

Chapter One

Last night he dreamt of his mother again. In the dream his mother's face was incredibly beautiful and bright with her smile. Her hair was a black sheen. There was a touch of sadness in her eyes. She was wearing a rose embroidered white dress with pleated skirt. She said "I'll come back for you, wait for me, it won't be long now." He couldn't tell whether she was speaking in Thai, French, Russian or German. He knew only that he was sitting with her on a wooden platform under a shady tree on the bank of Saen Sab canal. The image was unfamiliar. As far as he could remember, he had never seen his mother there before.

Pink Tecoma trees along the canal shed pink petals, sending them floating down on mother's hair. He wasn't sure whether it was their scent or the scent of his mother that was perfuming the air. She kissed him once more before walking off. Suddenly there was an explosion of gunshot. Crimson streaks of blood ran down her white skirt. Even in death, her eyes were bright. "Wait for me darling..." Crimson blood faded into the pink petals of the Tecoma blooms.

"Mother", he screamed and propelled himself into consciousness. The dream images disappeared. Ruj Rujirek awoke to reality.

The shrill, air piercing sound of a flying squadron shattered his dream. He found himself sleeping on a roadside. He sensed that he was not on the bank of the Saen Sab canal, but in a war torn foreign land. On this rough ground he spent last night, half the world away from his home on the canal.

He levered himself upright, tired, hungry, thirsty. He had not eaten for twenty hours. Dusting himself down, it was time to move on. It was still early, but from where he stood, he caught glimpses of Berlin, still far off.

The grey horizon was jagged with Gothic style buildings rearing up against a sky so gloomy with thick dark cloud that it seemed to cloak the city in death itself. The whole city could be an abandoned cemetery.

This late in April, the temperature hovered at around ten degrees, but he didn't feel the cold. No one living through such a crisis paid any attention to the climate. His shoes caked with dust, his feet bruised and tired from walking fifty kilometres, but he kept on, step by step. He would be home soon. Black smoke rising from the burning city ahead drew him on hurriedly and fearfully, his heart saddened. The sound of mortar

shelling could still be heard intermittently. Naked flames still lapped fiercely in many parts of the city. Berlin was a battleground.

He was a young Thai man in his early twenties. Being six foot two and wide-shouldered, he was taller than an average Thai. The dimples on his cheeks rendered his face particularly handsome. He was told by many people that he did not resemble his father at all, apart from the eyes which seemed to come out of the same mould. As he had no recollection of ever having seen his mother; he couldn't tell whether he had inherited her looks.

For the last ten years, since 1935, Ruj Rujirek had been in Germany. First to study political science to fulfil his father's wishes, and after graduation, to accept the Thai Ambassador, Major General Phra Prasart Pithayayut's offer to work at the embassy. His father would have been proud of his achievements both scholastically and as a working adult. It pained him to think of his father, not because of the love and the longing, but because of a far more complex feeling.

A squadron of Spitfires and Hurricanes flew over his head, then another, and another, and another, all heading towards the centre of Berlin. He checked his pocket calendar – April 26, 1945. He had been away from Berlin nearly a week. It was an interminable week of sustained enemy attack. In fact, ever since the beginning of the year, the sky over Berlin was never free from enemy bombers. The destruction Germany had brought to other countries, was now coming home in vengeful retaliation.

He had just come back from carrying out the Ambassador's orders to escort all the remaining Thai citizens on a very long trip south to Bad Gastein in compliance with the German government's request. As an official of the Thai Embassy, he was seeing to their safety, and he should have stayed with them instead of coming back.

But he was on his way back.

Nearing the end of World War II in Europe, when Germany faced inevitable, total defeat, the German government ordered the evacuation of foreigners from Berlin, away from the constant heavy air raids. Its Foreign Ministry alerted each nation's ambassador to prepare for an exodus. Two special trains were assigned to transport the diplomats and their families to the Southern parts of Germany near Salzburg. Evacuees were told to take only the necessities with them.

On the day of departure, the station was overflowing with people. Hundreds of embassy officials and their families thronged the platform.