
Raji
3
TEKTIME
Charley Brindley

Charley Brindley
Raji, Book Three

Аннотация

October 1932. At the beginning of the Great Depression, schools and universities all over America were cutting back, and even closing their campuses. Raji and Fuse, like so many other young people, were to be cut adrift. Having concentrated on nothing but academics for the past four years, they weren't prepared for the brutal economic realities of a world sinking into misery and hopelessness.

Содержание

Raji
Book Three: Dire Kawa
by
Charley Brindley
charleybrindley@yahoo.com
www.charleybrindley.com
Edited by
Karen Boston
Website https://bit.ly/2rJDq3f
Cover art by
Charley Brindley

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Some of Charley Brindley's books
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Spanish
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French
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Chinese
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and
Russian
The following books are available in audio format:
Raji, Book One (in English)
Do Not Resuscitate (in English)
The Last Mission of the Seventh Cavalry (in English)
Hannibal's Elephant Girl, Book One (in Russian)
Henry IX (in Italian)
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1. Oxana's Pit
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4. Raji Book Two: The Academy
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11. Dragonfly vs Monarch: Book One
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13. The Sea of Tranquility 2.0 Book Two: Invasion
14. The Sea of Tranquility 2.0 Book Three

15. The Sea of Tranquility 2.0 Book Four
16. Sea of Sorrows, Book Two of The Rod of God
17. Do Not Resuscitate
18. Hannibal's Elephant Girl, Book Two
19. The Rod of God, Book One
20. Henry IX
21. Qubit's Incubaator
22. Casper's Game

Coming Soon

23. Dragonfly vs Monarch: Book Three
24. The Journey to Valdacia
25. Still Waters Run Deep
26. Ms Machiavelli
27. Ariion XXIX
28. The Last Mission of the Seventh Cavalry Book 2
29. Hannibal's Elephant Girl, Book Three

See the end of this book for details about the others

Contents

Chapter One

Raji

In the fall of 1932, Fuse and I walked through the near-deserted campus of Theodore Roosevelt University, in Richmond, Virginia.

We were third-year students in the medical school and would have been at the top of our class–had there been a class. Two days earlier, the two of us sat in the rigid wooden chairs in front of Dr. Octavia Pompeii's desk. She was chancellor of the medical school, and she looked as if she carried the weight of the entire university on her tiny shoulders. Her beautiful red hair was thinning, and during the past two years, streaks of gray had crept into the curls from her temples. Dark circles saddened her eyes.

Dr. Pompeii took a deep breath and let out a sigh. "Raji, Fuse, I have bad news."

Fuse and I glanced at each other. We knew the university was in dire financial straits, just as all the schools were. Faculty and students had been drifting away ever since the crash of 1929.

"We're closing the medical school," Dr. Pompeii said.

"Oh, no," I said. "Why?"

She toyed with a yellow pencil for a moment. "We've lost seventy percent of our funding and enrollment for next semester is next to nothing."

Fuse was quiet, but I knew he was in shock, just as I was.

We had talked about this very event over the past semester, but I don't think we really believed it would happen. No one spoke for a while.

"Dr. Pompeii," Fuse finally said. "What will you do?"

My old pal Fuse, always thinking of others first.

"Strangely enough," she said, "I'm going back to school."

"That's wonderful, Dr. Pompeii," I said. "Where will you go?"

"Cornell University. I'm going to study ortho-pedics." She looked through some papers on her desk. "I've prepared a list of ten schools where I want both of you to apply. I've mailed letters of recommendation, along with your transcripts, to all of them. I have no idea what the scholarship situation is, but you have to try."

"Dr. Pompeii," Fuse said. "I don't think…" He paused to look at me. "I don't think any of them have money for scholarships."

"You don't know that. If none of these ten will take you in, then we'll find ten more. There's no one in this country more deserving of scholarships than you and Raji."

I took the list of schools. "Thank you so much, Dr. Pompeii," I said, then stood. "We'll get right to work on these."

Dr. Pompeii rose from her chair and reached across the desk to take my hand. "I wish both of you all the luck in the world." She held her other hand out to Fuse.

"Thank you, Dr. Pompeii," Fuse said. "Thank you for everything you've done for us."

* * * * *

I don't know why, but our rambling walk took us to the nearby campus of Octavia Pompeii Academy. I thought about that day in August 1926, when I had joined the junior class. Fuse didn't finish the competition in the top fifty, but he was invited to attend when one of the other students had to leave due to a death in his family.

Now the once lively academy was a depressing sight, with the windows and doors boarded up and weeds overgrowing the sidewalks and tennis courts. We stopped in front of Hannibal House to watch a trio of crows pecking at the disintegrating parapet above the door.

"I wrote a letter to Mom," Fuse said, keeping his eyes on the crows.

"You're leaving, aren't you?"

He nodded, still not looking at me. I turned to walk along the sidewalk, watching the cracks in the crumbling cement. He walked beside me.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

He stopped to face me, and I saw that crooked grin I knew so well.

"I've always wanted to see India."

"Me, too." I returned his grin.

It had been fifteen years since I was taken from my home in Calcutta. Thinking back over my life in America, I truly believe I should be thankful to those thugs who grabbed me, along with twenty other girls and young women, from the streets

in 1912. We were shipped to New York in the hold of a cattle boat like so much livestock, then sold off to become indentured servants. After my thirteenth birthday, I ran away from the house in Queens where I had been held. Two days later, I ended up sleeping in a barn in rural Virginia.

How fortunate for me that the barn belonged to the Fusilier family. Fuse, who was a boy of fourteen at the time, discovered me the next morning, then I spent the most wonderful year of my life with him and his family. Marie Fusilier took me in as if I were her own daughter.

"I should write to Mama Marie, too." I took Fuse's hand.

"I told her you were going with me."

"Well, how presumptuous of you."

"Uh-huh."

That night, Fuse and I packed what little gear we had and hitched a ride to New York City on the back of a potato truck, then we walked along the docks of lower Manhattan.

