

Ghosts of Burma

A novel by David Byerlee

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.

Chapter 2: A bombing in Paradise

The Bay of Pattaya sparkled under the moonlight, the waters just metres away from where Tan and Chie Shin sat eating *tom ung gung*, a spicy prawn soup with Chicken Rama at the Siam Star in Pattaya. Tan clasped his new wife's soft hand and they smiled in delight. A haunting Chinese love song added to the magic as the ocean haze that had begun to appear at sunset cast a spell over the bay that could go on forever. The honeymooners from Singapore, together for only three months prior to their wedding in Hong Kong, were happy, relaxed and looking forward to a boat cruise in the morning. Now into the second course with a serving of *Kai jiew moo*, a delicious omelette with pork and fish sauce, they smiled and chatted happily together. In no hurry, the couple toasted over a glass of velvety Vietnamese wine and in whispered tones they made secret plans for a thousand tomorrows...

Then, as their crystal glasses clinked together once more, a bulky object sailed over their heads like some stray postal parcel. Within seconds, a detonation caused a massive pressure spike of thermal air and gas, indiscriminately blasting bodies and debris at 600 feet per second; atomising everything in the direct impact of the bomb and reverberating outwards resulting in disastrous and complete devastation of the Siam Star.

After just a microsecond's delay, the roar of the blast was heard as the ear-bursting explosion demolished the restaurant's structure from the roof to the support beams, sending the ceiling crashing down as though swept aside by the hand of a vengeful ghost.

Bodies and debris lay strewn everywhere over what had, an instant before, been the perfect setting for romance. Now, survivors were faced with a life-changing reality. Only after the lingering white fog of plaster particles and the red mist of destroyed blood vessels cleared was the full extent of the carnage clear. The moans and cries for help were appalling to the horrified onlookers just beginning to gather at the fringes of the bomb site. Added to the din was the wail of sirens from approaching ambulances and emergency services amid numerous beeping horns as night traffic started to build and overflow like an uncorked bottle into Beach Road.

Ripped flesh and shredded clothing hung off men and women who staggered in shock through choking asbestos dust and lurched aimlessly around the dead and the dying. Bodies—both dead and alive—had been thrown everywhere. Most had missing arms, legs or both, and open wounds bled out like human fire hydrants.

The dead and maimed lay about in twisted, gruesome poses. One man lay with his leg facing the wrong way, his lifeless eyes staring into nothingness. Another man, still alive, held onto his bleeding stump—the rest of his limb nowhere in sight. A trail of blood marked his progress as he dragged himself across the floor.

With nothing to be done for the dead and with most of the couples, including Tan and Chie Shin, dying together, the walking wounded staggered about in search of help. A stout, matronly woman with mangled arms and no lower body wailed in Thai, '*Phi Tai Hong*' then in English, 'Vengeful ghosts do this. It is a curse. They have power we not have.'

Her high frequency wail dropped an octave then faded to a hoarse whisper as she quickly weakened, her cries coming out once more in Thai, then deteriorating into gibberish as she gently rubbed what had once been a fully intact stomach but was now crudely split open like a bag of squid. Her bleeding innards formed a tributary that flowed south to pool with the blood gushing from legless stumps. Lifeblood was

still being pumped out by a heart not yet done. She struggled to keep herself upright in a makeshift seated position, as if fighting the battle against unconsciousness could prevent her inevitable death.

Propped up against part of an upturned table covered in a pile of mangled and charred debris, she mumbled, drifting between Thai, English and other tongues, probably known only to her.

Her now thin tone could still be heard in a strange silence that had descended on the area immediately following the deafening explosion. She said again in English, following sharply inflected Thai words, 'Vengeful ghosts, they come for us. They will kill us all.'

Those who managed to escape from the hellish aftermath of the explosion would likely spend the rest of their lives wondering what happened, replaying the events over, and over again. As one voice faded to its merciful end, so another replaced it. An elderly Thai woman bleeding heavily from the forehead called out in Thai with a loud voice that defied her broken body.

'Where is my son? Where is my son?' The sharp intonation of her words sounded as though she was shouting at demons. But no matter how much or how loudly she shouted, her son failed to materialise, and the truth became clear. Her shouts turned to cries of agony. She too was doomed, haunted.

