

*An inherited Burmese artefact challenges
a young Gold Coast mother's ideas and
marriage, leading her into great danger*

your
sneak
preview

Di Morrissey

Golden Land

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I



1885 – Burma

IN THE COOL SHADOWS of the high-ceilinged wooden monastery the young monk sat with bowed head, chewing his bottom lip as he painstakingly drew his stylus over the lacquered red square that lay on the floor in front of him. Occasionally he hitched his cotton robe back onto his shoulder, draping the folds over his lap, his bare brown feet protruding from the robe as he worked. He sat cross-legged, his brow furrowed in concentration. Chosen by the abbot of the monastery because of his exceptional artistic skills, he had been given the chance to decorate the sacred text of a kammavaca that was to be presented to the king himself.

Ye Aung's talents had been discovered not long after his arrival at the monastery as an eight-year-old boy. His impoverished family had entrusted him into the care of the

monastery in the hope that he would become a respected and learned monk. They, in return, could expect to gain merit for their sacrifice.

Ye Aung joined the long classes with other novice monks, learning to chant by heart the Buddhist canon in Pali, the ancient language that Buddha spoke. Many hours were also spent in prayer and meditation and reading the old texts held in the monastery. Through these texts Ye Aung learned about the life of the Buddha and legends and tales of the spirit world that hovered between myth and belief, as well as the history of the great kings of Burma.

Ye Aung was a quiet boy who was happy in his own company. When the other young monks played, chasing woven bamboo balls behind the long dining hall or flinging off their robes to dive and splash in the silky brown waters of the Irrawaddy River, Ye Aung would sit in the shade of a tree, gazing at the old monastery with its spacious corridors and high heavy doors, its sweeping tiered roof and tall, ornately carved spires held aloft by carved mythical creatures.

The teak of the buildings had turned dark grey over the century or more that the monastery had stood in the quiet, remote jungle clearing. The courtyard between the main building and the two smaller ones was made of fine white earth and was swept daily by the monks, whether the courtyard was sun-warmed or contained puddles shining in the monsoon rain. The buildings had a weathered, friendly appearance and a softness quite unlike the gilded pagodas and stupas that were scattered near the local villages and in the city of Mandalay.

This place was so peaceful that it might have appeared deserted if it weren't for the constant flutter of deep red robes, draped over a line in the courtyard or from railings and windows to dry, or the low rumbling hum of chanted prayers that droned from within the monastery like a swarm of earnest bees.

Ye Aung had always seen pictures in his head and he wanted to transcribe the rich tapestry of stories from his lessons into delicate, detailed illustrations. He shyly told his teacher, Sayadaw, his ambition, and Sayadaw began to encourage him. Even though he had not had formal lessons, Ye Aung loved nothing better than to draw with a brush or stylus.

He shared his dormitory with other young monks. Each had a mat on the floor and a coverlet and used their folded robes as a pillow. A small box held their few personal items, which included a writing slate and copies of the Pali texts they learned to chant by heart.

Ye Aung liked to sit alone in his corner while the other boisterous boys let off steam outside. He enjoyed his solitude in the quiet room where the open wooden window shutters let in the warm breeze from the river. Here he drew tiny images adapted from all he saw around him: fantastic creatures, glorious flora, the beautiful birds and even the monks themselves. Sometimes he drew pictures of the spirit-world creatures, or the animals representing the different birth days.

Eventually Ye Aung graduated to creating kammavacas, sacred Buddhist texts written on treated palm leaves. The leaves were smoothed and smoked before the texts were written on them, with spaces left between some of the lines for intricate illustrations. When complete the leaves would be carefully joined together with silk cords and folded between lacquered pieces of bark. Sometimes the teak-bark covers were decorated with gold leaf.

Frequently kammavacas were commissioned by families and given to the monastery when a son entered the Buddhist order. The special palm-leaf manuscripts were then stacked in decorated boxes or wrapped in cloth and stored in the ornate library chest in the abbot's quarters in the dim reaches of the inner sanctum of the

monastery. Ye Aung's family had been too poor to commission a kammavaca and the young boy hoped that by illustrating them for others as well as he could, he would be able to bring merit to his parents.

One day, Sayadaw called Ye Aung into the private sanctuary used by the senior monks. Here the older monks meditated and prayed, surrounded by relics, thangka hangings, figures of the Buddha and library chests holding palm-leaf manuscripts so old that few could still read the ancient script in which they were written.

Ye Aung was awed to be in this sanctuary and stood quietly, his head bowed, hands clasped beneath his robes as his teacher took a monk's robe from a chest. Ye Aung knew the cloth was old the moment Sayadaw put it into his hands. His teacher then told the young boy that the robe had belonged to one of the monastery's most respected and honoured monks. He explained that instead of using the usual palm leaf, pieces of this robe were sometimes used to make special kammavacas. First, the cloth would be covered with lacquer to become a smooth but pliant surface and then it would be cut into sections on which the monks would inscribe sacred texts. These cloth sections would then be joined together by narrow ribs of split and polished bamboo. Ye Aung would then illustrate the work with his drawings, using boiled black lacquer as ink.

'May I ask to whom this special kammavaca is to be given?' said Ye Aung.

Sayadaw smiled. 'It is to be presented to King Thibaw.'

Being asked to work on this particular project weighed heavily on the shoulders of Ye Aung. As he worked he began to have an inkling that there was more in the text than simply Buddhist teachings. He asked Sayadaw to translate the meaning of the ancient Pali script but Sayadaw shook his head.

'The old monks have special knowledge that they

occasionally pass on, hoping that someone, somewhere, will be able to decipher what is hidden in the text. It's a means of safekeeping.'

'Like a secret?'

Sayadaw shrugged. 'Yes, such as where certain relics, riches or objects to be venerated are hidden. Perhaps monastic traditions. Whoever can decipher the text will acquire special status, karma and enrichment.'

'Can you read what's written in this kammavaca?' Ye Aung asked.

Sayadaw shook his head. 'The senior monks each write only a part of the story. No-one is allowed to read all of the manuscript.'

'Who knows the whole story?' asked Ye Aung.

'I cannot tell you,' said Sayadaw.

Ye Aung did not know whether his learned teacher did not know the answer or simply would not tell him, so the young man asked if he could draw some white elephants in this kammavaca like the carved elephant figures at the base of the monastery steps.

Sayadaw smiled. 'I'm sure the king would like that very much. The white elephants are sacred indeed.'

Ye Aung was worried that he had displeased the abbot when he was called to stand before the senior monk. But seeing the pleased expression on Sayadaw's face as he stood nearby, he was reassured. Indeed, so pleased was the abbot with Ye Aung's work that he gave his permission for the young monk to accompany the senior monks to Mandalay to present the completed kammavaca to the king.

In the cool of the early morning, led by the most senior monks, the holy men filed solemnly from the monastery,

carrying their alms bowls. In his cotton shoulder bag the abbot carried the gift to the king that Ye Aung had spent many months helping to create. When Ye Aung saw the bag he smiled to himself, knowing what was in it and remembering his drawings of white elephants wearing jewelled necklaces and richly embroidered cloths with bands of gold around their tusks, walking beneath a gold-tasselled white canopy, escorted by musicians and magicians.

The monks walked for days through villages, pausing at food stalls and houses where they were given water and food. Once they passed the bodies of two dacoits who had been crucified on a hillside as punishment for raiding a local village. Ye Aung shuddered when he saw them and quickly averted his eyes, although he admitted to himself that the villagers had the right to protect themselves from such bandits. Knowing that lawlessness abounded in the countryside, he felt safer when the monks arrived on the outskirts of Mandalay.

The closer they got to the royal palace, the more crowded the roads became, not just with people but also with dozens of pigs jostling around them.

‘King Mindon, who came before King Thibaw, fed a thousand pigs each day to earn merit but when he died they were abandoned,’ Sayadaw explained to Ye Aung.

The monks arrived at the expansive palace, crossed the wide moat on the fifth bridge, walked in single file through the grounds, past the watchtower, and were led to a beautiful, large pavilion. Inside, a carved wooden partition divided the cool and airy space into several reception rooms. The monks went into a small room to await the arrival of the king.

Ye Aung couldn’t stop looking at the throne, heavily decorated with intricate carvings, which sat at the end of the room, while, high above, the ceiling was painted with

lavish scenes and spectacles from the life of King Mindon, who'd built the splendid palace.

When King Thibaw arrived, he did so modestly, without Queen Supayalat or any attendants but accompanied only by two of his young daughters. The princesses were dressed in silk longyi, full-length sarongs in brilliant colours with tight-fitting long-sleeved silk blouses and jewelled flowers pinned at the side of their long, smooth hair. Ye Aung thought they looked like a pair of beautiful butterflies and he tried not to feel too prideful when the younger princess held the kammavaca for a moment before returning it to her father.

It was a short and formal meeting and, if not for the presence of the two princesses, a very dull event. After it was over, Ye Aung followed the older monks to the central shrine of the palace to offer appropriate prayers. He couldn't help wondering if the king would study the pages of the kammavaca and notice his illustrations or if it would simply be placed in the royal library and forgotten. Nevertheless, he said a prayer for the wellbeing of the king and his family.

Within a month, there were dramatic changes in Mandalay that affected even the quiet life of the monastery. British troops had moved in from the coastal regions of Burma and travelled up the Irrawaddy River, marching through the villages and markets on their way to Mandalay Palace.

The novice monks were ordered to stay indoors while the senior monks spread out through the countryside to protect their shrines and relics. The invaders had no respect for the Burmese culture and took what they pleased. In the marketplaces, supplies of rice and staples were stretched and there were greatly reduced offerings for the monks on their daily rounds to the food stalls, shopkeepers and

houses of devout townspeople. When they returned to the monastery their alms bowls were often empty.

Ye Aung asked Sayadaw about the welfare of the king and the royal court, especially the princesses. Sayadaw told him that the British had taken them away from the palace in bullock carts and sent them to live somewhere in India. The British were now in control of all Burma.

Eventually the abbot decided to find out for himself exactly what was happening in the city. But when he returned from Mandalay he was greatly distressed. He said that he had heard that the palace was now called Fort Dufferin after the Viceroy of India, and that the British officers were using it as their private club. Jewels had been plundered from it and the largest gemstones had been sent to Queen Victoria. The lavish Burmese throne was now in a museum in Calcutta.

Just before dawn several days later, a small fishing boat pulled into the landing below the monastery and a figure wrapped in monk's robes hurried up the steps and along the path to the clearing where the monastery stood in the dark shadows.

Ye Aung stirred. Lying on his mat on the dormitory floor, he'd heard the splashing of an oar in the river, and now the soft brushing of footsteps hurrying up the stairs and the creak of the teak boards as the visitor walked swiftly along the outer corridor. Whispers were exchanged. Then Ye Aung heard the sounds of several more monks as they followed the visitor to the zayat, the pavilion in the grounds of the monastery that was used by the monks for meditation during the day and where visitors rested.

Ye Aung, now wide awake, was curious and he rose and walked quietly past the other sleeping boys and through the darkened rooms, slipping between the pillars of the main corridor, out through the tall carved doors and down the stone steps at the rear of the monastery.

He knew that eavesdropping was wrong but he also knew the monks were worried about the British. In the moonlight he saw senior monks sitting in a close circle on the floor of the pavilion, speaking softly. He didn't dare go any closer so he turned and crept back to his place on the dormitory floor and hoped he'd learn more later.

Sayadaw didn't disappoint him, taking him aside after morning meditation that day. From the look in his teacher's eyes, Ye Aung suspected that he had either been heard or spotted creeping about the monastery the previous night.

Sayadaw looked serious as he began to explain. 'There is much trouble in the city. Everyone is very distressed. The British soldiers burned the royal treasury.'

'So are all the money and jewels gone?' asked Ye Aung.

