

## CHAPTER ONE

ASSAM. MARCH 1944

The Punjabi Lance Naik, guarding the coal bunkers, watched her from the shade of a gnarled baobob on the far side of the compound, and she could read his thoughts. He had been studying her for half an hour; regardless of caste, all Assamese girls were assumed to be prostitutes by these foreign soldiers.

She realised with dismay that she was staring back at the man, but before she turned her head away their eyes met and he smiled, then spat a thin stream of red betelnut juice on to the dry earth by his feet, making the gesture sexual and obscene. The soldier grinned, then hefted the sling of his rifle into a more comfortable position on his shoulder. She knew that in a few moments he would stroll over to her and there would be more embarrassment as she tried to reject his unwelcome attentions.

Acrid smoke from a neglected cooking fire beside one of the market stalls was drifting

slowly across the wharf, beyond which lay the ancient paddle-steamer carcass serving as quay and office for the Brahmaputra River Transport Company. It was mid-afternoon, the laziest time of the day, and the only sound was the dull hum of insects. The coolies were lounging in the shelter of stacks of tea chests awaiting shipment downriver, while the market traders squatted motionless like shrivelled Buddhas beside their wares.

Apart from the Punjabi soldier and herself, it seemed to the Lushai girl that only the river was awake, its brown water swirling lazily around the mooring cables of the floating ghat, and lapping against the wooden piles which prevented it from eating its way towards the cantonment during the monsoons. Half a mile distant, and close to the far bank, a small country boat, overloaded with rice straw, drifted sideways in the current. Somewhere under its towering and unsafe cargo slept its crew; a small boy hung over its steering oar, and dozed.

From the corner of her eye, the girl saw the soldier begin to move towards her, but to her relief, after only a couple of paces, he hesitated then stopped, listening. She heard the sound of engines in the distance; a convoy from the military supply depot on the eastern