Two days later, we shipped out on the *Borboleta Nova*, under the command of Captain Sinaway. The *Borboleta* was a beautiful new freighter only six months out of the shipyards at Lisbon. She was bound for Calcutta with a cargo of dynamite, and since neither Fuse nor I had any sailing experience, the captain assigned Fuse to the engine room, shoveling coal, and I went to work as a deckhand. We didn't care what we had to do—we just wanted to escape. From what, I don't think either of us knew.

I was very apprehensive about seeing my family, especially my

mother, Hajini. Seven years earlier, she had written to me at the Fusilier farm, informing me that she had arranged a marriage for me. This was quite a shock, at age fourteen to learn my mother had betrothed me to a man of forty-seven. Mama Marie Fusilier was equally surprised. She told me if a man married a child in America, he would go to jail.

Marie helped me write to my mother in India, explaining that I would like to wait for marriage until I was at least eighteen, then I wanted to pick my own husband.

My mother wrote back, telling me I was being disrespectful and this sort of behavior was not allowed. And in addition, she and my father had purchased passage for me on a ship leaving America for Calcutta. The ticket would arrive soon.

The ticket did indeed come to me in the mail. I sent it back, telling my mother I was old enough to make my own decisions. After that, it was four months before I heard from her again. This time, she said my grandmother was dying and I should come to see her as soon as possible, but she made no mention of paying my passage. I wrote back, saying if I had enough money, I would pay my way to India to see grandmother, but it would be a roundtrip ticket.

It was a year before I received another letter, in which my mother gave me news of all the family. She included many details about my nieces and nephews, and she said my grandmother was still alive, but growing weaker. I wrote back to her about my progress at the academy and said I planned to go to medical

school.

Five years passed with no more letters from my mother.

* * * * *

Fuse

I spent a very tense week with Raji and her family in Calcutta. She and her mother were exactly alike in temperament and frankness, each one speaking her mind on any matter that arose. Her grandmother of eighty-seven was just as outgoing, but without the energy to carry an argument to conclusion she often fell asleep in the middle of a discussion.

On a warm Friday evening in October, a young man arrived at the Devaki home.

"This is Panyas Maidan," Mrs. Devaki said, leading him into the living room, where Raji and I sat on the floor, teaching some of the children to play chess.

Raji was on her feet before I was, and it seemed to me her smile was a bit more lively than necessary.

"I am Vincent Fusilier." I spoke in Hindi and reached to shake his hand.

"This is my daughter, Miss Rajiani Devaki," her mother said, pushing Raji forward.

Mr. Maidan looked at Raji, then spoke to me. "It is an honor to meet you, sir."

His English was perfect and precise. His handshake was firm, but not overpowering. I must admit, it was somewhat of a relief to hear my native language after a week of endless conversations in

Hindi. His build was athletic, and his complexion a light tan. He was a few inches taller than my five-foot-ten, and maybe three or four years older than I, making him about twenty-five.

"Mr. Maidan is an architect," Mrs. Devaki gushed. "He has built many beautiful buildings all across India." Her radiant set of dentures was outshone only by Raji's dazzling white teeth.

"Oh, no," Mr. Maidan said. "I only draw the pictures of buildings. I must leave the difficult tasks of construction to more capable hands."

He looked at Raji. She still had that ridiculous grin on her face, and now she tilted her head to the side in a cutesy but rather awkward motion.

Mr. Maidan glanced at Raji's hands, then mine. "Do you play cricket, Mr. Fusilier?"

"I'm not much for sports. I play tennis occasionally." I felt the edge of Raji's sandal pressing down on my little toe.

"Really? Perhaps you could come to my club for a few sets of tennis tomorrow afternoon."

I would love to be on a tennis court. After five weeks on the freighter, then being cooped up in the Devaki home for another week, a few hours of strenuous tennis was exactly what I needed.

"That would be great." I pulled my foot away from the painful crush of Raji's weight. I looked at her to see her right hand make a quick motion toward her ear, then she flipped her hair back over her shoulder. "However," I said to Mr. Maidan, with my eyes still on Raji, "I won't be able to accept your generous invitation,

because…"

"You promised the children you would help them with…" Raji looked around the room. "With their acrobatics tomorrow."

"Right, acrobatics." I turned back to Mr. Maidan. "And anyway, Raji is a much better tennis player than I am."

"Is that a fact?" He looked Raji up and down. "A lady tennis player?"

She nodded.

"All right, then. While Mr. Fusilier teaches gymnastics, perhaps you will teach me a bit about the game of tennis."

If the scene before me had been a smiling contest, I believe Raji would have lost out to her mother.

* * * * *

I suppose Mr. Maidan's tennis game wasn't very good, because he apparently needed lots of instruction on that Saturday afternoon. It was very late in the evening when Raji returned, and the two of them were back at the game the next day, and the day after that.

Early on Tuesday morning, Raji and I sat on the veranda, sipping tea and watching the sunrise.

"Raji," I said, "there's a riverboat going up the Irrawaddy from Rangoon next Wednesday."

She looked at me, raising an eyebrow, her way of asking, "And?"

"I have to move on. The boat is bound for Mandalay, then on through northern Burma to Myitkyina, on the Chinese border."

For a moment, she watched the bright morning sunlight filtering through the banana trees, while I watched the warm glow of her beautiful face.

"All right," she said. "Wait for me in Mandalay, and we'll go see what those Chinese guys are up to."

I'd hoped she would say something like that. We traveled well together, but I didn't want her to feel obligated to leave her family, or Mr. Maidan. However, I also knew Raji better than her parents did. They were nice people, and somewhat prosperous in spite of the economic downturn. Mr. Devaki was a professor of history at Jawaharlal Nehru University, and his wife worked in some sort of government office, so they had a reasonable income. But once Raji caught up on all the family history and her mother and father went back to their respective offices, Raji would become bored without the intellectual stimulation she was accustomed to; at least that was my hope. Of course, if she found other sources of stimulation, I'd probably be traveling to China on my own.

Raji's father, who made frequent trips to Mandalay for reasons that varied from "commercial ventures" to "scenic excursions" or "leisurely studies of nature," recommended a hotel called the Nadi Myanmar, on 62nd Street, just off the City Center, as a convenient place for me and his daughter to meet in Mandalay.

