



PART I

Burma, 1941–1942







1

Bagan, October 1941

Kate could hear her own breathing, fast and loud in the darkness. She tried to focus on the other sounds: the drip of water somewhere along the passage and a stone falling nearby. She could no longer hear the low roar of the Irrawaddy River; she had come too far into the tunnels.

‘Hello?’

Her voice echoed. She touched the stone wall beside her and felt the deep carvings beneath her fingers.

I am not afraid, thought Kate. Any minute now the monks will realise they’ve left me behind.

She recalled wandering around the farm at night when she was a girl, following the dim illumination of the sky and the distant light of the stars. Here the darkness was a different shade. The tunnel had wound so far into the hillside that no light could enter and now she stood in absolute blackness, unable even to see her hand in front of her face.

I lost him in the darkness. The phrase suddenly emerged in her mind. It sounded familiar, a hushed, painful cry. *I lost him in the darkness.* Like a mantra she repeated it over and over, feeling her heart beginning to pound once again.





I never used to be scared of the dark, she thought. This is absurd. But the fear was primitive, ancestral, as though the ghosts of her past had been waiting here for her all her life.

I lost him in the darkness, came a whisper in the tunnel, and she knew that they were there.



Kate had been cycling along a rough track, a few miles from the ancient city of Bagan, when two young boys munching on slices of green mango waylaid her. They had shaved heads and wore the ragged yellow robes of novice monks.

‘Good morning, lady. You want see temple?’

She laughed. ‘I’ve seen quite a lot of temples in the last few days. I’m not sure I need to see another one.’

The younger of the boys, swallowing his piece of mango, said, ‘No, no, this temple very special. Nice . . .’ and here he paused to confer in Burmese with his brother, ‘nice cat cones.’

‘Cat cones?’ said Kate.

‘Very nice cat cones,’ confirmed his brother. ‘Very big, very old.’ They looked at her expectantly.

‘Ah – do you mean catacombs? Are there any?’

‘Yes, lady,’ said the younger boy, now examining her borrowed bicycle with the air of a professional dealer. He squeezed the tyres, nodded sagely at the frame, and rang the bell.

‘All right,’ said Kate, ‘how much for the tour?’

‘For you, lady,’ said the older boy, sucking his teeth, ‘five annas.’

‘Two,’ said Kate.

‘Four.’

‘Three.’





'Done,' he said. 'Your name?'

'Kate. And yours?'

'Nyan. This my brother, Shwe.'

'Pleased to meet you,' she said, shaking hands solemnly with each of them, then leaned the bicycle against a fence.

'This way, Miss Kate.'

Nyan walked beside her, looking with interest at her clothes and the knapsack she carried. 'Why you come Bagan?'

'I work for the government,' said Kate. 'In the education department in Rangoon.'

'You are teacher?'

'No, but I visit schools and write reports about them. This week I've been visiting some of the schools near Bagan. What school do you attend?'

'Ananda monastery school,' said Nyan, pointing vaguely to the east.

'Do you like it there?'

He nodded enthusiastically. 'Is good school. Teachers very nice.' Kate decided not to point out that he and his brother were obviously playing truant.

They went through an archway and joined a path that led steeply downhill between grassy rocks. Kate saw that they were descending slowly into a gorge and thought they must be near the river; sure enough, a moment later she saw the Irrawaddy glinting through the trees at the bottom of the hill.

'Where's this temple?' she asked, pushing damp hair off her forehead.

'Here,' said Nyan, pointing at the slope beneath their feet.

Squinting against the sun, Kate moved closer to the rocks and pulled off a creeper. Beneath it she saw intricate carvings





and words in curling Burmese script. In the quiet of the afternoon a bell rang out down in the gorge, somehow muffled. She felt the hair stand up on her arms even in the heat.

‘This way,’ called Nyan, beckoning. Kate followed the boys, clambering down steep stairs, and saw the stone walls of a temple emerging from the hillside. Panting slightly, she reached the bottom and found herself on a sunny paved terrace above the river. Pink and yellow orchids bloomed nearby and, on the riverbank, fig trees trailed their leaves in the limpid river. She wiped her sweating palms and waved ineffectually at the insects that buzzed around her face, noticing that her shirt and shorts were damp with humidity.

The boys were sitting on a step, grinning, and at the back of the terrace she saw the entrance to the temple set into the rock. A little old woman squatted in the wide arch, making a garland of white flowers. She looked up with a red, betel-stained smile as Kate approached and held out a candle, her other hand holding up one thin finger.

Holding out three coins, Kate took the candles, giving one to each of the boys and keeping one for herself. The old woman picked up a flaring taper and lit the candles with an unsteady hand.