'I believe that only some money was left. A lot has already been looted and the king took as much as he could in the short time he had before leaving Burma. It is said that he also arranged to have much of it hidden.' Sayadaw shook his head. 'But no, Ye Aung, that is not what has upset the monks so much. In the treasury were kept all the genealogical records of the hereditary nobility. These important records were inscribed on gold-bound palm-leaf manuscripts and wrapped in embroidered silk cloths.'

'As beautiful as my one?' said Ye Aung and Sayadaw gave a small smile.

'Perhaps, but none would have the devotion and imagination you put into your work. And, sadly, the royal library has also been looted and many precious books and records of our culture have also been destroyed.'

Ye Aung could only stare at Sayadaw in shock, imagining the thousands of manuscripts, many hundreds of years old, that must have been burned. 'Why would the British soldiers do this?' he whispered.

Sayadaw shrugged. 'They want to impose their law. But they will not be here forever. We have been here for centuries, and one day these British will be forced to leave and we will again be ruled by our own wise and peaceful men.'

Ye Aung tried to remember the teachings of the Buddha and to forgive the ignorant soldiers who had caused such destruction, but he feared that the kamma-vaca he'd illustrated for the king had now been turned to ash. Suddenly he said, 'If there was a secret in the script on the king's kammavaca, it might be gone forever!'

'Then its secret wasn't meant to be found,' said Sayadaw philosophically.

Ye Aung heard the chanting of the lessons begin as he scampered across the compound. He touched the carved elephant at the bottom of the steps to the monastery and whispered a swift prayer in the hope that by some blessed chance his special manuscript had survived.

1913

The late afternoon colours melted over the slick brown surface of the Irrawaddy. The tranquillity of the still river was broken by the chugging of the engine driving the large paddlewheels of the laden steamer as it churned towards Mandalay. On the polished teak open-air upper deck, in the section reserved for first-class passengers, pre-dinner drinks were being served. The dark-skinned Bengali boat crew of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company waited on the passengers, all of whom seemed to be British, as they reclined in their planters' chairs, screened by tubs of palms, sipping their sundowners. The men, dressed in crisp whites, were discussing trading prices, the formation of a new British teak company, the continued growth of the Yenangyaung oilfields, their successful rice crops and news from home.

In more subdued tones, they discussed the latest rumours of the continuing machinations of the exiled King Thibaw and his queen, still languishing in Ratnagiri in India.

‘They have to be watched like hawks. They’re always plotting to get back to Burma,’ said a planter.

‘She’s the one to watch. You know she was behind the massacre of most of the king’s relatives, even some half brothers and sisters, and anyone else she thought might have challenged his succession,’ said another.

‘Beaten to death in red velvet sacks,’ shuddered his companion.

‘I was told by a British officer whose friend was present at the executions that it was all very ceremonial. Indeed, quite respectful and calculated to be swift since the blows were judiciously placed,’ responded the first planter.

‘The people didn’t like Thibaw much, either. Blood-thirsty, even if the chap did play cricket,’ said his friend laughing.

‘Damned primitive lot if you ask me,’ commented another of the group. ‘Thank god we’ve annexed the country now. They should consider themselves fortunate not to all be stuffed in a velvet bag.’

‘If it wasn’t for loyalty to the flag and the opportunities out here I wonder how many of us would stick it out,’ mused a retired colonel.

‘I think those ruby mines, oilfields and teak forests are rather attractive,’ said the paddlesteamer’s captain with a slight smile. ‘As are the Burmese ladies. I think the rewards of Burma are well worth putting up with a bit of discomfort.’

A little apart from this group of men, Andrew Hancock sat quietly while the drinks and Chinese savouries were being served by the stewards. He listened half-heartedly to the conversations nearby. Staring out over the river to the thickly forested bank, Andrew thought of how incredible

it was to be here in Burma. Travelling and adventure was not the life he had expected. His father worked in a bank in Brighton, and Andrew assumed he would do the same, even though he was passionate about photography. He thought it was wonderful to capture something or someone in a photograph and make that moment last forever. Unfortunately, he could see no way of earning a living taking photographs. Then he had a marvellous piece of luck. A distant uncle died and left everything in his will to Andrew. While it was not a fortune, it gave Andrew the time and opportunity to see if it was possible to become a professional photographer.

Andrew quickly found that photographing Brighton was quite dull and he realised that what he really wanted to do was to combine photography with adventure, so he sailed for India. He travelled throughout the country, mainly taking photos of village life, although he did get to the durbar in New Delhi where he saw George V crowned emperor of India. Then he started to write stories to accompany his photos and found that several magazines were interested in buying his work. This meant that he could stay out in the east even longer.

One morning, as Andrew was having breakfast in Calcutta, he heard some men talking about Burma and their discussion piqued Andrew's interest. So he decided to see for himself and now, here he was, as Mr Kipling would say, 'On the road to Mandalay'.

As he sat dreaming to himself on a chair on the deck of the steamer, he was joined by a small, plump Scot wearing tropical whites who peered at him through a pince-nez as he introduced himself.

'Good evening. I'm Ian Ferguson. I don't think I've seen you before. Is this your first trip to Mandalay?'

Andrew rose from his chair and offered Ferguson his hand. 'First time in Burma at all, actually. It looks to be a

wonderful country. All those temples. I don't expect that there is another place in the world that has so many.'

'Ah, yes,' replied Ferguson. 'The Burmese are devout Buddhists. What brings you to Burma? Civil service? Trade?'

'Neither,' said Andrew. 'I'm a photographer. I sell my work to magazines back home. May I ask what it is that you do in Burma, Mr Ferguson?'

The little Scot beamed. 'I'm an art expert. In fact, I would go so far as to say that I am *the* expert on Burmese culture and Burmese artefacts.'

Andrew Hancock was impressed. 'So you travel the country, learning the culture of the people?'

'Well, laddie, the thing is the Burmese don't really value their culture. Their temples are packed with artefacts that the monks don't bother to look after. You can buy any number of beautiful things at the markets for a pittance. The Burmese would rather have the money than their religious objects.'

'Perhaps they do care but they really need the money,' Andrew suggested.

'Nonsense, laddie. When you've been here for a while like I have you'll realise that we British place a far higher value on the local culture than the Burmese do.'

'So are you preserving it?' asked Andrew.

'I certainly am. I collect the best of it and send it back to Britain.'

'Into museums?'

'And to private collectors who appreciate Burmese art.' The man gave a short laugh.

After Ian Ferguson moved away to join another group, Andrew reflected on their conversation. He had not been in Burma long and was certainly not the expert that Ferguson claimed to be but he thought it odd that the Burmese should be so casual about their art and culture.

He had observed quite a different attitude in India where the pomp of the rajahs had suggested to him that Indian culture was highly esteemed by its people. He found himself questioning why the same would not be true of Burma. Perhaps he would find out for himself how correct Ferguson's pronouncements were.

The Irrawaddy was now a mile wide, the banks a distant blur. Occasionally the ship steered a course into a deeper channel to avoid the tangled roots of vegetation. Once or twice Andrew saw a small craft being paddled by fishermen, and once the sight of several dolphins leaping from the water brought many of the other passengers to the side of the vessel to exclaim in excitement. Andrew wished that he could photograph the small dark-grey, snub-nosed creatures, but they moved too quickly.

Then the river narrowed and steep volcanic hills smothered in lush jungle rose up beside them. The river-bank was no longer soft brown mud but solidified lava, shining in the afternoon light. At the river's edge, large pools had formed and were surrounded by sheltered clearings backed by high cliffs. The captain told Andrew that elephants sometimes bathed in these pools but now, as they passed, all looked deserted.

Suddenly a small island of thick overgrowth divided the river. To one side was a sheer cliff face, which the water rushed past. The steamer took the calmer reach around the island, giving Andrew a view of a monastery perched on top of a cliff, seemingly abandoned and in some disrepair, yet still imposing and breathtaking.

As they nosed further along, Andrew's attention was caught by a flash of light high in the hills. It took a moment for him to realise that the fiery gold light was the setting sun glinting off the roof of a pagoda which clung to the edge of a precipice. How on earth, wondered Andrew, were people able to ascend to it? It looked impossible.

And how much gold leaf had been applied to the pagoda for it to glow so richly? Moments later he caught sight of another temple, or stupa as he now understood some were called, its distinctive rounded bell shape also shining brightly.

All he had read and heard seemed to be coming to life: stories of chambers of perfumed sandalwood and eaglewood leading to the legendary House of Gold. Its walls were plated in sheets of gold, while a carved vine encrusted with fruit and leaves of emeralds and rubies the size of large eggs embellished its columns; inside a golden casket on a gold table was filled with precious gems; guarded by solid gold idols studded with glittering stones. How much was myth, how much reality?

Now he knew why Burma was the Golden Land – a country, it was said, resplendent in more pagodas, temples and shrines than anywhere else in the world. A country rich in Buddhist culture, rich in natural resources and rich in colourful history. And here he was, ready to explore and photograph it.

1926 – Rangoon

Andrew turned off the Strand, the road that ran beside the river, down a small lane between the solid colonial edifices of the post office, the courthouse and the shipping companies that serviced the busy port of Rangoon. He passed street vendors and their tiny food stalls where the appetising odours of frying noodles and savoury pancakes reminded him that it had been some time since he'd had breakfast. A row of narrow doorways led into cluttered dark cubicles that sold everything from bicycle spare parts to cooking utensils and handmade straw brooms. Halfway down the lane was an entrance marked by fluttering magazines, postcards and an array of coloured pencils. Andrew

stepped through the door and into a little shop. The Scottish proprietor was dressed in a white shirt tucked into a traditional checked green and magenta cotton longyi, knotted at the waist. He didn't look up from where he sat, cross-legged on a short stool, reading a book.

Andrew glanced at the used books on the shelves, some well-worn English novels and textbooks written in both English and curling Burmese calligraphy. He turned to the shop owner.

'Good morning, Mr Watt.'

The owner peered over his glasses at him, then stood hurriedly and extended his hand.

'Mr Hancock. This is a surprise. I haven't seen you in some time.'

'It certainly has been many years, hasn't it? I was told that I would still find you here. It's good to see you again, Mr Watt.'

'Yes. Not since the outbreak of the war, I think. Pull up a stool or a cushion.' Mr Watt clapped his hands and a young Indian assistant appeared from behind the rows of books. 'Vinay, this is an old acquaintance of mine. Please go straight to the tea shop and fetch us tea. Now tell me, Mr Hancock, what have you been doing with yourself all this time? I thought you might have married and settled down by now.'

'No; perhaps I'm not that type. Things have been uncertain for me. I sailed home when war broke out and spent the next four years in the trenches on the Western Front.'

'Not a pleasant experience for you.'

'It certainly wasn't, although at least I came out of it relatively unscathed, which is more than I can say for others. I was luckier than most. When the war finished I was at a bit of a loose end. My father had died and my only sister, Florence, married an Australian soldier she'd

met when he was on leave in Brighton and they moved to Australia. I didn't like to leave my mother alone so I managed to get work with Lord Beaverbrook's newspapers as a photographer. I tried to write a novel, but it wasn't very good and no-one would publish it. When my mother passed away, I decided that there was nothing to keep me in England, and I thought that I would like to come back to the east, and so here I am, looking for more stories about this wonderful land and its people.'

'I heard that your magazine articles were very well received in London along with your excellent photographs.'

'Yes. That work really interested me. Can't say the same about being a London newspaper hack though. But what about you? How have you been all these years?'

'Still happily married to Moe,' said Mr Watt, referring to his Burmese wife. 'I don't think we'll ever get back to the old country. Both of us would find the cold unbearable.'

Andrew concurred, knowing that it was probably the frosty reception that Mrs Watt would receive in Scotland, rather than the weather, that kept the bookshop owner anchored in Rangoon. As Vinay returned to the room with the tea, Andrew asked, 'And your business is doing well?'

'Well enough. What are your plans?'

'I'm planning to be a wanderer again, trusting in the goodness and generosity of others, specifically several London magazines. But instead of an alms bowl, I will carry a camera and a notebook,' Andrew said smiling. 'But I'm not just looking for travellers' tales to send to these publications. I'm trying to get beneath the surface of this country. In Britain there's a lot of ignorance about Burma and its people.'