I knew from Raj that her father was deeply involved in the struggle against the English as both India and Burma tried to throw off the yoke of the British Empire. He not only helped

arrange funding for opposition groups, but he also traveled to Burma to help organize clandestine meetings with rebel organizations. A year earlier, I would have told him I knew quite well what he was doing in Burma, and I probably would have taken the side of the British in trying to hold on to their far-flung colonies. But as he, his wife, Raji, and I, along with their nine other children and a multitude of nieces and nephews, sat on the floor around the low table, eating curry and *khatta mango dal*—mangoes with beans and red chilies—I thanked Mr. Devaki politely for the information as I made a mental note of the hotel name and street address in Mandalay.

Two weeks later, I met Kayin in the lobby of the Nadi Myanmar hotel.

Chapter Two

A smiling young lady tapped the bell sharply under her palm to call the next bellhop forward.

"Have nice stay we hope, Mr. Busetilear," Kayin said as she handed me a three-dollar receipt for a week's stay at the hotel. She could never quite get her tongue around the pronunciation of my last name, Fusilier.

I screwed the cap back on my fountain pen and put it away, but before I could thank her for the pleasant remark, the bellhop grabbed my suitcase and snatched the room key from our joined hands. Kayin had pressed the key into my hand but seemed as reluctant to let it go as I was of losing her touch.

"Make haste with Po-Sin this way, and quickly," the boy said, dragging my heavy suitcase across the floor. "Jump on lift before ascends away to top, if it pleases you."

Po-Sin was apparently in a hurry to be finished with me and my luggage so he could collect his dime tip and get back to the lobby and his place in line with the other boys awaiting the next big spender. He was around fifteen years old and smartly dressed, wearing a cap with no bill—similar to a fez without a tassel—a tight-fitting, maroon waist-jacket with three yellow stripes on each sleeve. He also wore a brightly colored *longyi*, the traditional wraparound skirt-like garment worn by both men and women in Burma.

I took my cap from the counter and turned to follow Po-Sin. A few steps away, I glanced back to see Kayin watching me. A brief frown crossed her lips before she revived her commercial smile for the next guest.

"Welcome to Hotel Nadi Myanmar," she said to a stiff young Englishman who flourished his furled umbrella before him as if it were some sort of benign weapon used to clear his path of any undesirables. The man wore spotless white ducks and a matching pith helmet, with a long albatross feather sprouting from the band.

I looked down at my dirty old sailor's cap, then back at Kayin. Her words and smile for the Englishman were the same as she gave me only moments before.

* * * * *

It was an accident, my bumping into Kayin at the hotel's front door—she coming out as I returned to the hotel after a walk down to the river. This was the day after I first met her at the front desk. Earlier, when I left my room and went out, I'd looked toward the desk, hoping she'd be unoccupied and I could ask some aimless question about where to find the nearest Buddhist temple or how far was it to the river. But she was busy with the hotel manager, an Englishman, and I thought it better not to interrupt.

"My sorry, Mr. Busetilear," Kayin said to me on the street outside the front door of the hotel after we collided. "I am so awkward." She knelt to pick up her packages.

"No, no." I knelt down and deliberately bumped my head

against hers. “It was my fault.”

She laughed and rubbed the side of her head as I rubbed my forehead. “Perhaps better next time,” she said, “that we should steer clear of each other so not to bring more harm.”

Her laugh was beautiful, and exactly the response I’d intended.

“Do you happen to know,” I asked, “where is the nearest Buddhist temple?”

Her eyes widened. “You are Buddhist?”

“No.” I took her elbow to help her to her feet. I couldn’t lie to her. I’d already deceived her with the head-bump, but that was justified. “No, I’m not a Buddhist, but I would like to see the inside of a temple.” I was certain she was Buddhist, as most Burmese are.

“I have only right now one hour for lunch, and I must run the errand at bank for that Mr. Haverstock, our manager, then also to American Express office.”

“Oh.” I was crestfallen. This was unpretended. I really was disappointed that she’d be otherwise occupied. “I see.” I had a sudden inspiration. “May I walk with you to the bank? Then you can point me in the direction of a temple.”

If she’d made up the story of the errands for the hotel manager and she was actually going to meet her boyfriend, or husband, then she’d tell me to mind my own business and find a temple by myself. A woman as beautiful as she was must have a boyfriend, if not a husband.

“Of course,” she answered right away. “I would be happy for

your company on walk to the bank. It is quite long way to go."

We chatted easily along the way about Burma, Mandalay, the hotel, her job, her boss, and just as we neared the personal information I really wanted to know, she stopped me.

"Well," she said, "here it is, the bank where I must leave hotel money."

I looked up at the imposing Romanesque building rising four stories above. Chiseled into a marble slab over the doorway were the words "Reserve Bank of India." At that time, Burma was still part of India, and the British used the same currency throughout the area.

"Already!" I was genuinely surprised we were there. "But you said it was a long way."

"We have come more or less twelve blocks, probably." She stood beside the bank door, smiling sweetly.

"Oh," I said after a moment. "Where is that temple?"

"Just go down here this way two or more blocks, then on your left side, walk a bit until you see bright color yellow side of house. Stop and try to see small bridge right just ahead of your left-hand side, another few minutes you will be presented in front of Shwe Nadaw temple."

I couldn't be sure, but I had the distinct feeling she tried to disorient me with her rapid directions.

"Did you say on my left was the yellow store, or right?" I tried to make it even more confusing.

"Wait right here three minutes or little more, then we shall

walk by that place together."

With a bright smile, she went inside the bank. I watched her through the window as she handed over the hotel's money to a teller, then went to a young lady sitting at a desk and leaned over to tell her something. The lady glanced in my direction, and I looked away to watch a policeman ride by on his bicycle.

After leaving the bank, we walked along Yadanar Street to the banks of the Nadi Canal, where I purchased *ohno khauk swe* from a street vendor for our lunch. The food consisted of rice noodles and chicken cooked in coconut milk. It was very spicy, as most Burmese food is, and delicious.

We were late in getting back to the hotel, but Kayin assured me it was all right. I told her if she got into any trouble with the manager, I would make it up to her with a nice dinner at a nearby restaurant.

"Well," she said, "might be just a bit of trouble I get into."