Perhaps realising there wasn't much time she dug into her handbag—the dark leather now white from dust—and pulled out a photo of the son she had just lost. With bloodied, torn fingers she held his picture close to her chest and wailed, 'I am coming to join you, *Phi*. It will not be long.' She kissed the torn photo then a gust of wind tore it from her weakened grasp. Speaking in Thai and then English as the other woman had done, she said, 'My son is *Phi Tai Hong*, a ghost who shall haunt his killers for his monstrous death.' And with the last of her energy depleted from the final cry of a wounded heart, she collapsed as her soul reunited with the son she could not live without.

As the wail of sirens approached, the walking wounded united with outsiders. Anyone who was able attempted to assist victims emerge from the ruins of the building or carry those who couldn't move on their own. One man attempted to help a middle-aged European woman with a twisted posture akin to a broken doll but her painful cry seemed a warning that this could well have been the wrong move: 'My legs, I can't move my legs!'

In the middle the blast zone, a man could be seen lying prone on a bed of jagged glass and debris, staring at what was left of his legs and arms. Silent and in shock, he had no words for the unspeakable. He lay back and folded his arms across his chest as though waiting to die.

Nearby, a young Thai woman sat on the kerb, shards of glass protruding from her gut like translucent daggers. Looking down, her face a mask of horror, one bloodied hand grasped a shard but as she tried to pull it free she screamed in agony. Her head slumped, and she let go of the offending protrusion that she now realised couldn't be removed without surgery. The woman raised her bleeding clasped hands in a *wai*, or a show of respect, towards a remarkably intact bronze Buddha, still sitting with a beatific smile over the wreckage as though he was one of the few survivors. The statue's devotee would not be among them. The nameless young lady, alone and broken, knew death was circling like an evil crow about to land on a human perch. She seemed to be praying for mercy, for grace, that final grace. Speaking softly in Thai to herself and to dearly beloved Buddha, she slowly fell over on her side, eyes staring lifelessly at the ruins that had taken her life. A man hurried over and pushed her eyelids down to let her soul rest.

This would keep her soul from wandering forever. Her ghost, *Phi Tai Hong*, the ghost of a person that suffered a sudden violent or cruel death, would curse this place until her murder was avenged.

Like radiation after a nuclear event, the toxic blowback promised to bring even more damage than the initial blast. Acrid smells of cordite and dust filled the air evoking violent coughing and choking, possible precursors for lung damage and worse. One young girl, possibly American going by the accent, stood with her hands on her knees coughing up blood between hoarse cries of, 'Help me, somebody help me.' Otherwise unmarked, her prognosis was uncertain as trickles of blood from her mouth segued into a vomitus flow.

Then came sounds of rescue. The eerie silence that had descended after the ear-shattering detonation was replaced by the blaring, urgent sounds of sirens, coming in unrelentingly like a tsunami of sound waves following an earthquake. This aftershock was enough to give aural hallucinations to the many with shattered eardrums. Already they were bombarded with a dull roar endlessly replaying inside their heads like wild surf crashing onto a beach. This noise was now being pierced by a repeated volley of oscillating sirens signalling the arrival of the emergency services. For most of the diners however, it was too late. The Singaporean honeymooners appeared almost unscathed if observed from a certain angle. But they lay silent and unmoving. Forever together in a final, heartbreaking embrace. They would become the night and the stars. Was there a special kind of heaven for doomed lovers like Tan and Chie Shin, or would their souls, too, become vengeful ghosts demanding justice, as told by a prophet now deceased?

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This micro-world, this small facet of the glittering jewel of a twilight Pattaya, was changed forever.

Po Hmu watched and felt relief at the successful explosion. The relief washed away the tension and replaced it with elation, with joy.

Chapter 3: *One week earlier- Irreconcilable differences*

Brodie Jackson poured another drink with all the skill and finesse of the cocktail waiter he'd once been. Around him, guests joked and laughed. The sultry summer air was perfect for a midnight drinking party. He didn't feel especially drunk but knew he was far from sober and he didn't like his chances of passing a roadside breath test. It wouldn't come to that though, he was the host, and no one's designated driver.

Filling the glass with Bacardi mix he asked Grace, 'More?' She nodded with a serious look as white rum filled the glass, first one finger then two. He paused and asked with a smile, 'Enough? Or do you want to go the full Monty, sweetheart?'