The bookshop owner nodded gravely. 'Yes, the British really have very little idea what is happening to their empire in the east. Changes are afoot. There are anti-British

rumblings, even here in Burma. The Burmese are patient people. But for how long? The young ones are becoming restless. There has been a rebellion at the university.'

'I can't help feeling that our country exploits Burma,' said Andrew, gently.

'I may be from Scotland, but I have thrown my lot in with the Burmese. I have begun to despise the arrogance of our soldiers and civil servants who consider themselves so superior to the people they are ruling, and about whom they know very little. They like to play lord and master in Burma, when the same people would have very little social standing at home. Sometimes I am ashamed to say that I'm British,' Mr Watt burst out.

Andrew nodded thoughtfully. His attention was then caught by several beautiful photographs hanging on one of the walls. One was of Burma's most famous pagoda, the Shwedagon. The beautiful monument with its golden dome and jewelled spires was Rangoon's pre-eminent landmark – as spectacular as any edifice in India or Istanbul. Not only the people of Burma but also foreigners came to pay their respects there. Another photograph was of George V. Next to it was a formal portrait of the late King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat taken in a lavish throne room. The final photograph was of a distant monastery, somewhere near a lake, whose golden bell-shaped stupa was surrounded by misty mountains.

'This one is very fine,' said Andrew, taking the picture down from the wall to look at it more closely.

'Yes, it is beautiful, isn't it? I'm not surprised that you noticed it. It was taken by Philip Klier,' said Mr Watt. 'He also took the one of the old royal family.'

'Ah, yes.' Andrew studied the stoic faces of the royal family, their frozen expressions waiting for the time exposure on the camera to be completed. 'He was an excellent photographer. Tell me, Mr Watt, do you know what

happened to the royal family after they were banished to India? I remember hearing some stories but maybe they were all rumours.'

'Poor Thibaw. Rather an ignominious end being sent into exile so far away. I hear they led a lonely existence. You know that the queen came back to Burma a few years ago, after the king died, although she was never allowed to return to Mandalay.' Mr Watt took the photograph from Andrew and put it back on the wall. 'She died last year. At least she was given a suitable funeral in Rangoon. She's buried at the Shwedagon pagoda.'

'And his daughters? What happened to them?' asked Andrew.

'One of them married a commoner, which upset the king and queen. They live in the hills – Darjeeling, I think. The other princesses also had to make their own way, especially after the family money and jewels ran out.'

'Did you ever meet the king and queen?' Andrew nodded at the photograph.

Mr Watt peered at Andrew over the top of his spectacles. 'I'm not that old. The king was deposed more than forty years ago. Though I have been in Burma a long time.'

'Which is why you know so much about Burmese life and culture and history,' said Andrew.

'I know because I want to find out about it, unlike so many of our countrymen who are closed to all ideas except their own,' Mr Watt said. 'When I first came to Burma I was part of the Indian civil service but when I was working in Mandalay I fell in love with a Burmese girl. The choice came down to my beautiful Moe or the ICS. And here I am, still in Burma and still learning about this country and about Buddhism, and still in love with my wife. My life is simple and I like it that way.'

Mr Watt gestured at the photo of the royal family. 'For them it was difficult to change their ways. They really

didn't adjust, which I suppose was understandable. The king always hoped to return, however that was not to be. One of his half sisters lives near here although her life is far from what it used to be.'

'I didn't realise that. Do you know her?' Andrew asked.

The bookshop owner picked up several books and placed them back on a shelf. 'Yes, I know Princess Tipi Si. She came back to Burma with the old queen. Now she comes in here occasionally to borrow books. She lives very simply. Being Buddhist, she accepts her different circumstances, perhaps not with grace, but with fortitude.'

'Did she never marry?'

'Oh, yes, when she lived in India. She's had a colourful life! I haven't seen her in person for a while; she sends her retainer in for books. I rather miss our conversations, although she's challenging company,' he added with a raised eyebrow and small smile.

'I'd very much like to meet her. Do you think she'd see me?' asked Andrew. 'It would make a great story for one of my magazines, especially if she would let me take her photograph. Do you think she would agree? I would pay her a sitting fee, of course.'

'Why are you interested in her? That is the old Burma. Burma has changed. The monarchy is gone. No-one misses the excesses of the royal dynasties.'

'I believe people always like to read about interesting lives. Lives of people who were once powerful, but are now very different.' Andrew was going to add that perhaps people felt better about their own circumstances when they could read about another's misfortune, but instead he said, 'I'd like to know about the last years in exile and the old queen's final years in Rangoon. It seems very few people know about her and I'm sure my English readers would enjoy reading about her.'

‘I’ll ask next time I see Tipi Si, but she may not agree,’ said Mr Watt. ‘Where are you putting up while you’re here?’

‘The Strand Hotel,’ said Andrew. ‘A bit of an indulgence until I decide where I’m going next. Or you can leave a message for me at Bourne and Shepherd here in Rangoon.’

‘The photographic studio. I know them.’

‘I will be doing occasional work for them while I’m here.’

Mr Watt nodded. ‘You mean photographing those whites-only functions? I’m pleased that you’re planning to get out of Rangoon. For those who wish to see beneath the golden stupas, there are hidden treasures in Burma.’

Andrew wasn’t sure exactly what was meant by this oblique comment, but he was excited by the adventures that might lie ahead. He thanked Mr Watt, promising to call by again, and bought a well-thumbed novel by Somerset Maugham before he left the shop.

Andrew walked around Fytche Square where Queen Victoria’s statue gazed severely at the passersby, and then strolled down towards the busy waterfront. He decided that he needed a pot of English tea and turned under the portico of the Strand Hotel.

He sat at a small rattan table and glanced through the novel he’d bought but he was really thinking about what Mr Watt had said about the exiled princess. He tried to imagine what her life had been like and what it must be like now. She sounded as exotic as a character in one of Maugham’s novels. Andrew was sure that if he had the chance to interview her, he’d have no difficulty in selling his pictures along with a brief story to a London magazine.

So he was pleased and delighted when, a few days later, a note was handed to him by the tall and burly Sikh hotel doorman.

Tipi Si has agreed to see you. Here's the address, wrote Mr Watt. She is a surprising lady. Quite a character. She might expect something in return.

Andrew settled himself into a trishaw, steadying his camera box beside him on the seat as a wiry driver pedalled past crowded markets, busy tea shops, noodle stalls and a jumble of leaning shophouses. They made their way through narrow lanes interspersed by grander colonial streets, which were filled with business houses. The trishaw rattled over cobblestone squares, and Andrew caught glimpses of some of the city's pagodas and temples, all of which were overshadowed by the magnificence of the Shwedagon Pagoda.

The driver turned down University Avenue and then into a street lined with mature trees and large residences that had been built for the British years earlier. The street also contained the homes of wealthy Indian, Chinese, Burmese and European businessmen. The houses of former ambassadors and employees of the deposed royal family sat among rambling gardens overlooking Inya Lake.

Andrew was taken aback by all these grand houses and for a moment he thought Mr Watt must have been mistaken in describing the reduced circumstances of the princess. But then the driver stopped outside one of the mansions and pointed to a small house beside it, no more than a couple of rooms, set amid an overgrown garden.

Carrying his camera equipment, Andrew opened the gate and walked beneath dank, overgrown trees and across the decaying lawn covered by swarms of mosquitoes. In the distance he glimpsed the white portico of the big house. A second look at the huge home gave him the impression that it was unoccupied. Shutters, their paint peeling, leaned crookedly at some of the upstairs windows. There were moss and leaves on the steps, and birds had nested under the guttering, in which luxuriant

grass had sprouted. The small house, which had presumably belonged to the gatekeeper, looked equally dishevelled.

Andrew knocked on the door of the small house and it seemed an interminable length of time before he finally heard shuffling footsteps. The door was opened by a tall young man, dressed in a longyi and a formal white shirt. Andrew guessed from his light skin that he was a Shan from the northern hill country. The boy's dark eyes were friendly but he looked surprised to see Andrew.

In halting Burmese, Andrew said, 'Good afternoon. I am Andrew Hancock. I am here to see Princess Tipi Si. Mr Watt arranged it.'

The young man nodded and replied in careful English, 'Yes. The princess is expecting you to visit. Please come in.' He held the door open as Andrew removed his shoes, slung his camera box over his shoulder and entered the shadowy house. Andrew assumed that the man he was following was not just a house boy, for he was obviously educated and had a poised air about him rather than the acquiescent shyness customary of servants.

The house was small, though it had high ceilings and, being bereft of furniture, seemed bigger than it was. It smelled musty, looked dusty and felt forlorn. When they stepped into the reception room, Andrew took in the bare tiled floor and a slowly turning ceiling fan. The room contained little furniture, just two chairs, a low table, a carved mirror and a wooden screen that sectioned off a corner. Through the rear door Andrew could see a lean-to, which was clearly the cooking area, next to the bath house. In the reception room, sitting on some large embroidered cushions, sat an elderly Burmese woman.

She sat straight backed, her hands folded in her lap, her chin lifted, her gaze directed at Andrew although she made no effort to greet him by nod or gesture. She was

dressed in a silk longyi and a tightly fitted, long-sleeved lavender silk blouse. Her only adornment was an elaborate hair comb that glittered in her smoothly coiled but faded black hair.

Andrew bowed his head slightly but before he could speak the princess finally acknowledged his presence.

‘Good afternoon. Mr Watt informed me that you would like to meet me. As he is an old acquaintance, I agreed.’ Her English was accented and formal.

‘Thank you. I am honoured.’

‘There is no need to be. I am no longer a royal princess. Please, sit down.’

She waved towards the other chair and when Andrew sat down, she adjusted her position slightly so she could face him squarely. Now that Andrew could see the princess more clearly, he was impressed by how regal she looked with her cool, imperious expression. Her skin had the soft creases of overripe fruit, but her dark eyes glittered keenly as she looked at the man before her. She did not seem embarrassed or worried about her impoverished circumstances.

‘What do you wish to speak to me about?’

‘Your story intrigues me. Mr Watt may have explained that I write stories and take photographs of interesting places and people in the east, which I sell to English magazines. When Mr Watt told me about you, I wondered if you would allow me to write a magazine article about your life.’

‘I am no longer interesting, Mr Hancock.’

Andrew smiled politely. ‘I don’t think that is true. May I ask in what way were you related to the late king?’

‘I am, or rather was, his half sister. We had the same father, but we had different mothers.’

‘Is that why you went with him to India?’

‘Yes, when all the royal family were forced into exile.’

‘That must have been difficult for you.’

‘For the king and his chief queen, yes. I was more bored than anything. Ratnagiri was a backwater. The king quickly became involved in the construction of his new palace, which did not interest me, so I disguised myself as a servant and wandered the city. There I discovered there were Indians who liked the British no more than I did. I went to meetings to hear them speak. I became very involved with their plans to rid India of British rule, for I could not respect the British after their treatment of my family.’ She paused and added accusingly, ‘And my feelings against them have multiplied.’

Andrew felt embarrassed by her vehemence and tried to keep her to her personal story. ‘I believe that you went to England at one point?’

‘I wanted to learn more about my enemy, so I sold what little jewellery and possessions I had and I went to England with a charismatic Indian who was a poet, a philosopher and a fighter for India’s independence. He made me realise just how much we in Burma had been exploited by the British. But I did not stay long. Two years later I married a saopha from the Shan hill tribes.’

‘A Shan prince. That seems appropriate,’ said Andrew.

The princess shrugged. ‘We were minor royalty, but we were invited to attend the durbar in Delhi in 1903, which was held to celebrate the accession of Edward VII as emperor of India. King Thibaw wished to attend but the British refused his request. But I rode at the head of the Shan chiefs in a golden howdah on a white elephant decorated with jewels and peacock feathers.’

‘That sounds very impressive,’ said Andrew politely.

‘It might have been if I’d had more money, but my husband was mean and, as you know, my family had nothing.’

