' Lizard said, edging towards the window. 'I'm sorry to disturb you.'

'If you go, I'll scream and scream and scream.' Georgina twirled a lock of her copper hair around her finger.

Lizard stopped.

‘Then my maid, Ruksana, will come running and, oh my goodness, the fuss there will be,’ said Georgina, eyes wide. She paused to let this sink in. ‘Come here, boy.’

Lizard took an unwilling step forward.

Georgina stood up and came closer. She was the same height as Lizard, and he was unnerved when she leaned in, staring at his face. He could smell her breath—sweet and clean. He held his own.

‘Your eyes are green,’ she said, ‘and shaped like a cat’s. Your hair is black and your skin is golden.’ He flinched when she patted his face. ‘You’re very pretty, for a boy.’

Abruptly, she whirled round in a flurry of red hair and flounced back to her chair.

Lizard blushed scarlet.

‘Tell me your name and where you live and what you do during the day. And,’ she stared at him with one eyebrow raised, ‘I insist on the truth.’

‘They call me Lizard,’ he said, reluctantly.

Georgina frowned. ‘Why do they call you that?’

It's not a very nice name.'

Lizard shrugged. 'My uncle always called me that.'

'And where do you live?'

'I live in Chinatown.'

'So you're a Chinatown lizard?' Georgina's eyes glinted with amusement. 'Where in Chinatown do you live?'

'Above a tailor's shop.' Lizard felt clever for being vague; after all, there were many tailor shops in Chinatown.

'And during the day?'

'Sometimes...I go to school.'

'How can a boy who has to steal food at night pay to go to school during the day?'

Before Lizard could think of a reply, he heard voices outside the front door.

'Oh! They're back much too early!' said Georgina. 'You'll have to hide in the bedroom. Sneak out through the bathroom window when you have a chance.'

Lizard was already dashing into the other room.

‘Thank you, Missy,’ he said as he dropped down beside one of the beds.

A key turned in the front door and he heard two men speaking in urgent voices outside.

Georgina ducked her head through the bedroom door.

‘I haven’t finished with you, boy,’ she whispered. ‘Come back tomorrow night or I shall make sure my father finds you.’

‘I can’t!’ spluttered Lizard, shocked.

‘How hard do you think it would be to find a green-eyed half-Chinese boy who lives above a tailor’s shop in Chinatown?’ She shot him a look of triumph, then turned back to the sitting room as the front door opened.

‘Why wasn’t I told it was so important, Commander Baxter?’ demanded a voice that Lizard recognised as Mr Sebastian Whitford Jones’s.

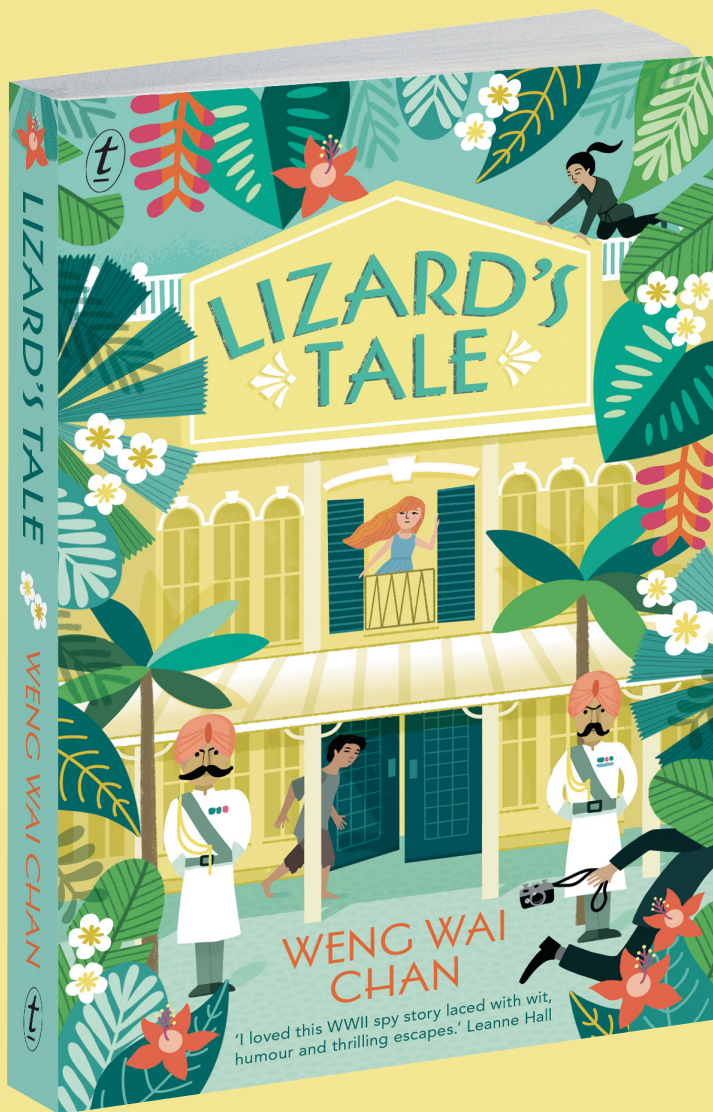
‘Well, you know, Navy top brass didn’t want too much attention drawn to the thing,’ said an unfamiliar voice. ‘But never fear, all will be well once you’ve handed it over.’

‘Yes, quite, but nevertheless I ought to have been told of the nature of the thing,’ grumbled Mr Whitford Jones.

Lizard moved the mosquito net out of the way and peeped around the bed. The two men stood just inside the front door, with Mrs Whitford Jones behind them. Lizard saw Georgina turn to them.

‘Mother? Father?’ Her voice trembled. ‘Oh, Father, I had the most dreadful nightmare!’

To Lizard’s admiration, she burst into loud and believable sobs. He was so impressed that he almost missed her hand waving at him behind her back, just before she pulled the door half closed. She ran and flung herself into her father’s arms. Lizard took that as his cue, and he darted to the other end of the bedroom and out the bathroom window.



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