At 6 p.m. when she got off duty, she would go home to change, she said, then meet me in front of the restaurant at eight.

It was a long wait for me, and I realized during that interminable afternoon that I'd never been on a date with a girl. Raji and I had done many things together, but nothing one could actually call a date. I was twenty-one and uninitiated, as my father would say. I wondered if Kayin was initiated. Why had I never been out with a woman? Why had Raji and I never made love? What was it like to make love? And why was I thinking about it so much now, since I never had before? And much more of the

same, for many hours.

Finally, the evening came, and I'd already been pacing in front of the restaurant for forty-five minutes, wondering if I were on the wrong street. But there she was, promptly at eight, coming along the sidewalk toward me, her heels clicking a quick cadence.

I was very nervous and self-conscious. Sitting at a candle-lit table with a beautiful woman was new for me. I didn't know whether to ask questions or talk about myself. I'd spent a lot of time with another beautiful woman; Raji, but we had an easy, almost familial relationship. Nothing romantic. I had a feeling there wouldn't be any romance between Kayin and me either. I was such a klutz that I was sure to bore her to sleep. If she yawns, I decided, we'll get out of here and I'll walk her home.

But Kayin was no boor. She talked easily about Burma, her job at the hotel, and she asked questions about America and the freedoms we enjoyed.

At first I kept my answers short and to the point, not wanting to dominate the conversation. She moved from one topic to another, keeping a nice balance between questions and answers.

Our food came and an hour passed quickly, then another.

After the delightful dinner, we strolled for hours through the parks, past many temples, and all the way up to the Golden Palace, with its wide moat and tall towers at each of the four corners.

"Have you ever been inside?" I asked.

"The Golden Palace?" she said. "That is where King Rama

lives."

"Ah, King Rama's palace. But have you been inside? I wonder what it's like."

"Oh." She hesitated and watched one of the towers for a moment before she went on. "In the photos I have seen, it is, how you say, ornament?"

"Ornate," I said.

"Yes, ornate. I am sorry my English is no so well."

"Your English is wonderful. Will you teach me Burmese?"

She looked at me for a long time. "Why did you come to Mandalay?"

We stood at the edge of the moat, tossing pebbles into the dark water.

"I'm on my way to Myitkyina," I said. "My friend is meeting me at the hotel in a few days. I signed the two of us onto a riverboat called the *Gaw-byan*. I guess we'll be working as deckhands, I'm not sure. But we don't mind hard work."

"Why Myitkyina?"

"Just to see what's there."

"But what do you do?" she asked.

At that time, I still called myself a medical student. Actually, I was no longer one and probably never would be again. So what was I? A bum, that's all I could think of, but I couldn't tell her that.

"I'm a medical student."

"When will you finish medical school?"

Her questions were much better than mine. She was getting to the heart of things, and I was feeling a bit uncomfortable.

"To tell you the truth, Kayin, I may never go back to school."

"Why?"

"I'm discouraged, disillusioned, and sick of how the politicians and businessmen have ruined our world."

"And you have come to my Burma to find what?"

What indeed. Why was I in Burma? Why was I anywhere? This wasn't the way I thought our evening would go.

"I'm beginning to believe I came to Burma to find you."

Kayin removed her sandals and sat on the edge of the moat. She splashed her feet in the cool water, then picked up a handful of pebbles.

"Not possible," she said.

I sat down beside her. "What is not possible?"

She didn't answer; only tossed the little rocks into the water, one at a time. I removed my shoes and socks. The water was much colder than I expected.

"It is not possible you came all this way to find me."

"But I did find you."

"Then you came for nothing, no reason."

She seemed to struggle with her emotions as the stones splashed into the dark water. Finally, she turned toward me and held my gaze for a long moment, then she dropped the last stone into the moat and dusted off her hands.

"You see these eyes?" she asked.

I nodded.

"My eyes are from my Scottish father. All my life I have been an, how do you say, an outlaw?"

"Outcast?"

"Yes, an outcast. My people, the Burmese, treat me as untouchable." She looked down at her hand, which I now held in mine. "Do you understand an untouchable in India?"

"Yes, a dalit, the lowest of the castes."

"And the British treat me worse than they treat the pure Burmese. They think I am some sort of aberration. My mother was the only person who ever loved me, and she..." Kayin pressed my hand, and I knew she was crying. "I cannot never do this to another child to come," she whispered.

"Kayin." I lifted her chin and gazed into her wet eyes. "If you have a blue-eyed child, you think he will be treated as an outcast also?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe you should remain childless all your life because of something your mother and father did as an act of love?"

She gave no response.

"You, my beautiful Burmese friend, should be proud you're part of two different worlds. You are, I think, about eighteen or nineteen?"

"Nineteen."

"We're almost the same age. I'm twenty-one." I reached for

her other hand. “And you’ve just made me realize I’ve been beating myself up for the past six months for something that’s not my fault.”

She knitted her eyebrows in a look I’d soon learn to love.

“My friend and I left medical school because we were disillusioned with the mess the last generation had made of the world. We saw no purpose in continuing our studies just to carry our degrees to the bread line and beg for handouts.”

“But doctors are needed all over the world.”

“Maybe so, but we were determined to go into research and work on cures for malaria and smallpox. Now all the research projects have been shut down for lack of funding.”

“Research is fine,” she said, “but do you realize the British take all our resources, and what do they give us in return? Protection! Protection, they say, from invasion, from illnesses, from our own ignorance. If they would only give us a little medical help, we would be most grateful. But we have only a handful of doctors and nurses for our twenty million people.”

“Why, that’s ridiculous,” I said. “You should have one doctor and a nurse for every five hundred people.”

“This is very true, but we would be happy if only our seriously ill could see a doctor from time to time.” She was agitated now, and I smiled as I watched the blue fire in her eyes. She’d forgotten about her personal problems as she attacked the British overlords. “The smallpox epidemic that took my mother, killed many thousands, and nothing was done to help us.”

"But schools. I know the British provide schools and government administration."

"Ha!" She laughed. "The British have wonderful schools, the best. They bring many teachers from England to teach their precious children the proper way of speaking and eating and how to rule over the poor, retched natives the once-proud Burmese people have become. Our children still squat in mud huts and watch someone scratch numbers in the dirt. That is your wonderful British education system."