‘What did you do? How were you able to live?’

‘I went into trade. First with elephants and then I expanded into other business opportunities. I enjoyed it and I was quite successful but my husband did not approve and said that what I did was not worthy of a Burmese princess. So I divorced him.’

‘When did you come back to Burma?’ Andrew tried not to show impatience with her bald summary of what seemed to be quite major events. He longed for all the details.

‘As you may know, when the king finally died in India, the queen and other members of his family were allowed to return to Burma. Although the queen was not permitted into Mandalay, I was allowed to take up residence there. I knew it well and had friends who could help me. I went into the logging business. I also traded ivory with the Chinese. Opium, too. But I found it was better for me to be in Rangoon. I could make more money here. I bought property. I managed to acquire some lucrative contracts, building roads and supplying teak logs to the British. The British did not like me because I drove a very hard bargain with them.’ The princess smiled for the first time and paused, then she reached across to the little table and struck a small gong sitting on it.

The young man swiftly and silently appeared and the princess spoke to him in a dialect that Andrew didn’t understand.

‘I have ordered tea,’ she explained.

‘May I ask you, the young man, is he a Shan?’

‘Yes. The Shan are a very proud people. They have always been independent, never under the rule of the Burmese kings. His father was a friend of mine but he was murdered. Now I care for his son who helps me. So, while he is not of my blood, he is all the family I need.’

The young man returned with a pot of smoky Burmese tea, poured a cup for each of them and then silently

left the room. Andrew gazed around as he sipped his tea and wondered to himself how it was that a successful businesswoman could end up in such reduced circumstances.

The princess watched him and then said bitterly, 'You are wondering how I came to live here. I must tell you that it is the doing of the British. They saw how my business grew and they thought that since I was of the royal line and increasingly wealthy, I would become a focus of rebellion and a threat to their rule, so they conspired to take my wealth from me.'

'But surely the British knew that you wouldn't be a threat.'

The princess pointed at Andrew. 'You know nothing! British intelligence is full of liars and inept idiots plotting to feather their own nests. But they know that there are rebels trying to get rid of the British. Even some of the monks are prepared to act! Many Burmese are tired of seeing the riches of the country stolen from our shrines and pagodas and, more than that, the Burmese just don't want to be ruled by another nation. We want to run things our way. The British knew that I had been involved in the nationalist movement in India, so they were not going to take any chances.'

'The British have brought a lot of prosperity to Burma. Opened up business opportunities, built roads and ports. They have brought benefits to this country,' said Andrew stiffly, feeling that as an Englishman he should defend the empire builders.

'They help themselves for the benefit of Britain, not for the benefit of the Burmese,' she answered.

'How did the British rob you of your wealth?' asked Andrew, not believing that something so underhanded could have occurred.

'They denied me contracts and gave them to my competitors who did not deserve them. My goods were held

up in the ports. Shipping manifests were mislaid. Customs officers took their time. Banks called in loans. It's easy to organise these things when you have the power. Gradually, bit by bit, all my things had to be sold off, just to keep this miserable roof over my head.'

'But surely you don't mean that every Britisher has wronged you? There must be some who have not been so greedy.'

'If you are referring to that nice Mr Watt you are right. He is a good man, but he is married to a Burmese woman so he has a better understanding of things. But he is the only one. They take and they take. Just recently I had to give up something I treasured to a pompous little Scot, with his silly pince-nez. It would have been less galling if I'd been robbed by a local looking for a means to buy food.'

'What did you give up?' asked Andrew.

'Perhaps "give up" is not quite correct.' The princess lifted her shoulders. 'He was very persuasive. And I needed money. Now I am deeply regretful and sad. I had promised myself that no matter what happened I would not sell the last thing I owned that I had from my brother. I feel that I was pressured and intimidated. And I am not even sure that I sold it for its true value.'

'What was it?' asked Andrew quietly.

'I parted with a kammavaca. Do you know what this is? It is a Buddhist text usually written on palm leaves, except this was not on a palm leaf. It was made especially for my brother by monks and there is a great story attached to it.' She sighed. 'It should be treated with respect.' She lifted her hand in a small sad gesture. 'Now I have sold it just to survive. Maybe you would say that I was willingly robbed, but once again I know that I was bullied by the British who always expect to get their way.'

Andrew shifted uncomfortably. He had an idea of

who might have bought the princess's kammavaca. He remembered Ferguson, the self-important art dealer he had met when he first came to Burma. Andrew hadn't crossed paths with the Scot since he'd been back, but he recalled that Ferguson liked to tell everyone that he was an expert on eastern art. It sounded as though the man was in Burma and still in the business of acquiring antiquities and cultural artefacts.

'That is very unfortunate. I'm sorry that you felt forced to sell something from your brother. What is the story behind the kammavaca?' asked Andrew.

'It had been made with such reverence and patience by the monks. And it was my last link with my family. My brother gave it to me just before he died and told me that the kammavaca held the secret to my family's return to power. Now it is gone and my family remains powerless so my hatred of the British is greater than ever,' she said calmly.

'I can understand you feeling like that. Perhaps you will be able to get it back one day,' said Andrew in the face of her justifiable bitterness. Suddenly he found himself adding, 'What if I could get it back for you?'

She glared at his little smile. 'Don't serve me platitudes,' she snapped.

Andrew, seeing the princess's steely expression and burning eyes, knew she was angry, not just at the British administration and the likes of Ferguson, but also at herself, for having sold something so precious. 'If you tell me more of your story, it may help my readers in England know Burma and its people a little better, and why you feel the way you do. I understand your anger, I really do. I am often ashamed by the conduct of some of my compatriots,' he finished.

'I'd like to believe you. I'd like to believe my kammavaca could be retrieved. The king placed such importance

in it. But why should I trust you?’ The princess stopped. ‘Enough. I have said enough already.’ With that she hit the little gong again and when the young Shan entered the room she told him that Andrew was leaving and directed him to escort the photographer to the front gate.

‘I wanted to thank you for the introduction to the princess,’ said Andrew as he walked back into Mr Watt’s bookshop after his abrupt dismissal by the princess.

Mr Watt chuckled. ‘I had wondered how you survived the interview. Did she give you the rounds of the kitchen about us colonials?’

‘Indeed she did. I can understand why she feels that way. But I held my tongue,’ said Andrew.

‘Ah, wise move. Did she reveal any details about her extraordinary life?’

‘Not as many as I would have liked. I caught her at a bad time. And I have to say I felt uncomfortable, in fact somewhat guilty, as she’d just been taken advantage of by a rather obnoxious Scot who’d pressured her into selling him the last remaining possession that had been her brother’s. I think that it not only had sentimental value but was of some great cultural significance.’

‘That is a shame. You can’t be responsible for the behaviour of others whether they are British or Bolivian,’ said Mr Watt. ‘But I must agree with you, the British rulers are a rapacious lot out here. Take everything that’s not nailed down and even then they take the nails. Difficult for the Burmese to stop it and such behaviour creates a lot of ill will.’

‘The princess seems such a formidable character, but she is a forgotten woman. She lives in utter poverty!’ exclaimed Andrew. ‘It amazes me that she has nothing, after being so rich. I really felt that she had

been cheated, so I offered to get her kammavaca back for her. I think that the person who bought it could be a man called Ferguson. I met him once when I was here before the war.'

'I know Ferguson. Greedy little man. No respect for Burmese artefacts. Well, that's not entirely true, he knows their cash value to him on the open market. I believe he has made a lot of money selling artworks and statuary in Europe and America.'

'I doubt what he's bought from her is that valuable,' said Andrew.

'But if this one was made for the king, it gives it more cachet. A certain unique provenance,' said Mr Watt. 'If you can get it back, I'm sure the princess will be grateful. Maybe she'll tell you more about her life – then you'll have a great story, believe me.'

'You've fired my enthusiasm even more. I can redeem some honour for my country by returning the kammavaca that means so much to her and find a great story as well,' said Andrew. 'I'm sure I'll be able to track Ferguson down, and on the way there will be some great tales to sell to the magazines back home.'

Mr Watt shook Andrew's hand. 'Good luck, and be careful. Away from the cities Burma can be a dangerous place these days. I will be keen to hear of your progress.'

'I'll see you when I get back, and with any luck I'll have a good reason to see the princess, too.'

Andrew walked into the British Pegu Club, a modest club by some colonial standards, and, hearing the thwack of tennis balls, wondered at the madness of some members choosing to play an energetic game in the heat of the day. He ordered a gin, eschewing the club's Pegu cocktail, and wandered out to the verandah to admire

the profusion of English flowers being tended by the Indian gardener. Andrew was an infrequent visitor to the Rangoon club as he quickly tired of the all-white male members' gossip. He thought their banter about the inadequacies of the Burmese and their complaints about the laziness of the Indian and Chinese coolies and servants were demeaning.

Andrew never ceased to be shocked by the imperious attitude of the British civil servants. The British police officers often made rather incendiary and unnecessary remarks about the local people. Andrew had fought beside Indian military companies in the trenches on the Western Front so he knew what brave and reliable soldiers they were. Many of the comments he had to listen to were nonsense, but he held his tongue and kept his opinions to himself. Tipi Si's story had yet again reaffirmed his discomfort at British behaviour in Burma. Nevertheless he chatted briefly with several regular members and the club secretary, and eventually learned that Ferguson was indeed in Burma. He had recently set off on a trip north, presumably to collect more artefacts. Cheered by this information, Andrew departed the club and set about planning his own foray to the north.

Andrew felt his legs wobble and feet bounce as he stepped onto the narrow plank linking the old boat to the landing. Surrounded by goods and other passengers, he'd been the only European on the boat since its dawn departure from the busy port of Sittwe. The creek was low and the mud shone in the last light of the day. It had been an arduous journey up the Kaladan River and now the simple village of Thantara looked very welcome.

Andrew managed to get directions to a small guesthouse where he stayed the night. There he made

arrangements to travel by pony cart to Mrauk-U, the place where he'd been told Ferguson was working.

Andrew had been on Ferguson's trail for weeks, traveling overland and along rivers. He had taken photographs of the countryside with its ancient temples and little villages, as well as the Burmese people. Every place he'd been to seemed to have a story to tell and Andrew knew that he would be able to sell most of them. Mrauk-U was not easily accessed but not a surprising destination for the Scot as the ancient capital was filled with the remains of temples and pagodas.

As the little pony trotted through the ruins, Andrew saw that village life continued to flourish among the crumbling stupas. Goats fed on the grasses around the hilltop pagodas, and the village itself encircled the area where a royal palace once stood. It didn't take long to learn that Ferguson had hired several locals to help him work at the Shitthaung Pagoda.

The following day just after sunrise, Andrew headed to the ridge where the sprawling pagoda was reflected in the early morning light. It was surrounded by bell-shaped stupas the size of small cottages, built to house Buddhist relics. But Andrew was dismayed to find that the great temple was very dilapidated and seemed to be deserted.

He walked through it, negotiating piles of forest debris and animal droppings, recoiling from the stench of the bat colony that had taken up residence. He groped his way into a narrow corridor as best he could and tried to find his way to the central sanctum. In a pale beam of light, a row of large carved Buddha figures sat along the inner wall and stared silently into the shadows. Andrew quickly counted twenty-eight of them.

He paused. He could hear a faint tapping sound. He turned a corner and entered a room that had more light

and saw that the walls and ceiling of the temple were covered in carvings. He was astounded by the intricacy and detail of these small sculptures that depicted animals, goddesses and scenes from the spirit world and from Buddha's life. Looking closely he saw that some of them had been painted. They were faded now, but Andrew could imagine how brilliant and vibrant this gallery must have been when it was first completed.

The tapping had grown louder. Turning another corner into a long stone passageway, he saw a small light at the far end and several figures moving about. He realised that this must be Ferguson and his team. He called out.

'Who's there?' demanded Ferguson.

'It's me, Hancock. Andrew Hancock,' called Andrew, waving his torch. 'We met once, years ago.'

