

Chapter 1: *Flight for life*

Mon Thaik reached towards her friend Aom, whose protective arms were wrapped tightly around her small son Auk. Plumes of black smoke rose from villages in the distance, a dark beacon of the soldiers' horrific deeds.

On the banks of the Salween river that had been running dry only weeks earlier, they searched for a way across the swollen, rushing white-water. Further upstream, the dead were stacked in rows like kindling; shot by the very soldiers responsible for setting the distant villages alight.

'We should get back on the trail and look for a way over,' Mon said as the sound of the wild water threatened to drown out her words.

They heard a muffled explosion as landmines exploded. Cries for mercy tore at Mon's heart.

'Should we go back? We might be able to save anyone who can walk.'

'There is no going back, we must save ourselves,' Mon said in her Kachin-accented Burmese.

Behind the women, Myint and Yei nodded their agreement. They, like Mon, had left their children with family in villages far to the north. All wanted to leave Burma as the conflict that erupted in Rakhine State with the Rohingya communities continued to spread in all directions towards Kachin, Shan and Karen like a grass fire. The plan was to return for those they had left behind once the troubles eventually faded and blew over like a spent typhoon.

As the group made its way up the embankment and out of sight of the men obsessed with ethnic cleansing, Aom struggled to lift her son. Clawing at the muddy incline, Auk hoisted himself up to the track.

Looking down he said, 'Come, Mother. I will help you.'

Slipping on the wet grass he shifted his footing for a better position but instead a loud explosion rang out and Auk was hurled into the air before splashing into the fast-moving water.

Aom screamed and scrambled to fish her son from the rapids but it was too late. The rush of water pulled Auk from her grasp and he was gone, what was left of his limp body smashing against the rocks before vanishing around a bend in the river.

'My son, my son, please don't leave me!' Aom screamed.

Frantic she cried, 'I want to go with him. Please let me go with him!'

Seeing the danger of more senseless loss Mon, and then also Myint, held her tightly; jumping in would mean certain death.

'My son, my son!' she called again to Auk. Then by some miracle, his bloodied and pale face reappeared briefly above the surface. With his body still submerged in the boiling river, Auk lifted his hand up as if to wave goodbye to the brave woman who had brought him into this world.

Stricken, Aom collapsed into body-wracking sobs. Then, summoning the last tiny thread of strength remaining, she called out, 'I will come for you. Wherever you go, we shall be together again. Wherever you go.'

Auk's soft face silently succumbed to the raging torrent. Aom fell to the earth only to be promptly pulled back up by Mon. 'We have to keep going or they will find us and kill us all.'

They were interrupted by the overwhelming buzzing and clicking of what could only be described as symphony of a billion cicadas singing, followed by a ball of light ascending from the angry river below. For a moment, the violent waters stilled, then the bright vision drifted upwards before disappearing up into the sky. The buzzing and clicking quieted as the rapids returned, a watery stampede of wild horses.