"And if you were queen of Burma, what would you do?"

"Please," she said, pulling her hands from mine. "Do not make of me a fool. I am not a child that is to be indulged." She looked away toward the palace. A light winked off in one of the tall towers.

"Believe me, Kayin, I never indulge anyone. I'm deeply interested in your thoughts and ideas about what's to be done with the world. It's our generation, yours and mine, that's to repair the damage done by rich old men, living in their ivory mansions. A year ago, I would have argued against you and on the side of the British. But now, I don't know what to think. I find it very difficult to take issue with you. I wanted our evening to be pleasant and beautiful. All afternoon, I thought only of how I could bring cheer into your life, and perhaps get you to like me a little. I really think of you as my intellectual equal, and when I ask what you would do if you were in control of your own country, I mean it as a theoretical question. What would you do

if you suddenly had the power to do something for your people?" I didn't know where this speech came from, but I was beginning to sound like the debater I once was.

Kayin looked at me for a long time. This wasn't the look I remembered from our walk to the bank earlier that day, where our conversation was light and carefree. This was a look of antipathy or malice.

"You are American."

I nodded.

"You are close to being British."

I shrugged, then shook my head. I didn't consider myself close to being British at all.

"Then, may I put it this way?" she asked. "You are closer to British than to Burmese."

I agreed that was true.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Mr. Busetilear, but if I were Queen of Burma, as you say, I would summarily kick out all the Anglos, including Americans, and also the Germans and especially the French, and do it smartly, too."

"I believe you would," I said. "I believe you would surely do it."

"And now what do you think of your new Burmese friend?"

"What do I think of you?" Now it was I who looked away to gather my thoughts. "I think you're a rebel. I'm pretty sure you know a bit of American history and of how we threw off the yoke of British rule a hundred and fifty years ago."

"Yes."

"They called us rebels and terrorists. They tried to suppress us with their military might. They will do the same thing here in Burma."

"Let them try," she said, "perhaps we have a Patrick Henry and a Betty Ross waiting somewhere in our own population."

Betsy, I thought but didn't correct Kayin this time.

I stood and held out my hand to her. After a moment, she took it and pulled herself up.

"Let's go back to the hotel," I said.

"And?"

"And we'll have a cup of tea in the dining room and talk about medical students and revolutionaries."

Chapter Three

In the hotel dining room, we shared a pot of tea, along with golden *shweji*, the little wheat cakes with coconut cream and raisins. We talked until 11 p.m., when the dining room closed. We then left the hotel to walk back toward her rooms, but as we reached the corner of the building, the skies opened in a heavy downpour.

"This way, quickly!" she said as she took a key from her purse while we ran.

When we reached a side entrance to the hotel, Kayin slipped the skeleton key into the lock and shoved open the door. We jumped inside, already wet from the rain, then she closed the door and locked it.

In that small anteroom, we stood facing another door, and across from it was a stairway leading up to the floors above. Kayin said the door led to the kitchen, where the cook and his staff would be cleaning up. Neither of us made the decision to take the stairs; it was simply the only option.

In my room, I gave her a towel and my robe while I went to the bathroom to put on dry clothes. When I came out, she was drying her hair, and I could see she kept on her wet clothes under the robe. I knew she was uncomfortable and nervous about being alone in the room with me, so I suggested we scoot the chairs out onto the balcony. The rain had stopped as suddenly as

it had begun, and the moon peeked through a break in the clouds. Outside, she wouldn't feel threatened, and we could relax.

I had no intentions of trying to make love to her. If that came at some point later in our relationship, it would be fine; even wonderful. But not on this night. It wouldn't be proper. I wanted to know more about her past, as well as her plans for the future. Anyway, I had no idea how to get a woman into bed. Did one simply ask a girl to get undressed? Or should there be a few hours of drinks, jokes, and foreplay, as I'd read in books? Perhaps the man patiently waited for the woman to tell him when it was time to proceed to the next step.

I hated my lack of experience in matters of love, and I knew when, or if, it came about, I was sure to make a hundred juvenile mistakes. Of course, I was aware of the mechanics and function of sex from my studies, but those professors of medicine wrote nothing of the emotional or sensual side of that most intimate of all human behaviors. Why had Raji and I never made love? If for no other reason than to see how to go about it and what should be done, and in what order. But no, we were too 'intellectual' to indulge in the crass activities of other young people. We couldn't lower ourselves to waste time on romance. Too bad; I could certainly use the experience now.

We squeezed ourselves onto the little balcony, then relaxed in the chairs as we watched the city lights wink off one by one. The noises filtering up from the street slowly diminished until we heard only the occasional clatter of wheels on cobblestones

as a rickshaw driver pulled his last customer home from a late night on the town.

"Are you warm enough?" I asked Kayin.

She smiled and nodded.

As we sat facing each other, with our knees touching, I could almost feel the pulse of her heartbeat.

"Have you always lived in Mandalay?" I asked.

"Yes. I was born in the Quang Ka quarter, just down near the river."

We left the politics alone and talked about ourselves. Her mother died when Kayin was nine. She was raised by another member of her family. They didn't have enough money to send her to school, but she learned English from a man she called Than-Htay. At fourteen, she was already supporting herself and made her way as best she could by selling fresh fruit on the streets. She was then hired by the hotel because of her knowledge of English.

I talked about my mother and father, the farm in Virginia where I grew up, Octavia Pompeii Academy, then medical school. In the spring of 1928, my mother moved all the family's investments to government bonds. The returns weren't so high compared to the roaring stock market, but investing in the stock market, she told me and Papa, was like riding a wild bull—it was surely exciting, but at some point the beast would throw you to the ground and perhaps trample you to pieces. Because of her good judgment, my family was financially better off in

1932 than before the crash of '29. The good old U.S. government kept right on paying dividends on my mother's bonds, despite the Depression.

