

♥ CHAPTER ONE ♥



The Little
Snow
Leopard

Princess Maya leapt up the mountainside, jumping over rough stones and patches of star-shaped flowers. She climbed and climbed until she reached the huge flat rock called Ching-May Peak. Crawling onto the stone, she pushed her long black braid over her shoulder and gazed all around.

“I can see for miles. The palace looks so tiny!” she told Deena.

“How did you climb up so fast?” puffed



the rosy-cheeked lady below her. “You’re like a mountain goat!”

Deena was a groom at the palace and, as well as caring for the horses, she also looked after the king’s wildlife projects.

Maya turned to gaze at the view again while she was waiting for Deena to catch up. The gray, turreted palace that she lived in had shrunk to the size of a toy castle. All around it were the streets and houses of the city.

“I love it up here,” she said, smiling. “I’m so glad you let me come with you.”

“I’m happy to have your help. I want to write down all the wild animals we see so I can report back to the king.”

Deena took out a notepad and pencil.

“He needs to know how the wildlife project’s going.”

“Do you think we’ll see any snow leopards?” asked Maya.

“I really hope so,” Deena replied.

Everyone in the kingdom of Lepari knew that the numbers of snow leopards had fallen over the last five years. There were very few of them left. The king, Maya’s dad, had set up a nature project to help the endangered animals. It meant that no one was allowed to hurt them or to build houses on the mountain slopes where they lived. That way the leopards would be able to live in peace.

Maya tilted her head back to look at the tallest peak, which was glittering white with snow. A few weeks ago, the whole mountainside had been covered, but now it was springtime again!

“There are two mountain sheep,” said Deena, scribbling on her notepad. “Can you see anything else, Maya?”

Maya turned her attention to the mountain slopes. Snow leopards were



always well camouflaged. Their gray-and-white patterned coats were hard to spot against the rocks, but she thought she could see something moving.

“Look! There’s a snow leopard!” Maya said excitedly. “Right next to those bushes.”

The beautiful leopard had thick white fur speckled with dark rosettes. Maya watched it prowl across the mountain slope. It paused, crouching behind a boulder, its long tail flicking from side to side.

“Some people still call them by their old name: Spirits of the Mountain,” said Deena softly. “I think it’s because they’re so graceful.”

“It’s amazing that they’re such good climbers,” said Maya.

Deena nodded. “This one’s quite small, so it’s probably a female. I wonder if it has any cubs.”