'Good lord! What are you doing here? Wait there, and I'll come and show you the way.' Ferguson hurried down the corridor. 'This way, this way.'

As he walked into the bright sunlight, Andrew saw that age had faded Ferguson's sandy hair and he had grown more rotund, but his air of confidence remained, as did the old-fashioned pince-nez, which was still firmly planted on his nose.

'Remind me where we've met. I can't quite place you,' said Ferguson, squinting.

'I'm not surprised,' replied Andrew. 'It was before the war, on a paddle-steamer to Mandalay. I had just arrived in Burma and you were explaining that you were an authority on Burmese art and architecture.'

Ferguson sat down on a broken pillar and lit a small cheroot. 'Can't say that I remember, but never mind. Bit of an out-of-the-way place to run into you, again,' he commented as he took a puff of the small cigar.

'Amazing place. Shame it's so dilapidated,' said Andrew. 'Where's the central sanctum?'

‘Oh, down there. Can you see that small alcove? Follow me.’

Andrew did as he was told and at the end of the narrow corridor he stepped into the small chamber. Even in the dim light he could make out the huge statue of the Buddha sitting cross-legged on an ornamental stone platform, gazing calmly, staring into the gloom of centuries. Andrew found it awe inspiring.

‘Incredible. I see why you’re so fascinated with all this. What are you planning to do?’ asked Andrew as Ferguson led the way outside.

‘Looking at what can be restored and what should be removed for safekeeping.’

‘How fascinating,’ said Andrew cheerfully. He peered around the temple. ‘Well, I’m on the hunt for stories. I’ve been travelling all over the country and I’ve come across a few decent ones. The *Illustrated London News* has taken some. Anyway, I was in Sittwe and I heard you were here and I thought I might find a good story for the magazines back home. And I was told that the ruins at Mrauk-U are fascinating.’ While this was all true, Andrew hoped above all that Ferguson would still have the princess’s kamma-vaca and that he would be able to persuade the art dealer to sell it to him.

‘Jolly good. What do you want from me?’ Ferguson seemed eager to help.

‘I’ve just got a few questions,’ said Andrew. ‘How long have you been working in Mrauk-U? Who do you work for, who are the people you sell to and what sorts of things do they buy? What do you think would be of interest to people back in England?’

Ferguson studied the younger man for a moment. ‘I don’t want you to think that I sell everything I come across. A lot is being transported for safekeeping. I mean, look at this place.’ He waved his arms towards the row

of small stupas. Many were smashed, now looking like defeated, broken bells. 'Weather, time, treasure hunters and looters. So many relics have gone.'

'What was inside those small stupas?'

'Could have been gold figurines, gems, bronzes or religious texts, just waiting there for me to show them to the world. Such a shame they've all gone. You must remember, art belongs to everyone, laddie. Many of those beautiful things should be in the British Museum, for example. Not lying around in the jungle for thieves to pilfer, or rotting away in abandoned shrines for a few local villagers to notice, if indeed they do.'

'But,' said Andrew, looking at the hundreds of ruins in front of him, 'surely there is too much here for museums. They couldn't take it all.'

'You're right, laddie. But there are a lot of collectors in Europe and especially in America who are pleased to pay for a Burmese artefact. And I'm happy to sell them. Allows me to continue my work out here.'

'Have you been in Mrauk-U long enough to excavate anything of major importance, Mr Ferguson?'

'Nothing really spectacular yet, but it's early days. Would you like to see what I've found?'

Ferguson walked over to where a large cart was piled with bulky objects covered by a blanket. Two local men were lifting a stone Buddha the size of a large boulder into the last space in the ox cart. Ferguson pulled back the blanket. Andrew could see that the cart was full of stone Buddhas.

'What will you do with these?' he asked.

'They aren't particularly exceptional pieces, so I'll put them on the open market. I send them to agents, runners. Occasionally I go over to Ceylon and Siam with items, trading with serious collectors and such.'

'I wouldn't mind a memento of Burma. It's a pity

these are so big. Have you got anything that doesn't need porters to carry?'

'What, gems or gold, or a small statue?'

'Goodness, no. I probably couldn't afford anything like that.'

'I have got something small that might interest you. It won't be cheap because it has an interesting history. But I'll show it to you and you can see what you think.'

Ferguson led the way to his small tent, which had a table and chair outside it. He reached in under the fly netting for his satchel and took out a small, narrow box, covered in gold engraving.

'The kammavaca in this box belonged to the last king of Burma,' he told Andrew.

Andrew couldn't believe his luck, but he knew that he would have to be very careful so Ferguson did not suspect his real reason for wanting to buy this particular artefact.

'How on earth did you come by it?' he asked innocently.

'It belonged to his half sister. She's had an eventful life and now lives quietly. Told me that this was the last thing of value that she had, but I'm sure she has a few other treasures, a few last jewels tucked away. You never know with these people. I've seen others like her. They all complain that they're down on their luck. Blame the British administration. But funnily enough they always manage to find something to sell.'

Andrew bit his tongue. 'Can you explain this piece to me? I'm certainly no expert, like you.'

'This is a particularly fine and unusual kammavaca because of the exquisite illustrations. It's a bit like the illuminated manuscripts that were produced in Europe before the advent of printing. And it's not made on palm leaf, either, as they usually are, but specially treated cloth. And that it was made for the king gives it an impressive provenance,' said Ferguson knowledgeably.

‘So it’s kind of a family heirloom,’ said Andrew.

Ferguson unfolded the little sections and carefully handed the kammavaca to Andrew, who turned it over and studied it.

‘What does it say?’

Ferguson peered at it. ‘I haven’t looked at it much. But usually these sorts of things are just prayers and sacred texts from the Pali canon. Not worthwhile bothering to translate them, really. I thought I had a buyer in Mandalay so I carried it with me up there, rather than leaving it in Rangoon, but the chap had gone back to England before I could contact him. Bit of good fortune for you, young man.’

‘It is delightful. This is just the sort of thing I had in mind,’ said Andrew. He carefully refolded the sections of the long, banner-like kammavaca and placed it in its box. ‘It rather intrigues me. I’d like to take home one souvenir of Burma and this is easy to carry if it’s not too expensive.’

‘I couldn’t let it go cheaply. It’s definitely a collector’s piece,’ said Ferguson, getting down to business.

‘But if it belonged to the former king, it’s not very old, is it?’ said Andrew. ‘You’re very knowledgeable and lead such a fascinating life, I’m sure that any article I wrote about you would be very well received in England. People outside the world of archaeology would certainly learn all about you.’

Ferguson considered this. ‘You’d have to be careful what you wrote. Can’t have every Johnny racing out to Burma and clearing out the tombs and temples, eh?’ began Ferguson, but Andrew could see he was flattered by the idea of appearing in a publication as prestigious as the *Illustrated London News*.

They bartered back and forth and in a short while had agreed on a price for the kammavaca, on the condition

that Andrew should write an article about Ferguson and his work in Burma.

Andrew extracted some English pounds from his wallet. While the price for the kammavaca was not a huge sum, it left a bit of a hole in his savings. But for Andrew it was a matter of principle. The meeting with Princess Tipi Si had affected him deeply and had brought to the surface his own embarrassment at the greedy and unscrupulous behaviour of his countrymen in Burma. If he could show the princess that not all of them behaved so badly by returning the king's kammavaca, then he would feel better. It would be his moral victory.

Andrew took some photographs of Ferguson working at the Shitthaung Pagoda and other locations in Mrauk-U, and of three red-robed monks making their way down the green hillside from their monastery to the village with their alms bowls. He then packed away his camera, settled the small teak box with the kammavaca inside his luggage, and began the arduous journey back to Rangoon to see the princess and return her family heirloom.

2



Gold Coast, Queensland, 2006

NATALIE GRASPED MARK'S ARM, closed her eyes and held her breath.

'Going once . . . Going twice . . .' The auctioneer paused, holding his gavel aloft, and glanced around at the small crowd standing on the footpath.

'Last chance for what could be the best waterfront living on the hottest part of the Gold Coast.'

'Oh no, that couple are going to get it. Mark, bid again!' whispered Natalie urgently.

'We've already gone past our limit.'

'Please try another five thousand dollars, quick.' She pushed his elbow and Mark's arm shot up.

'Thank you, sir. Now, going once, twice, going three times . . . Sold!' The agent banged the hammer onto the lectern in front of him and pointed to Natalie and Mark.

‘Congratulations to the young couple with the stroller! If you could just come this way, we’ll sort out all the details.’

Mark and Natalie walked back through the house, now seeing it through different eyes. They were about to be its new owners.

‘Scary but wonderful, isn’t it?’ said Natalie, already visualising the changes she wanted to make to their purchase.

That was six months ago. How excited they’d been to buy the house of their dreams. Natalie and Mark Cutler had been married for five years. But with the arrival of their children, Charlotte, who was now three, and eighteen-month-old Adam, they’d outgrown their house in Brisbane. They’d decided to move to the Gold Coast, mainly for the lifestyle it offered, but also because they’d be a bit closer, but not too close, to Natalie’s mother who lived over the border in northern New South Wales now less than two hours away. Mark, who was an electrician, had mates who assured him there was plenty of work available for good tradesmen on the Gold Coast. So they’d sold their nicely renovated house in Brisbane for a better price than they’d expected and spent the following weekends looking at homes on the Gold Coast.

Being a holiday and a tourist destination, highrises dominated the skyline and hugged the beachfronts. But with a growing family, an apartment was not for them. Slowly they began to explore the suburbs away from the beach strip and discovered that they liked many of them, although a lot of the houses were way out of their price range.

One day as they drove from one house inspection to the next, Mark said, ‘I don’t want to move out into the

hinterland. Too rural. Too isolated. Let's stay fairly close to the coast.'

Natalie looked at her fit and handsome husband, who at thirty-eight was still sports mad even though he didn't play competitive football anymore. His hair was sun bleached and he had a year-round tan. Both of them liked swimming and surfing, so finding a home close to water had been high on their wish list.

'Oh, I agree,' said Natalie. 'I want to be close to shopping. With Charlotte and Adam we need to be near a park, perhaps a play group and a doctor. All that sort of thing. But I don't want to get caught in an area that's full of holidaymakers, either, so that I can never park the car, and where there could be a lot of party noise.'

'I really don't want to be in a part of town surrounded by stuffy retirees,' said Mark. 'It would be great to have families our own age nearby so the kids have someone to play with.'

Eventually they found what they thought was the perfect place. It was a rather run-down seventies house that they knew would need a lot of work, but they loved the area, which was full of well-kept houses and mature gardens. There was a handy corner shop and a park at the end of the street. Most of all, they loved the position of the house. It sat on one of the wide canal developments so that from the back of the house the view was of a broad expanse of sparkling blue water.

'I think this place has fantastic potential,' Natalie whispered to Mark the first time they inspected it. 'The bones of the house are terrific, and how about that outlook? Can't you see us fishing off our own little wharf? We might even be able to buy a boat and tie it up at the bottom of our garden.'

'This place is really run-down,' Mark cautioned.

'I know. But we'd never be able to afford a place in

such a fabulous position if it wasn't. If we can do up a place in Brissie, we can do this one up. You're handy, and all your mates are tradies. Surely we can get things done for mates' rates, and we can paint and do a lot of the renovations ourselves!' exclaimed Natalie.

Mark smiled. 'You really want this place, don't you?'

Natalie steered him onto the deck that overlooked the patchy lawn running to the water's edge. Beside it was a swimming pool that desperately needed cleaning. 'I didn't want to seem too keen, but I know that we could fix this place up and make it a really wonderful house to live in.'

'It's big enough with five bedrooms, but there's only one bathroom and a dinky ensuite. And there's no big work area for me,' said Mark.

Natalie gave a dismissive wave. 'I can see it! I can just see how we can fix this place up.'

'I don't know. It's going to be a big job and it's not going to be cheap.' Mark looked out at the canal and the houses opposite with their fancy swimming pools and thatched Balinese-style cabanas. Many of them had boats moored to their own private landing or pontoon.