I told Kayin about leaving school and hiring on the ship bound for India. I wrote to my mother but didn't ask her for any money. With so many people suffering from the devastating economic depression, I felt I had no right to my family's money. They'd built up the farm from nothing, and the bulk of their income now came from the government bonds and a small herd of miniature horses, but all that had nothing to do with me. I resolved to be as destitute as the vast majority of the world and try to make my own way.

By 3 a.m. on our first night together, Kayin and I knew almost as much about each other as we knew about ourselves. That was also when she began teaching me to speak Burmese. I've always had a knack for languages, learning Hindi very quickly from Raji. The grammar was a bit difficult, but slang was my biggest problem. Learning a nation's slang is always the downfall when one tries to go native.

"What time do you have to be at work?" I asked her.

"Seven."

I walked with her the few blocks to her home, a nearby apartment located above a shop, where she lived with another girl. I asked why she didn't live at the hotel, and she told me it was far too expensive.

She would get only a few hours' sleep before returning to work,

so I decided to get up early and find things to do around the city. If she had to stay awake all day, then I would, too.

We met for lunch at the *Yadana* cafe.

"Do you not tire of restaurant food," she asked, "all time, every meal?"

"Yes. It's all right for a while, but then everything begins to taste the same." I broke a cracker and spread a little butter on it.

She sipped her tea and glanced over at a waiter who picked up a few coins from a nearby table. "And it is also quite expensive."

"I know." I nibbled my buttered cracker.

"Will you not come to our home for dinner tonight?" Her teacup rattled into the saucer when she hit the rim instead of the center. Her face flushed a little as she looked down at the offending cup.

"Willingly," I said. "But your roommate?"

"Lanna will not mind," Kayin said quickly. "She shall be glad of the company."

We set a time for me to drop by for dinner that evening as we walked back to the hotel.

"You must be exhausted," I said.

"No, not at all. I found last night very delighted."

"Delightful," I said. "Does it bother you when I correct your English?"

"I am grateful to you for doing that. How else should I know?"

"And," I said, "as you teach me Burmese, you can give the corrections back to me."

"I will," she replied as we came to the door of the hotel. "I will be looking for you tonight."

Kayin touched my hand, and I had the distinct feeling she wanted to kiss my cheek but held back. I certainly wanted to kiss her.

She hurried into the hotel and back to work.

* * * * *

Lanna and Kayin's home consisted of two small rooms and a tiny kitchen above a weaver's shop in Hoa-Bin Road. They shared a communal washroom with some other families in the building next to theirs.

"Where's Lanna?" I asked as I settled myself on the floor at a low table where Kayin had directed me.

She ran to the kitchen to attend to something on the stove. "She had to go on urgent family business, will return in two hours," she said as she brought a large tray to the table. "More or less," she added and gave me a quick smile as she took her place on the floor across the table from me.

What a wonderful dinner we had. Central to the meal was a large platter of steamed rice, with a delicious chicken curry, along with two large salads for us to share. One called *lephet*, and the other a ginger salad. The *lephet* was carefully arranged on a long plate with a multitude of ingredients, including dried shrimp, toasted yellow peas, sesame seeds, fried garlic, green peppers, lime juice, and green chilies, all mixed at the table according to one's taste. For desert, we had a tasty coconut

custard.

As we cleared the table and put away the food, I told Kayin it was the best meal I'd had since I left home for the academy, five years before. With typical Burmese modesty, she refused to take credit for the meal, saying Lanna had done most of the preparation before she left.

It was late, and Lanna hadn't come back. Kayin showed no concern about her roommate, and I soon realized she probably wouldn't be home that night.

Chapter Four

The technical difficulties I'd pondered over the proper approaches to making love never developed. We were simply sitting on cushions next to each other on the floor, listing to Glenn Miller's music coming over the radio from the BBC, when she laid her head on my shoulder. I slipped my arm around her, then, almost as a continuation of my movement, she tilted her head back, leaving our lips on a slow collision course. From that point on, nature took complete control of our bodies.

The last thing I remember was hearing the words to Cole Porter's *Let's Do It, Let's Fall in Love*. Then it was another night without sleep, but neither of us minded. I think Kayin realized from my fumbling that I'd never been in bed with a woman. She whispered into my ear that she wasn't sure about what to do, so we'd have to learn together. By sunrise, we were both thoroughly initiated in the art of lovemaking.

All the next day, I prowled libraries, museums, parks—doing anything to stay awake. Finally, in the evening she came to my room. We didn't bother with food or drink, but went straight to bed and slept soundly in each other's arms until four in the morning. We got out of bed two hours later, and I walked her home so she could get ready for work.

* * * * *

A week later, early on a balmy Tuesday afternoon, I leaned

on the counter, chatting with Kayin. I knew Mr. Haverstock, the manager, would be gone for at least an hour. Every day at around that time, he would leave, saying he had to inspect the rooms to make sure the employees had done a proper job of cleaning.

"The bloodless fool," Kayin said as she tallied the hotel ledger. "Everyone on staff knows he is soundly sleeping in one of the vacant rooms. He naps for an hour or more, letting us think he is performing some sort of critical management duty. But we are happy for it. It is at that time we can relax and do what we want. It is not that we are lazybones or finding careless time; it is only that we can get more of our work done without him peeping over our necks every minute."

"Bloody fool," I corrected her slang.

"Yes, he is that also," she said.

Suddenly, she became alert and her commercial smile came back. She looked beyond me, and I knew another guest was coming to the counter from behind me.

"Welcome to the hotel Nadi Myanmar," Kayin said to the newcomer.

"Hey, sailor," the guest said. "Goldbricking again and flirting with the lady, I see."

I recognized the voice. "'Bout time you got here, Raji." I turned to face her.

She gave me a hug and kissed my cheek. As I leaned back to look her over, I saw her gaze pass over my shoulder. With a tiny smile, she nodded toward Kayin.

"Oh, I'm sorry..." I started to introduce them, but I could see half of that had already been done. Kayin held Raji with the coldest look I'd ever seen in my life. She then gave me that same hard stare.

"Ahem," Raji cleared her throat. "Perhaps you forgot to tell her about me, Fuse."

"Fuse?" Kayin repeated my nickname, and the word dripped with a venom only a woman can inject into a single syllable.

"I told her you were coming," I said to Raji while I watched Kayin's eyes. I never knew the color blue could be so very frosty.