Kate and the two boys stepped inside the temple doorway and instantly she felt the temperature fall. The only light came from the door and from a couple of guttering candles that stood either side of a statue of the Buddha, smiling beatifically in his niche. His neck was draped with flower garlands and the floor nearby was crunchy with dried petals. Two great pillars held up the terraces above. The whole place smelled strongly of incense, enough to make her light-headed.





'Welcome,' said a soft voice and an elderly monk appeared. The boy spoke to him in Burmese and he bowed low before picking up one of the lit candles. She wondered how long it had been since his last visitor and had the fleeting impression that he had been waiting for her for a long time.

The monk bowed again to Kate, his face craggy in the candlelight, and slipped through a roughly carved narrow doorway. Kate followed cautiously, watching her feet as she passed through into the tunnel, where a single thick candle, almost burned down, was stuck to the floor with wax. Looking up, she saw the monk disappearing around a corner into the darkness and felt a chill.

The tunnels of Kyaukgu Umin, the boys whispered to her, were the oldest in Burma. 'Millions of years old,' said Shwe confidently. Hundreds, certainly, thought Kate. The walls – and here they gestured upwards, Nyan raising his candle – were carved with scenes from the life of the Buddha.

Ahead of them, the old monk paused and stood patiently, the candlelight flickering on his face. He spoke softly to the boys, his free hand tracing lovingly over the carvings on the wall.

'He say this one birth of Buddha,' said Nyan, and Kate saw what might be rays of light emanating from a round object that was perhaps once a baby, although centuries of eager hands had worn the carvings almost smooth.

The monk continued down the corridor, the boys following in a small pool of light. The tunnels seemed to go back for miles into the hillside. The main passages were wide and obviously well-used, their floors polished by the bare feet that must have ranged over them for centuries. Somewhere out there the war was raging, but the ghosts of Kyaukgu Umin knew nothing of





the world outside. How extraordinary to think that this scene had not changed: a monk in a worn saffron robe pacing through the timeless tunnels.

Ahead, the monk and Nyan were examining another carving, talking quietly, and then they moved around a corner and were out of sight, Shwe trailing behind them. As Kate held up her candle to see the wall, a draught made it gutter and go out, and suddenly she was alone.



I lost him in the darkness. I lost him. I lost him.

‘Miss Kate?’

From somewhere ahead she heard a voice and this time she was sure it was real.

‘Shwe, is that you?’

‘Here, Miss Kate.’

She sensed him coming back along the tunnel, although she could see nothing, and at last she heard his breathing, felt his small sticky hand take hers.

‘Where’s your candle, Shwe?’

‘Wind blow down.’

‘Mine too.’

For a moment they stood silently and then she felt him tug her hand, leading her carefully forward, his bare feet silent on the stone floor.

‘All right, Shwe,’ she said, swallowing. ‘If we keep moving we’ll probably see the light from Nyan’s candle.’

‘Yes, Miss Kate,’ he whispered, sounding subdued. Running their hands along the walls, they inched around the corner.





Hoping at any moment to see a friendly glow, Kate kept her eyes open, peering into the blackness.

‘They too far,’ said Shwe beside her.

‘Then we just have to keep going,’ said Kate firmly, though her legs were like jelly.

They shuffled along, feeling the gnarled rocks under their hands. A dreadful thought struck her. ‘Shwe,’ she said, ‘does this passage split into two anywhere? We don’t want to go down the wrong path.’

‘No, Miss Kate,’ said Shwe, although he sounded uncertain. ‘Stop, lady. Stop for moment.’

She felt him touching the wall carefully, laying a cheek against the stone, running his fingers over whatever carvings were to be found there. Then he knelt and touched the floor, feeling the texture of the ground beneath him.

‘Do you know where we are?’

‘Yes, lady. I think. Come.’ He took her hand again and tugged her along, still moving gingerly in the darkness but with more purpose.

Suddenly there was rock in front of them and Kate realised they were at a junction. Without hesitating, Shwe pulled them along the right-hand tunnel, then took another turning and another.

‘Are you sure . . .’ Kate began, but she didn’t finish, because ahead of them was light, flickering around a corner. It proved to be the last inch or so of a candle, burning in an alcove. Two more bends of the passage brought them to an opening where a different, whiter light was spilling into the tunnel.

‘Daylight!’ exclaimed Kate and felt relief flooding through her. They emerged into the entrance chamber of the temple,



on the opposite side from where they had entered the tunnels. Nyan and the monk were standing by the Buddha, the old man muttering prayers.

Kate strode past them and out through the front door, down the steps, past the old woman, until she was standing at the front of the terrace, looking at the river and taking huge gulps of clean air. The bell chimed again behind her, the sound ringing out across the valley.