'Mark, we've got the experience. I'll draw up some of my ideas for you tonight,' said Natalie with confidence.

Mark stared at her. 'The renovations we did at our place were cosmetic. Paint, carpets, a deck, garden. This would be structural, you'd need an architect or at least a builder who knows what he's doing.'

'Let me show you. I can see it,' insisted Natalie.

Later, they talked into the night, discussing their budget and working out a rough costing of Natalie's ideas. With the knowledge that they could eventually renovate the house into something very special, they went to the auction with enthusiasm and enough money from the bank to buy their dream home.

After they'd bought the house and moved in, they

spent the first few days settling, getting to know all aspects, good and bad, of their new home. It was soon apparent that the massive renovation job together with their bigger mortgage and the expenses of the move meant they had to re-evaluate their financial position.

‘Finding the money for the renovations is going to be more difficult than I thought,’ said Mark. ‘And are you still thinking of another baby?’

‘Of course I am! I adore being a mother. But, well, it isn’t really the right time, is it?’ Natalie said with a sigh. ‘And I’m disappointed about the renovations. You’re right. I don’t think we can find enough time and money to do them quickly. How are we ever going to save enough to do the really big jobs, like the bathrooms and the kitchen, let alone fixing up the pool? Maybe I should go back to work.’

‘I’m not sure about that. By the time we pay for day-care, babysitting and another car, I don’t know that your teacher’s salary is going to cover what we’ll need. And we’ve always agreed that being at home to look after the kids while they are little is the best thing for them. I think we should stick to our plan of you having these years off and only going back to paid work when they’re older and in school,’ said Mark.

‘I know,’ said Natalie. ‘Perhaps we should do as much work on the house as we can ourselves, and then when we’ve saved up a bit, we’ll do the more expensive bits. We’ll get there.’

Over the next few weekends they began to renovate the house. They ripped up the carpets and painted the walls in one of the spare rooms.

After dinner one night when the children had gone to bed, Mark poured them both a glass of wine. ‘Sit down, I want to talk to you, Nat.’

‘Hmm. Sounds serious. Or have we won the lottery and you haven’t told me?’ she asked lightly, not liking the look on her husband’s face.

‘Look, this renovating the house bit by bit isn’t going to work, is it?’

Natalie was about to disagree with him, but in the end she quietly nodded her head. ‘You’re right. We’re spending every weekend working on the house, but it’s so hard with the kids around. They just get into everything and you have to watch them all the time. You know what Adam did with that paintbrush. I mean, it only took a couple of hours to fix up the mess he made, but it wasn’t helpful. We are living in chaos. We can’t have our friends around because there’s nowhere nice to entertain them. At least we didn’t get carried away and rip out the kitchen, but it’s so awful to cook there because the stove barely works and the oven takes an age to heat up. If it weren’t for the barbeque, we’d never have a meal at a reasonable hour. I don’t regret taking on this place, but I wish we could speed up the renovations.’

‘I’ve worked out a way we can fix this place up much faster than we’re doing, and without you having to go back to work.’

‘Really? How?’ Natalie looked puzzled.

‘I’m going to apply for a new job.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Still a sparky, of course. But away from here . . .’

‘Move? Oh no! Do you want us to move? Do you want to rent this place out?’

‘Calm down, Nat. No, of course not. Anyway,’ he smiled at her, ‘who’d rent the place in the state it’s in? No, what I meant was that I’ll be away, but you and the kids will stay here. I won’t be away all the time. But I can make a lot more money working out at a mine site. It’ll be long hours but great money. And they tell me the conditions aren’t bad.’

‘You mean you’re going to be a fly in – fly out worker?’ said Natalie quietly. ‘How long would you be away for?’

‘It’s four weeks on, one week off. Twelve working days a fortnight.’

‘That’s ridiculous! Crazy.’

‘I know it’s not perfect for us, Nat, but it’s great take-home pay, much more than what I earn now.’

‘Where would you be?’ asked Natalie, trying to settle her jumbled feelings and emotions. The money sounded terrific but the hours were horrendous for Mark, she would miss him and how would she manage on her own for such long stretches at a time?

‘Central Queensland. There’s a lot of work for good electricians: keeping machinery operating, wiring work sites and building living quarters and facilities for the workers.’

‘It’s such a long time away . . .’ began Natalie, feeling close to tears.

‘It’s the only way we can save enough money to get the renovations done quickly. Just for a year or two, say. And after each shift, when I come back, I’ll have seven days just to be here with you and the kids. That will give you a break. You can have lunch with your girlfriends, and I’ll spend quality time with the kids.’

Natalie stared at Mark. ‘You’ll need time-out after working those hideous hours. It’s your break, too.’

‘I’ve talked to other people who have done it. Jason’s working as a plumber over in the west. Saving up for a house. Says he’s whacking nearly a grand into the bank every pay.’

‘I have to think about this.’ Natalie got up. She was too tired for another glass of wine and she wanted to think about the whole idea before discussing it further.

‘I need to get to bed. Adam is waking so early these mornings. Let’s talk about this some more before we make a decision.’

Slowly Natalie got used to the idea and the lure of the extra money seemed too good an opportunity to pass up.

But when Mark started his new job the adjustment for them all was much greater than they had imagined. The children became clingy and needy while he was away. When Mark came home he was exhausted and slept for hours at a stretch. It took at least two days for him to reset his body clock, regain his good temper and enjoy playing with them, and then it was time for him to go again.

‘It’s not like you’ve flown in from Alaska,’ complained Natalie. ‘I don’t understand why the job has had such an impact on you.’

Mark sighed. ‘I don’t stay up late boozing, watching DVDs or anything like that,’ he said defensively. ‘Anyway, we get tested for alcohol and drugs and you can’t work if they’re in your system.’

‘Drugs! You get drug tested?’ exclaimed Natalie.

‘People are driving expensive equipment, working with explosives. It’s a safety thing. Jeez, I don’t want to work with someone who’s not all there.’

‘What are you doing that makes you so tired?’

‘I’m working. But it’s hard physical work, even my job. There’s a lot of noise, speed, shouting, whistles, machinery, trucks, trains hauling coal. It’s full-on madness. And people are working round the clock, working under lights, twenty-four seven. There’s constant pressure. When I have time off I stick to my room to get a bit of peace and quiet.’

‘It sounds awful.’

‘It’s better than it used to be, I hear. The first workers on the site lived really rough. Now there are sealed roads, a rec centre with a pool and a club social room and a big dining hall with really good meals. Even landscaped gardens! It’s a plush camp in the middle of nowhere.’

‘What about the people you work with? Have you

made friends? Hung out together after work? Are you working with the same people all the time?’

‘Not really, said Mark, ‘I work with different people a lot because I move around to different jobs. Everyone has different rosters, too, and they seem to come and go, quit and move on, very regularly. Most don’t see it as a long-term job. Like me, they’re in it for the money. Hanging out! I’m too buggered to socialise. Twelve-hour days are pretty full-on, takes its toll.’

‘I’m trying to imagine it. Can you take some photos?’

‘We’ll see.’

In the beginning Natalie had missed Mark terribly. When he came home she changed her routine to fit in with him. Because he slept late for the first couple of days, she kept the kids home from their preschool so that he could spend time with them when he woke up. She appreciated taking time-out for herself, even if it was just for a doctor’s appointment or grocery shopping in peace without the kids, or getting the car serviced. And she delighted in the four of them spending time together, going to the beach for a swim or packing a picnic lunch and finding a park with lots of things for the children to play on.

As time went by, Natalie found that she adjusted to Mark’s long absences. She liked not having to prepare elaborate meals, especially when it was so hard to cook in their kitchen. Eating an egg and a piece of fruit with the children was much easier, and she found that having only herself to please could make life very simple. While Mark was away, she took over those jobs that he had usually done, including mowing the grass in the front of the house and, while it added to her workload, Natalie felt a small twinge of pride in managing everything. At night, when she was on her own and the children

were asleep, she refined her plans for the renovations. The more she lived in her house, the more she loved it. She wasn't bothering to watch TV of an evening but instead listened to her iPod as she made sketches, took measurements and flipped through country-inspired decorating magazines.

The kitchen was not just going to be replaced. She wanted to enlarge it by knocking out the wall between it and the laundry. And what had been a small office at the end of the hall, opening onto the side garden, she would turn into a new laundry with a fold-down clothesline on the outside wall facing the morning sun. The fourth and fifth bedrooms, which were fairly big but dark and depressing, she planned to make into one big play area for the kids, with one of the walls to be replaced with folding plantation doors. These would open onto the sheltered and fenced front garden, which she would plant with tropical flowers, or maybe herb beds, and perhaps construct a sandpit there, as well.

She planned to throw white paint over all the dark rooms with their old stained-wood panelling, which Mark had said was only wood veneer anyway. She'd decided to go with a colour scheme of white and indigo blue with splashes of yellow. Fresh, clean, cool.

She'd get Mark to slash back some of the rampant tropical growth that shaded so much of the garden and verandah and harboured, as she'd discovered, hordes of mosquitoes. The length of scrubby grass that stretched from their fence to the edge of the canal needed work. She wished she could wave a wand and transform it into a green lawn with a white picket fence and gate flanked by cheerful white daisies. She'd add a small path to a jasmine-covered pergola, under which they would walk to reach the landing, where there would be chairs ready for fishing, and a little boat moored.

But most of her plans would have to wait. All these dreams cost money. Poor Mark. He was working so hard so they could afford it all, thought Natalie, though I'm still chipping away at the small jobs.

One night Sarah, her mother, called. 'We've sold our place! Never thought we'd find a buyer for the farm, at least not at the price we're asking.'

'Congratulations. Is Steve pleased?'

'Frankly, he's in a bit of shock. Reality sinking in. And it's a short settlement time and you can imagine how long it's going to take to clear out and pack. Do you want to come and help? Bring the kids down for the weekend?'

'Don't know how much help I'll be with those two in tow, but I'd love to come.'

Natalie hurried through the rain to the shed behind the farmhouse. It was already overflowing with piles of packing boxes. She stacked the one she was carrying on top of the others and drew a breath as she surveyed the pillars of brown cartons that held the essentials of her mother's life and which Sarah insisted she had to bring to her new home.

Natalie didn't know whether to laugh or cry. 'There's no way!' she exclaimed aloud.

Her mother and stepfather were downsizing and facing an enormous challenge in packing up a farmhouse where they'd had sheds and a double garage in which to store things. They were moving to a neat house with a tidy garden on the ridge above Lismore.

Natalie knew that her mother was pleased they were moving. Sarah had decided that the daily commute from the farm to Lismore, where she owned a fashion boutique, was getting too much.

'Fifty minutes on a good day because the road is full of potholes and it's prone to flooding if there's even a drop of rain!' Sarah often said. Steve had been finding the farm tiring ever since a little accident had thrown his back out, so Sarah was pleased she was able to persuade him it was time to move. And when that buyer turned up and agreed to their price for the place, lock, stock and barrel, well, Steve felt he couldn't refuse. He was a bit sad about leaving his family home. But he had no kids to leave it to and Sarah was confident he'd be happy once they were settled.

Natalie certainly hoped so. Her mother had married Steve just after Natalie had graduated from university with an education degree. She was thrilled that her mother had made a new life, and she liked Steve, a solid, calm, good-natured dairy farmer. Natalie and Mark enjoyed visiting the farm in the tranquil valley where they were always welcome.

Natalie knew that leaving the farm would be a huge change for Steve and hoped her mother's confidence that he'd be happy pottering about in a small suburban garden with neighbours close by and town just down the hill was not misplaced. Life in town would be dramatically different from the lush green paddocks encircled by the dramatic mountain range where the only noises were from the small creek, the call of birds and the occasional lowing of the cows. Steve, however, was the first to admit that he wouldn't miss rising from bed in the pre-dawn dark, the occasional frost underfoot in winter, to milk the sometimes uncooperative animals, and the endless cleaning of the bails. But still, he loved the simple routine of his days and the placid company of his herd.