Just then, her professional smile returned and she greeted a pair of new guests. While the man and his wife filled out the hotel register, I tried to get her attention.

"Kayin, I need to tell you—"

"Please move to lounge or the restaurant," Kayin interrupted me icily. "Or to your room to conduct personal business, please, now. I must perform my work."

The man glanced up at me, then at Kayin, who gave him an almost sweet smile and indicated she wasn't referring to him.

I took Raji up to my room, which was probably my second mistake of the day, since Kayin still smoldered in the lobby.

"She is very beautiful," Raji said as I closed the door and put her suitcase on the bed.

"Yes."

"How well do you know her?"

"Very well."

"Very?" Raji gave me a quick look and grin.

"Very!"

"Really?" She stood still, staring toward the French windows, as if she were trying to remember something. Finally, she opened her suitcase and picked up a white taffeta dress to shake out the wrinkles. "And you told her about me?"

"Yes, many times." I took a hanger from the closet and handed it to Raji for her dress. "I told her we went to school together, crossed the ocean together, went to India to see your family..."

"She seemed quite surprised to see me," Raji said, giving me a puzzled expression.

"Well, maybe I forgot to tell her you were a woman."

"You forgot?"

I made a helpless gesture.

"Fuse, sometimes I'm surprised you're able to function on your own without adult supervision."

"Me, too. What should I do?"

"You, my friend, are a very intelligent man, and at the same time a complete idiot." She gave me her hangered dress and motioned for me to put it in the closet.

"Yeah, but what can I do now?" I hung her dress on the rod next to my robe.

"Stay here. I don't want you making any more damage. Are you understanding me?"

"I'll stay right here until you come back."

For over two hours, I paced the floor. Exactly twenty-three

steps from the front door to the French windows, and twenty-three back to the door. I tried to read a book but couldn't concentrate. I stood on the balcony, counting the people below. I shaved twice and cut myself three times. I changed my shirt, polished my shoes, then, in my shiny black pointy-toe wingtips, measured the distance between to the French windows a few more times. The twenty-three steps never varied an inch.

Finally, I heard female laughter outside in the hallway, then my door opened. Raji and Kayin came into the room, arm-in-arm, still laughing. Probably about me. I didn't care—it was a beautiful sound.

Kayin gave me a severe look, then kissed me. "Why," she asked, "did you not tell me that Raji was a woman?"

"As my best friend," I indicated Raji, "has told me many times, I'm a blockhead."

"Yes, you are," they said together.

Raji took one of the chairs as Kayin and I sat on the couch.

"Have you two been talking about me for the last two and a half hours?" I asked.

"No, silly," Raji said. "That only took the first five minutes."

Kayin laughed. "Then we had a good, long talk about India, Burma, and how we should go about kicking the British from both our houses."

Raji had a wash-up and changed her clothes, then I took the two ladies out for a delightful dinner at a small restaurant overlooking the docks. Near the end of the meal, I poured a little

wine in each of their glasses.

"Raji," I said, "you might have the room to yourself tonight."

Kayin and Raji looked at each other, then laughed.

"What?" I asked.

"I already have a room for myself," Raji said. "On the fourth floor of the hotel."

"We took care of that earlier," Kayin said, "before we went up to your room."

* * * * *

On the third night after Raji's arrival, she and I waited for Kayin to finish her shift at the front desk and join us. Meanwhile, we studied the map of the Irrawaddy River valley and reconsidered our plans to travel to the Chinese border. I wanted to stay on for a while in Mandalay, and Raji understood my feelings but wasn't sure about what she wanted to do. Traveling on without me really didn't appeal to her.

"How's your tennis game?" I asked.

"Tush!" Raji gave me a look and rolled her eyes. "Tennis indeed. Panyas Maidan doesn't know one end of a racquet from the other. I repeatedly had to take the man by the hand and show him where to stand when serving the ball. Then, last Thursday night, when he took me to the teahouse at Radha Bazaar in Baneeji Street, he let slip, or maybe said on purpose, that the dowry my mother promised him might not be enough. I almost choked on my curry. Then I wanted to choke him, and my mother."

"Do you mean to tell me," I said, "your mother had already promised him a dowry, along with your hand in marriage, before we met him that first night?"

"And he had the audacity to tell me the dowry wasn't enough."

I couldn't keep from grinning. "What did you do?"

"I told that pompous fool that I wouldn't marry him if his mother paid *me* a dowry."

I laughed.

"And then I told my mother exactly what I thought of her as I packed my suitcase and left for Mandalay."

"When we were introduced to him," I said. "I thought he was a rich gentleman."

"Yes, and an architect. Do you remember when he said he drew pictures of buildings, then left the construction to more capable hands?"

"I do."

"He draws pictures of buildings all right. He's a street artist, and a poor one at that. And his so-called club is the municipal park where we had to wait an hour for a vacant tennis court."

"When will your mother ever learn?" I took my pipe from the inside pocket of my jacket and began to fill it with tobacco.

"When will I ever learn, you mean. And when did you start smoking a pipe?"

I struck a match and drew on the stem. "Last week." I went out to the telephone mounted on the wall in the hallway and rang up room service for tea and coffee. The night waiter brought the

tray up to my room, and a few minutes later, Kayin came in, followed by a man.

"I would like for you to meet someone," she said to Raji and me. I don't think Raji noticed it, but I thought I heard a slight tremor in Kayin's voice.

We stood up to greet him. He wasn't dressed in traditional Burmese clothing, but instead wore a Western-style gray suit, nicely cut but inexpensive. His posture was very straight, his bearing almost military, and he was taller than most Burmese men. I guessed his age to be late twenties. With the front brim of his black hat turned down, he could have stepped right out of a Charlie Chan movie.

"This is Major Kala-Byan," Kayin said.

He removed his hat as he stepped forward to take Raji's hand, bowing slightly. He then took my hand in a firm handshake. "Very nice to meet you, Mr. Fusilier." His English was good and strongly British.

"I'm glad to meet you, Major. Are you in the Burma Rifles?" I knew many Burmese men joined that unit of the British Army, but I hadn't heard of any being promoted to officer rank.