She smiled. The serious business of liquor strength nearly out of the way. 'Why not? I'm feeling up for it tonight.' Pouring carefully, he stopped at three fingers as the bottle was reduced to mere dregs. He put it on a table alongside another three empties lined up like sentry guards and blew his partner, Grace, a kiss. Tonight, she was looking sensational with a plunging split satin dress that showed off her toned and shapely legs. No one could say she didn't have great looking pins, right? No one. One of her best features in fact. It was 1 a.m. and he and his party guests were only getting started. People always said he knew how to have fun and Brodie's aim was to prove them right. It was just after midnight—the night still young—and there was too much fun to be had. There was no need to crash until they saw the morning light. In the background the Eddy Money song, 'Take me home tonight' voiced those very words.

As Brodie fixed a drink for Maggie, his friend Spike's other half, he felt like some mad chemist. One who knew exactly what he was doing, of course. As the triple Bourbon was handed over, he hummed and sang along to the lyrics, 'Take me home tonight, I don't want to let you go until I see the light.'

Looking over his shoulder he called out to his distracted—and possibly flirting—partner, 'Try it now, Grace.' Pulling herself away from a young, smart businessman Damon, she placed the glass to her pursed lips, signalled her approval with a wink, and drained the glass. There were cheers and she turned her back to Brodie once more. Damon, the man who had her full attention, had arrived straight off the tarmac from Heathrow, with his Saville suit and interesting hair style. He was pouring Grace shots of Tequila and, not wanting to appear a spoilsport, Brodie waved his approval. Two could play at that game. Brodie poured himself a drink, also three fingers, and not to be outdone by his hard charging partner, downed it in one gulp. In an instant, there was a rush of Dopamine-boosted blood to the head.

As the warmth of the alcohol flushed through his system, Brodie gravitated towards Spike and Maggie. Close friends, Spike was still nursing the single glass he'd poured himself without any dubious influence from the host. Maggie teetered over the triple shot Brodie had poured her as Spike steadied her with a hand on the small of her back. Someone had to stay sober, right?

Brodie tried to be accommodating; isn't that what good hosts do? 'How's the coffee shop going, Spike? Every time I go there the place is packed.'

'It's been alright, what with the rent and the competition. Sometimes I wish he'd bought that Subway franchise,' Maggie answered for him with a slurred voice.

'Yes, instead of making coffee we'd be making sandwiches all day. As it is we've met some wonderful people.'

'Yeah, like that actor out from Hollywood for a shoot.'

'Who was that?' Grace asked intrigued, her attention drawn back to the conversation.

'I don't remember exactly. But we made a pact not to name drop; it's not what we do.'

'So, we won't see it on Facebook, right?' Grace, now back in Brodie's orbit, said with a blank face and in a tone just this side of interested.

Spike smiled as if proud of his ability to keep a confidence. 'Yes, you got it. If we land a really big fish or even a whale, that will make to social media and the rest I'm sure. Have to protect your clients.'

They chatted as other couples joined them. Celebrity media gossip didn't interest Brodie, but it was safe, neutral, in that they weren't talking about people they knew or that were even in the same room.

Later in the evening after heavier spirits, including some lethal cocktails, Brodie began to see double. That warm, comforting feeling was being hijacked by unpleasant emotions. Just why was Grace spending so much time with the handsome stranger from Brazil?

It was hot and getting hotter even though it was past 2 a.m. now. A thin film of sweat covered Brodie's forehead but it wasn't just the heat that was making him sweat. Grace, his partner of five years, was making noises about leaving and this get-together was another attempt to patch up their relationship. A relationship on track to implode much like an old Church collapsing after an earthquake. Their relationship was propped up by support beams that could crack and fold at any time.

Brodie didn't want to think about losing his best lover yet and he rubbed his forehead as though to banish the thought. Squeezing his eyes again and again his vision began to swim as if he was looking into those crazy funhouse mirrors. Trying to rise from the too-deep cushioned armchair, his sense of balance failed him, and Brodie crashed into a glass side table. Shards of lethal looking glass, jade daggers able to cut to the bone, splashed onto the floor, one piece nicking him near the elbow. The tiny wound flowed with bright blood that found its way onto the carpet. Too drunk to feel it, he watched the red stream with detached bemusement. His friend, Spike, disappeared into the bathroom and came back with a towel to staunch the bleeding.