Although Sarah worked six days a week herself, she was quick to say, with a laugh, that being married to a dairy farmer meant no holidays for either of them. She'd had little to do with the dairy herd but she helped Steve in the

vegetable garden and enjoyed having friends over for long elaborate Sunday lunches that she spent hours preparing.

Natalie stared across the wet paddocks, thinking that this must be what Ireland looked like: lustrous emerald green, mist curling on the top of the ranges, a gentle drizzly rain. There was a lush softness to the Northern Rivers compared with the Gold Coast. Natalie had never travelled overseas and now, with their hefty mortgage, an overseas trip was out of reach. Natalie was grateful they had a house that she loved and which she knew they could transform into a very beautiful home, but she was sad that holidays at the farm were coming to an end.

Her musing was broken by her mother calling, 'Natalie! I need more flatpacks. Can you bring me some, please?'

Natalie shook her head. The amount of stuff her mother had brought to Steve's when they married was incredible. There were boxes, cupboards and trunks that Natalie knew had not been opened for years. Some had been packed away after Natalie's father died, others came from her grandmother's house. Sarah had kept putting off sorting them, partly because she had the luxury of storage space at Steve's farm.

'It'll be my retirement project,' she told the family when they teased her about them. But now downsizing was proving to be a headache. Natalie dragged out several more cartons and hurried back to the house.

'Mum, this is a nightmare. You'll have to have a clearing sale to get rid of it all. I mean, what's in all those old boxes?'

'I can't remember. Some of it's from your grandmother.'

'Well let's go through them. This is the time. You can't take all this to your new house. It won't fit and I don't want the job of having to sort it all out when you kick the bucket,' said Natalie cheerfully.

Sarah laughed. 'You're right. A good rainy day job. I'll make a pot of tea, you get some of the old boxes

together. It's lucky that young Imogen down the road is happy looking after Charlotte and Adam.'

Three hours later, the lounge room was littered with piles of books, china plates, ornaments, LP records, clothes, packets of letters and several shoeboxes of photographs.

'I see why you put off going through all this,' said Natalie. 'Do you know why you packed all of this stuff up?'

'Not really. I was so emotional at the time, I don't recall much about it. I hope I didn't throw out anything valuable.'

'Mum, I don't think you threw out anything!' Natalie was beginning to wonder if they should have started this job.

Sarah was wallowing in nostalgia as she went through her mother's possessions. 'This triggers so many memories,' she said sighing.

'Mum, the to-go pile isn't very big. Let's try and cull a bit more,' said Natalie, fearful that all the mess was going to be repacked and stored again. 'I can't take any of it to my place. Mark would have a fit.'

'That's probably because he's a no-frills man who spends most of his time in a tent.'

'Mum! He doesn't live in a tent. Actually, the conditions in the camp sound great. Better than our place in its current state! The mining company provides excellent facilities and he's earning enough money so we can save up for the renos.'

Sarah sighed. They'd been over this before. 'I still think it's very hard on you, carrying the load of the house and the kids. Don't you miss your job? You're such a gifted teacher, darling.'

'Thanks, Mum. I love teaching, and I have every intention of going back, but I love being a mother even more. There'll be time to go back to teaching when the kids are older.'

‘It sounds like Mark has a holiday when he comes home!’

‘He has an exhausting job. And I want him to have quality time with the children,’ said Natalie shortly. To change the direction of the conversation she picked up a small box from a pile of her grandmother’s little treasures. ‘What’s this?’

‘Oh, that sat on Mum’s bookcase for years. Came from her mother, your great-granny Florence. I have no idea what it is. Anything else in there with it?’

‘A bundle of old papers. Some knick-knacks. A set of thimbles,’ said Natalie.

The old box intrigued her so she opened it and lifted out an ornately lacquered panel. ‘What’s this? Looks like a fat ruler.’

When she held it up, it opened into a series of maroon folds joined together by narrow ribs of polished bamboo. ‘What on earth is it? Some sort of wall hanging?’ she asked, fiddling with it, turning it over. ‘There are pictures on this side and weird squiggles on the other. Is that writing? Mum, this side is covered with the most exquisite pictures. Look, that’s an elephant. Do you think this is Indian?’

‘Heavens, I have no idea. I don’t think I’ve ever seen it out of the box. Do you want it? Or could we sell it?’ said Sarah. She delved into another box. ‘Oh, god, her old furs!’

‘Get rid of them,’ shrieked Natalie, holding her nose. ‘Ohh, the poor creature. It’s moulting.’ She recoiled as her mother held up a ratty, balding fox fur. ‘It’s got feet! A face! Snout! Beady eyes! How could anyone wear such a thing?’

‘It was very fashionable in my grandmother’s time. Imagine what would happen if this made an appearance on the red carpet now,’ said Sarah with a giggle.

Natalie couldn’t help smiling as she held her nose. ‘Mum, dump it in the rubbish or at least put it aside for the clearing sale.’

‘Maybe the whole lot should go. Who on earth would buy any of this stuff?’

‘Sense at last,’ said Natalie as they gathered up the furs, an old beaded handbag in poor condition, some junk jewellery and several tarnished picture frames and put them in a carton.

‘What about that thing?’ Sarah pointed to the box and the unusual scroll. ‘Do you think anyone would want that?’

Natalie hesitated. ‘It’s sort of interesting. With its little pictures and funny writing.’ She put it to one side. ‘I’ll hang on to it for a bit.’

‘Now who’s being a pack rat?’

‘How’s it going, girls?’ Steve came in and smiled seeing his wife and stepdaughter together. ‘You two really look alike,’ he said.

Natalie thought he was pleased about the move. He had been talking about a holiday, going somewhere he and Sarah could enjoy time together. He smiled broadly but then baulked at the sight of all the things spread over the floor. ‘Sarah, what’s all this?’

‘Culling, sweetie. Don’t worry. Just checking Mother or Granny didn’t stash some bank notes in with this junk, so we can take it to the tip with a clear conscience,’ said Sarah.

‘I’m pleased to hear it. You’re going to miss having two sheds, a barn and a garage to store your things in.’

‘It’s her new resolution, to pare back,’ said Natalie. ‘Streamline her lifestyle to fit in a modern house. You won’t know yourselves.’

Steve didn’t answer, but looked unconvinced.

‘He wants to keep some vintage farm machinery,’ said Sarah. ‘As if we’ll have any use for that.’

‘It was my dad’s. My grandad’s before that,’ began Steve.

‘Natalie says we’re going to make a fortune in the clearing sale,’ said Sarah.

‘I don’t think so. If you’re lucky you’ll have enough to have dinner at the RSL and put twenty bucks through the pokies,’ said her daughter with a smile as she put the strange little hanging back into its box and placed it to one side. ‘You won’t miss this in your new streamlined modern house. Minimalist living. Stylish. The new you.’

‘Doesn’t sound like me,’ muttered Steve as he clumped out of the room in his workboots.

‘He sounds stubborn like Mark, doesn’t he?’ said Sarah.

Natalie didn’t answer. She wished her mother would stop criticising Mark. It wasn’t as if Mark really wanted to spend so much time away from his family. He was doing it for them. As he’d once commented to her when he arrived home, straight off the red-eye flight, tired and still in his grubby work clothes, ‘I can see why people don’t last long in this job. Everyone’s only in it for the money and once we’ve saved enough for the renovations, I’m out of there, too.’

But, most of the time, they were grateful for the extra money he was earning, despite the toll it took on family life.

It was almost dark by the time Sarah and Natalie had gone through the boxes and sorted them into piles.

‘I’m proud of you, Mum. You’re down to keeping just six cartons.’

‘And those papers? Do you think they’re of any interest?’ Sarah pointed to the bundles of letters tied with ribbon and packed in plastic bags.

‘Mum, I have no idea what’s in them. Why don’t you read them? Skim through them at night while watching the TV,’ suggested Natalie. ‘Now I’ve got to get the kids’ dinner.’

Later Natalie stood on the verandah watching the cows settle down. Steve had finished cleaning the milking

machinery and had come indoors for the evening. It was the time that Mark called to say goodnight to Charlotte and Adam.

‘What plans do you have tonight?’ asked Mark. ‘Surely you’ve finished going through that stuff. I reckon you should just dump it all.’

‘We’re nearly finished. Mum’s culling now. What did you have for dinner?’

‘Veal schnitzel, potatoes duchesse and peas, and floating islands for dessert.’

‘Those caterers spoil you! I hope you’re getting some hints on how to cook nice things. I’m looking forward to a special dinner when you get home.’

‘It’ll be special all right! How are the kids? Does Charlotte understand what’s going on with the farm?’

‘Kind of, but she won’t really understand that we won’t ever come back here until she sees Mum and Steve in their new house. She’ll miss the calves. She has drawings she wants to show you.’

‘Well, sounds like you’re having fun.’

‘Mark, this isn’t fun. It’s a disaster here. You can’t believe the stuff Mum has, even things from my great-grandmother. And poor Steve is – I don’t know – a bit ambivalent. Big wrench for him,’ she added softly into the phone.

‘Yes. But he should be happy he has a buyer who’s taking everything. Maybe they should have thrown in all your mum’s stuff as an extra! You never know there could be something valuable in there,’ he said with a laugh.

‘I don’t think so. Most of it just has sentimental value, no-one else would be interested. You should have seen this old fox fur. Yuck! Charlotte freaked out when I showed her. It had the head with its beady eyes and little feet. Anyway, Mum’s going to go through the old papers and photos later. Not that we know who half the people in them are.’

‘Nat, please, just don’t bring anything back with you.’

‘No, I won’t. Promise. Just a couple of eggcups that are old but cute, and some books that I loved as a child and I hope Charlotte and Adam will love as well, and an odd little thing I have no idea what it is, but it’s old and maybe I’ll hang it on a wall,’ said Natalie.

‘Sounds good. I’d better go. Put the kids on to say g’night. Miss you. Love you.’

‘Love you, too.’ Natalie went back inside and handed the phone to Charlotte. ‘Daddy wants to say goodnight.’

‘Natalie, come and see what you think,’ called Sarah as Steve settled in front of the TV.

Natalie went into the front room, which Steve rarely used but was now piled with furniture. Adam, in his pyjamas, was climbing over the chairs and a sofa.

‘Be careful, mister,’ warned Natalie. ‘He loves climbing, Mum. Is all this furniture going to the new house?’

‘Most of it. I’ve been mentally furnishing rooms in the new place but those things over there I can’t see working. Do you want any of it? Otherwise it’s the charity shop or the tip.’

‘Some of it does look old, but useful. I’m trying to get a fresh clean look in our place. Mark would hate anything that doesn’t fit in. He’s not a retro kind of guy.’

Adam let out a yell as a pile of cushions collapsed and he tumbled down to the floor.

‘I said be careful! You’re all right,’ Natalie assured him as she picked up the little boy and hugged him. ‘What’s this under here?’

‘Some old chair of Steve’s. Dreadfully old-fashioned, I don’t want it.’

Natalie sat in the chair cuddling Adam. ‘Very comfy. Plumpy cushions. It’s a wingback, too. Unusual.’

‘Hideous fabric. It’s got a footrest, pouf thing that goes with it,’ said Sarah.

‘Mum, I’ll take this if you’re sure Steve doesn’t want it.’

‘Good grief! I wouldn’t allow it in the house. What are you going to do with it?’

‘I just had an idea for the playroom. It’s comfortable, you can put your feet up, and because it’s in sections I’m going to upholster it in fabric that’s different, but matches in tone, if you know what I mean. A kind of pretty patch-work chair. Stripes and flowers kind of thing,’ said Natalie.

‘Can you fit it in the back of your station wagon? The sooner it’s out of here the happier I’ll be,’ said Sarah. ‘At least Steve will be pleased it’s gone to a loving home and not the tip.’

‘He mightn’t like it being mint green and lemon stripes with pink and green flowers. Or whatever.’ Natalie said smiling.

A month later Natalie was at home reading a story to the two children when her mother rang.