I saw him bristle, and he almost made a quick reply but then caught himself. "No, sir," he said slowly. "I am not in the Burma Rifles."

Kayin also saw the major's reaction. "Major Kala-Byan is in the Burma Movement for Independence."

I was surprised by the look in Kayin's eyes as she watched the

major. I can't say it was so much admiration as it was pride, like a mother seeing her son do well on the football field.

"I see," I said, not really seeing at all. Why had Kayin brought a man to us from the underground? And how did she know him?

"Won't you have a cup of tea?" Raji asked the major as I motioned for him to have a seat on the couch.

"Thank you," he said as he laid his hat on the couch and glanced at the coffee pot. "But I would prefer coffee."

Well, I thought, *at least he's a coffee drinker.* He was the first person I'd met in the East who asked for coffee.

The major sat in the center of the couch, while Kayin sat on the end, angling herself toward me. As Raji poured coffee for him, I sat back in my chair.

"You and Miss Devaki went to Theodore Roosevelt University medical school in Richmond, Virginia," the major said, taking the cup and saucer from Raji and helping himself to some milk from the creamer on the tray.

Although his words sounded more like a statement than a question, I glanced at Raji as she took her seat in the other chair.

"But you didn't complete your degree program?" He sipped his coffee.

I shook my head. This was a question.

I tapped my pipe on the edge of the ashtray, then filled it from the tobacco pouch. I held the pouch out to him, but he declined and took a fresh pack of Lucky Strikes from an inside jacket pocket. He broke the cellophane wrapper, opened the pack, and

offered a cigarette to Raji. She shook her head, then he offered one to Kayin. She surprised me by taking one of the cigarettes. I struck a match and held it out toward her. She leaned forward and tilted her head for the light. I watched to see if she would inhale the smoke; she didn't.

I lit my pipe, then shook the flame from the match and struck a new one to offer a light to the major. He took the light, cupping his hand over mine, as if to protect it from the wind.

"Three on a match?" he asked as he leaned back and inhaled deeply.

Strange, I thought. *How does one learn a culture's beliefs and superstitions?*

This business of not lighting three times on the same match stems, I think, from the World War of 1918, when three American soldiers were in a foxhole one night. One of the solders opened a pack of cigarettes, took one for himself, and gave one to each of his buddies. The first soldier lit his smoke, held the match out to the second man to light his, then to the third soldier. A German sniper, catching a glimpse of the match flame across the battlefield, took careful aim and fired just as the third soldier took his first, and final, puff.

Perhaps this was a military, rather than a cultural belief. But I had no military background. How had it come to me? I made a mental note to talk with Kayin about this the next time we were alone. If she and I were going to be together, then I wanted to learn her belief system, as well as her language.

I crushed out the match in the ashtray. “No,” I said in answer to his question about me and Raji not completing our degree programs. “We left school in our third year.”

“Why?” he asked.

I puffed my pipe and waited a moment. I didn’t mind talking about school or why Raji and I had quit, but I did resent being interrogated.

“Oxford,” I said as I leaned back in my chair and crossed my legs.

A puff of cigarette smoke obscured the major’s face for a moment, but from Kayin’s look, I imagined he glanced at her.

“Pardon me?” he said as the gray smoke drifted away.

“You went to Oxford University,” I said as I examined the bowl of my pipe, then looked back at him.

“The accent?” He took a bit of tobacco from the tip of his tongue using his thumb and forefinger.

“Yes.” I smiled and inquired further. “What was your field of study?”

“I have degrees in engineering and mining,” he replied as he dropped the bit of tobacco into the ashtray.

“Why mining? I should have thought political science would be of interest to you.”

He sipped his coffee and regarded me over the rim of his cup for a moment before he replied. “My primary interest was in the latest developments in explosives.”

“I left school,” I said, “because I no longer saw any point in

it. How about you, Raji?"

"I suppose, to me," she said, "it is really no more than a sabbatical leave. I will probably go back and finish my degree at some point."

I looked back to the major. "Does that answer all your questions?"

"I'm sorry," he said as he put his cup back on the saucer. "I didn't intend to be rude. Sometimes I'm too direct and forget my manners. I hope I didn't offend either of you."

"No offense," Raji replied, with a smile.

I waved away his concern.

"I know," he went on in a friendlier tone, "that both of you are sympathetic to our cause."

I looked at Kayin and saw she was waiting for my reaction.

"What is your cause, Major?" I asked.

The major leaned forward to tap the ash from his cigarette. "Quite simply, we want the British out of Burma."

"And if the British refuse your invitation to leave?" I asked.

"Then we are prepared to take action against them."

"'We?'" I asked. "I've read in the newspapers the British have almost five regiments in Burma, plus artillery and gunboats. Do you have enough men to go up against that kind of force?"

"No, we don't have enough men to confront them now, but our numbers grow every day."

"And you want me, Raji, and I suppose Kayin, to join your army?"

"Kayin has other duties to perform. But I would like very much for you and Miss Devaki to join with us on a training exercise."

I wanted to know what Kayin's other duties were, but he continued before I could ask.

"I'm taking a regiment of irregulars to Ethiopia for a training mission."

"Ethiopia?" I asked. "Why so far?"

"Three years ago, in 1928, the Emperor of Ethiopia was killed in the civil war. Two days later his wife, the Empress, died of mysterious causes, then Haile Selassie crowned himself the new Emperor. Those loyal to the former Emperor continue to fight the forces of Haile Selassie in the outlying provinces, and we are fortunate enough to have access to one of the airfields in a region they control. We have been invited to use their training grounds for our new recruits." The major took a last puff of his cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray. "As you say, it is a long way, and that is one of the reasons we are going there. It is so far away that the British will not notice what we are doing. We would like the two of you to go along and serve as our medics."

"I don't know about Raji," I said, "but I don't feel qualified to perform any medical procedures."

"Nor do I," Raji said.

"This will not be in the nature of surgery or treatment of diseases," the major said, "but more along the lines of first aid." When he received no response from either of us, he went on. "We

expect minor wounds and maybe a broken bone or two, nothing more."

I glanced at Raji.

Is she thinking the same thing I am? A broken bone or two?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.