Grace looked on with a careless smile as if to say, *I knew you'd make a mess of it*. No sympathy or show of emotion there, she was the dispassionate emergency services worker who acted like she'd seen it all. Being a nurse could do that to a person and even though she wasn't in the industry now, he wondered what she would do if he was really hurt, say with a severed artery, then dismissed this train of thought as something close to self-flagellation. It didn't bear thinking about, but then she put her casual cruelty into words.

'Way to go, Brodie. I spent a few hundred on that and that was down from nearly a thousand,' Grace said in a high-pitched American accent that left out mention of his injury. When angry, her rhotic American intonation became more intense; sharpened, like a blade on a grinding stone.

If they were hit by a category 5 cyclone, would she busy herself with the damaged house and the mundane tasks such as follow up calls to the insurers while he lay down with his head sliced open? How would she play the role of the grieving widow?

'Don't you mean 'we' Grace? Don't you mean 'we' spent hundreds on a piece of furniture? It's only a table for Christ's sake. It reminds me of the old saying about knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing.'

Maggie rushed to his side with a blanket of paper towels to replace the ruined towel and began to apply them to stem the flow. It worked, at least for now.

'Do you want to go to the surgery or the hospital, Brodie?' but Brodie shook his head. He couldn't leave the field without finishing the battle. He was still breathing, wasn't he?

'I'll be fine. It's not the cut I'm worried about.'

He looked at his totally ravishing partner who appeared unconcerned and could even detect a little smile he that could be gloating. 'I guess you're satisfied now you've drawn blood.'

This got the reaction he was hoping for as Grace stared at him with bulging eyes of flaming rage. He could take blows to the head but being ignored was something Brodie just could not stand. Grace prepared herself like a prosecuting attorney moving in for the kill with a devastating closing argument and with all the hostility she could muster, Grace hurled her drink into his face. With a wide, careless grin Brodie thrust out his tongue as if to take in rain from a cloud burst after a long drought. 'Hmmm tastes great, Grace. You must have an ace bartender. No point in letting it go to waste, this stuff isn't cheap.'

As the ever-caring Maggie rushed to Grace's side, Spike took Brodie by the arm and said, 'Look, we've all had a lot to drink tonight. You two are obviously a bit tired and emotional.'

Looking flustered Brodie said, 'Yeah, maybe it's time to call it a night...'

But as the sob sisters sobbed, Brodie wasn't done yet. 'Hey friend, I'm just getting started.' He pulled away from the unwanted attentions of his friend and staggered towards the makeshift bar. As he did, he crashed into a full-length mirror that fell to the floor but didn't break. Everyone stared at this lucky escape from seven years' bad luck. There was already enough bad luck to go around without the mirror playing into it.

'See!' he said as if it were a revelation. 'I *do* have good luck,' he paused, 'Even if it is of the rampaging bull variety.'

'Oh, so you want to get smart, smartass,' Grace said in her rhotic, heavy on the *R* sound, American accent that always got sharper as she got angrier.

Picking up an almost empty bottle of Scotch, she threw it against the wall and it exploded into a million slivers. Brodie saw his own life in the mess that was trickling down the wall. Fortunately, no one was hurt. Not yet.

'Go on, smash them all,' he said as he yanked a tablecloth from one of the tables. Everything, including plates of finger food and bowls of curry and rice, cascaded to the floor in a shrapnel of molten cheese and onion dip. It was a neat trick that never worked, even if it was in keeping with this sudden outbreak of violence. The party itself was in self-destruct mode. Brodie tried to summon up the energy to care but couldn't do it. While only a few people had left after the first shots of this War of the Roses, this latest exchange brought about an exodus as the remaining guests hurriedly made their apologies until only a clearly very worried Maggie and Spike remained.

Then, something unexpected. The large teakwood dining table began to shake, and dinnerware and glasses rattled. There was silence as the rocking and shaking continued for a brief time before stopping abruptly.

'What was that?' Spike asked in alarm.

Brodie, thankful for a diversion from the embarrassing fight with his soulmate said, 'Probably an earthquake, we've had them before.'

Spike and Maggie nodded at this plausible explanation while Grace glared at him as though ready to resume battle but before she could there was a knock on the door. Spike walked over and opened it to reveal two police officers.

'We have complaints about a disturbance,' said a burly officer as he eyed a living room transformed into a bloody battlefield.