‘Hi, Mum, when’s the big move happening?’

‘Truck’s coming next week. I’m going up to the new house this weekend to work out where things are going. Do you want to come down to Lismore and help? We could have lunch.’

‘Can’t, Mum. Mark is away and Charlotte has a ballet class. It’s a great idea to walk through the empty house to decide where to put things. Then you just tell the removalists to put it there and Steve won’t have to drag furniture around. Are you excited?’

‘Yes, I think so. I just want to get settled as soon as possible. At least I’ll have extra hours in the day without that damn travelling to and from the farm.’

‘How’s the shop going?’

‘Good. I’ve got some gorgeous new tops in. You’d love them.’

‘Sorry, Mum, we’re on a budget. And I don’t need anything. If I was still working, it’d be a different story.’

‘Yes, you must have been the best-dressed primary teacher in Queensland.’

‘Thanks to all your sales and generosity,’ said Natalie. ‘I wish you’d stock children’s clothes.’

‘Too hard. Now, listen, I’ve been going through the letters and I’ve found an intriguing one from my great-uncle Andrew. Your great-great-uncle.’

‘I’ve never heard of him.’

‘He was my grandmother Florence’s brother.’

‘You’ll have to tell me about this great-great-uncle.’

‘I never knew him; he died long before I was born. Granny Flo told me some stories about him. They started to come back when I read the letter and saw some photos.’

‘Where did he live? Did he have any family?’ asked Natalie.

‘Don’t think so. He travelled a lot. I’ve got a couple of postcards from India, and from reading the letter it seems he was also in Burma.’

‘In the Second World War?’ said Natalie.

‘No, long before that. He was there between the wars, I’m pretty sure. I’ll have to sit down and go through everything to see if there’s anything else. I just skimmed them to sort them out.’

‘Why was he in Burma? I mean, what kind of place was that?’ asked Natalie. ‘I don’t even know much about it now. It’s never in the news. No-one goes there. It’s communist, isn’t it? Like North Korea?’

‘Military dictatorship. I think it’s where they locked up that lovely lady in her house to stop her being the leader or something. I’ll have to look it up,’ said Sarah.

‘Yes, the pretty one who wears flowers in her hair,’ said Natalie. ‘But why would someone from our family have been in Burma in the 1920s or whenever it was?’

‘Might be in the letters. I’m pretty sure he was born in England.’

‘That’s right, Granny Florence was English, wasn’t she? How’d she end up out here?’

‘Now that’s a story I do know. Granny Flo met my grandfather, Wally, when he was on leave in England during World War One. He fought on the Western Front. She told me that they met on Palace Pier in Brighton. He was this jaunty, cheeky Australian soldier and he swept her off her feet. He proposed and she came out to Australia on a ship to marry him. He became a soldier settler. The government gave the returned men blocks of land as a reward for fighting in the war. It was a bit of a lottery, evidently, because some of the blocks were useless, but Wally was lucky and got a good block of land on the Richmond River, up in this area, not far from where Steve’s family lived, and started dairy farming. Granny said they knew nothing about farming so they struggled for a bit. Things got worse during the Depression, but they managed to make a go of it and had a family. They sold their farm and retired just before things went bad again.’

‘Why? What happened? It’s good dairy country out there,’ said Natalie.

‘Mum said that when Britain moved into the Common Market and stopped giving preference to Australian dairy products, the milk and cheese market collapsed. Steve’s family was one of the few who hung on as dairy farmers. A lot of farmers went into beef cattle and much of the grazing land was turned into macadamia plantations.’

‘Did Granny Flo ever go back to England?’

‘I think she went back once. She talked about it and there are photos. I have no idea what relatives we have back there. I’m pretty sure that Great Uncle Andrew never married.’

‘What was he doing in India and Burma?’ said Natalie.

‘What did he do? We know nothing about our English side.’

‘There’s a box of old photographs that look very Asian. Maybe that’s something to do with Andrew. I’ll let you know.’

Natalie wondered when her mother was going to find time to browse through the photos with her impending move and settling into a new house, so she said impetuously, ‘Why don’t you send them to me? I can go through them when the children are in bed.’

Sarah laughed. ‘I thought you spent your long lonely nights slaving away painting, sanding and pulling up old carpet. What are you up to now?’

‘I’ve been painting the urns to go around the pool. I’d love to knock out some old cupboards but that’s too noisy while the kids are asleep. So send me those things and I’ll go through them. There’s nothing to watch on TV. But register them, Mum. Don’t want to lose them,’ cautioned Natalie.

‘They have been in storage for so long I hope they’re still okay. Some of the ones I looked at are pretty faded. Thanks, darling. Ring if there’s anything of interest.’ Sarah said, sounding relieved.

Mark put his feet up on the coffee table and watched Natalie curled in the armchair she’d brought home from the farm. He studied his wife, struck again by seeing her after several weeks’ absence. She’d changed. Not physically, she was still slim, her dark brown hair a mass of tousled curls, her skin glowing without make-up, her dark lashes hiding her large brown eyes. She was chewing the curve of her bottom lip as she read. She had the natural beauty of a young girl, but now, in her thirties, she had poise and a strength that had developed only recently. Or

maybe he was noticing it because of their absences. He didn't often like to address the fact she was carrying the burden of running the house and caring for the kids while he was gone for a month. Although she was managing very well, he felt guilty for being away from his family so much.

'That's a really ugly chair,' he commented.

She looked up. 'It's very comfortable. I like it. And you won't recognise it when I've finished with it.'

'I hope it's not going to cost too much,' said Mark.

'No way. I found some fabric at a garage sale. Really gorgeous. It was a set of contrasting curtains. Upholstering the chair will give me something to do in the evenings. Can't be too hard. I can sew.'

'I'm sure you'll do a great job, Nat.'

'Hmmm,' replied Natalie, who was now deeply engrossed in an old letter her mother had sent her and didn't look up again.

Mark turned on the TV and began surfing the channels.

Eventually Natalie folded the letter and sat quietly.

Mark flicked the sound down on a cable sports channel, knowing she hated American football. When there was no reaction he glanced at her. Natalie was staring thoughtfully into space.

'What's up? Found a skeleton in the closet?' Mark asked.

'Not really.'

'Who's it from?' Mark was trying to fathom the expression on her face.

'It's from my great-grandmother's brother, Andrew. It's so . . . touching.'

'What does it say?' asked Mark.

'It's quite an extraordinary story,' replied Natalie. 'It seems that he was in Burma, working for an English

publication, when he met a Burmese princess called Tipi Si. She was very poorly treated by the British and as a result, lived in terrible poverty. In a weak moment, she sold something to an art dealer called Ferguson, but she regretted doing so immediately. The item, a thing called a kammavaca, had been given to her for safekeeping by her brother, the last king of Burma. Anyway, Uncle Andrew was so moved by her problems that he told her that he would track down the dealer, and get it back.'

'So what happened?'

'He found this dealer and got the kammavaca for the princess at a low price by promising to write an article about him. Ferguson sounds pretty ordinary to me, but Andrew just sounds wonderful. Listen to this last part of the letter,' said Natalie.

While one might not grasp the intricacies of the Buddhist faith straight away, there is no doubt that the Burmese idols, pagodas and stupas are magnificent. Perhaps it is the utter richness of this land, with its golden temples, its lush countryside; its wealth and its gentle people; that makes our men think that they have the right to casually plunder. But I know this is dreadfully wrong. Indeed, I think that in times to come, we British will be criticised for our destruction of ancient monuments, the heedless trampling of traditions and the outright stealing of precious artefacts.

I am intrigued by the writing on this kammavaca, a beautiful curling script, but what it says is anybody's guess. I shall ask the princess more about it when I surprise her with its return. I know it will mean a lot to her, but truly dear sister, it means a lot to me as well. In all my time here in this very special country, I have been treated with respect, friendship and generosity- and not just because I'm British! I have met some good people here, Burmese

as well as colonial chaps, and I feel affection for this lovely golden land. So if I can do one right thing for this country and restore the kammavaca to the princess, maybe I'll gain merit of my own. I just feel it so much the right and proper thing to do and will give me much pleasure and peace of mind.

However, before I return to Rangoon, I want to visit the Shan people and then go on to visit the primitive Naga people on the Indian border. Truly this is a country of many peoples with their own customs, habits and food – all most beguiling.

I do miss our chats Florrie. I feel very sure that when we do meet on whatever distant shore, you and I shall pick up where we left off, in Mother's warm kitchen that rainy night before we parted company and you left to go to Australia.

*Please give my best wishes to Wally and the children.
Love from your brother,
Andrew*

Mark took the paper from Natalie and read the whole letter. Then he folded the pages up, with its neat, closely written lines, and looked at Natalie. 'Interesting. I wouldn't say it was a sad letter. But it's intriguing stuff. Do you think it was the start of a beautiful romance between the princess and your uncle? I suppose we'll never know. And that thing your uncle bought for her. Do you think she was pleased to get it back?'

Natalie shook her head. 'Returning it meant so much to him and yet he never gave it back to her. Isn't that strange?'

'How do you know?' asked Mark.

'Because I have it, Mark. It was in Great Granny Florence's things. Mum nearly threw it out. It's in the desk.'

‘You’re kidding! You brought it home from the farm?’ Mark leapt up and went to the desk they shared and picked up the little teak box. ‘It sounds like something unusual.’

He carefully unfolded the illustrated manuscript. He squinted at the strange curling script on the back.

‘Wonder what all this is about?’ said Mark.

‘According to Andrew’s letter, it’s religious – scriptures or prayers by the sound of it.’

‘How old would this be?’

‘I’ve got no idea. The letter says it was a gift to the king, but I don’t know anything about the kings of Burma or when they ruled. I could Google it.’

‘What are you going to do with it now?’

‘What do you mean? I guess I could hang it on the wall or display it somehow. It’s special,’ said Natalie thoughtfully.

‘Could be worth a few dollars.’

‘Mark! I wouldn’t sell it. It’s been in the family all this time.’

‘Sitting in a shed!’

‘I wonder how Great Granny Florence got it? He must have given it to her.’

‘Why would Andrew have given it to his sister when he was so keen to return it to the princess?’ said Mark.

‘It’s a bit of a puzzle that it never got back to its rightful owner. He was certainly passionate about returning it,’ said Natalie, carefully folding the little kammavaca back into shape and slipping it into its narrow box.

‘It looks more like the sort of thing you see in a museum or a church, well, a temple.’

‘I like it. Maybe I should look at getting it framed. A family heirloom.’

‘Nat, it’s not your family treasure. It belonged to some princess in Burma!’ Mark said with a laugh.

‘True. Okay. I’ve had enough letter reading for tonight. My mind is overloaded.’

Mark reached for her. ‘Let me distract you.’

Natalie curled into his arms. ‘I do miss you. How much longer, Mark?’

‘Sweetheart, it’s hardly been any time. Hang in there. I’m really proud of you.’

Natalie rested her head on Mark’s shoulder and closed her eyes. As she lay in his warm embrace, her thoughts drifted back to the odd curio she had found. She could feel that Mark had fallen asleep. So she slid from his arms as gently as she could, and padded quietly across the room to her desk. She took out the box and unfolded the manuscript. She bent closer to study the little illustrations. A musty smell, not unpleasant, vaguely citrusy, clung to the cloth. She stared at a picture of a little white elephant standing in a jungle. Suddenly there was a flash of light from the painted forest. Or was it from the jewelled headpiece of the elephant? Natalie shut her eyes and when she opened them she realised it was merely the desklight catching specks of gold paint.

But in that moment, she’d felt as if she had been standing in that jungle clearing.

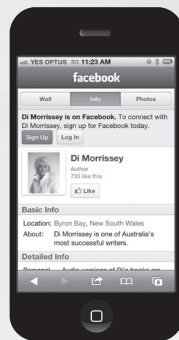
It was such a strong sensation that she decided that she had to find out what had stopped her great-great-uncle from returning this odd artefact to its rightful owner.

There's more to my story online

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