

Viktor

Chapter 1

1998 - Prague, Czech Republic

Angry young men with spiky haircuts and shaved heads transformed a cheerful crowd of music lovers into an angry mob. Fourteen-year-old Viktor Prazsky had invited Delia, the prettiest girl in his class, to the Global Street Party. Now they were caught up in the middle of this developing riot.

Delia clung to Viktor's arm, her dark, penetrating eyes shrouded with worry. "I don't like this. Let's get out of here."

Viktor nodded. He searched for a break in the crowd, but the throng of protesters propelled them forward.

An hour ago, Viktor and Delia had been enjoying a music festival at Peace Square. Viktor's father, a lieutenant in the federal police, had warned him not to go, claiming the festival was organized by anarchists. So, Viktor lied to him, saying he was taking Delia to see *Titanic* at the Old Town Theater. They were having fun, even when the bands stopped playing and the party moved to the streets.

Now, they were hemmed in by a gang of young men, raising their fists, shouting, "Reclaim the Streets," and waving signs with slogans expressing the same sentiment. Some men marched with red and black flags, carrying a three-pronged symbol reminiscent of the Nazi swastika.

Most of the protesters were older than Viktor — bigger and taller. Despite the cool day, many were shirtless. Some tied handkerchiefs around their faces, leaving only their eyes exposed. They looked like bandits.

Viktor moved forward with the crowd, Delia in tow, when he spotted something. He turned to her and spoke loud enough to be heard. "The museum is up ahead."

As they threaded their way through the mob, Delia cried out. "Leave me alone." Her grip on Viktor's arm tightened.

He stopped and looked back to see a tall man in a red ski mask holding Delia's other arm, screaming at her. "Black swine! Gypsy whore!"

Viktor's body stiffened and his heart raced. *He thinks she's Roma — Gypsy.* Actually, Delia was Greek, but her dark complexion must have drawn this man's attention. *They hate Roma.* Two Czech men had killed a Roma woman a few months back. The story had been big news in all the papers — telling how those men assaulted her, then threw her into the river.

As the man in the ski mask continued his tirade, the crush of the crowd eased. People moved away from the confrontation, while continuing to march through the streets.

Viktor and Delia stood in the center of a small opening in the crowd, along with the man who towered over them, refusing to release her arm.

Delia struggled and screamed, while Viktor's mind searched for a way out. Police sirens wailed in the distance. He doubted they'd arrive in time. He had learned a few Taekwondo moves, but he was only a novice.

Moving protectively close to Delia, Viktor faced her assailant. "Leave us alone. We don't want trouble."

Crooked, yellow teeth formed a smile that showed through a hole in the ski mask. The man reached into his pocket and fished out a knife — about twice the length of his hand. *Click*. The blade snapped open. He waved it in Delia's face and pulled her closer with his other hand. "Get out of the way, boy. Your damn Gypsy whore isn't worth it."

Gotta do something. Viktor lifted his right knee and delivered a snap kick to the man's groin, causing him to drop his knife and collapse, writhing in pain.

Someone grabbed Viktor from behind and held him in a bear hug.

Where'd he come from? Viktor shouted, "Run, Delia." He struggled to free himself. Despite his attempts, the man at his back held him tighter.

As Delia ran off, the man with the yellow teeth grabbed his knife and stumbled uneasily to his feet. "Bastard!" He pointed the blade at Viktor's face. "I see you met my brother. He seems to like you."

Behind Viktor, a scornful laugh burst out. "You ain't goin' nowhere."

In front of Viktor, the yellow teeth smiled through the mask. "Gonna cut you, boy."

Only one way to break this hold. Viktor twisted to the left. As the man at his back moved his right leg forward, Viktor twisted right again, and stomped his heel on the arch of the man's foot.

With a howl and a curse, the man released his bear hug and shoved Viktor forward — directly toward the knife in the other man's hand.

Viktor instinctively turned his face to the right. *Shit! Too late*.

Something slammed into his left temple. Everything went black.

Fifteen minutes earlier, Lieutenant Eduard Prazsky jumped into the passenger seat of the patrol car and buckled up. He knew the street party would turn violent. He was glad he had warned his son, Viktor, to stay away.

Josef Filipek, his new partner, started the engine and turned on the siren and flashing lights as he pulled into traffic. He glanced at Eduard "Wilsonova Street near the opera house. Ten minutes, maybe quicker."

"There could be a lot of foot traffic in that area. You'd be better driving around—"

"I've been driving these streets for years, Lieutenant." Josef kept his eyes on the road. "I can't afford my own chauffeur, so I probably know my way around better than you do."

Chauffeur. Eduard often heard comments like this, but it always made him uncomfortable. "If you want to request a different partner, that's up to you. For now, let's focus on the call."

Josef glanced briefly at his partner and then back to the street, before turning the wheel sharply to the right. "Tell me. With all your money, why do you even bother to work? Can't your friend, President Havel, find something more challenging for you to do?"

It was clear his partner wasn't afraid to speak his mind, so Eduard decided to do the same. "I do this because I hate terrorists as much as you do. The Anarchists of the Black Trinity have been turning these street parties into violent riots all over Europe. They need to be stopped."

Josef continued to speed through the streets and take sharp corners.

Eduard wanted to make this partnership work. They needed to communicate and trust each other. "Listen. I grew up with money and I know our president, but that doesn't make me soft or ignorant. I also spent eight months in Kosovo clearing mines and hunting down war criminals ... so, can you stop being an asshole, and start treating me as your partner?"

A smile appeared on Josef's face. "I think you and I will get along just fine."

The radio came to life with a woman's voice. "Unit twenty-seven, this is base. Assist emergency medical responders heading to National Museum on Wilsonova Street."

Josef made a hard-left turn and accelerated. He flipped a switch to trigger an urgent, wailing siren.

Eduard grabbed the microphone. "Base. Twenty-seven responding."

"Affirmative, twenty-seven. Man down, possible stabbing. Assist with crowd control."

An ambulance came into view from behind, pulling up close, tailgating their police vehicle. Up ahead, a crowd appeared as they approached Wilsonova.

Josef slowed down to avoid hitting any of the desperate crowd scurrying away in all directions, but he didn't stop. He continued to move forward aggressively, forcing people out of the way.

Eduard took the microphone. "Base, this is twenty-seven. Arrived at Wilsonova. Will assist responders on foot."

Josef stopped the car. The ambulance stopped directly behind.

Both officers donned their riot helmets and grabbed their radios and clubs. Eduard grabbed an air horn. They got out of the car and faced a moving sea of young people, marching down the street, most with faces covered and fists in the air.

Two emergency responders in solid blue jump suits rushed toward them from the ambulance, each carrying a red duffel bag. Two more followed, pushing a gurney on wheels.

The man in front shouted at Eduard. "You two lead the way. My partner and I will follow. Don't worry about the gurney team. They'll push their way through. We can't let them slow us down."

Eduard nodded to Josef and pressed noise-suppression plugs into his ears. He aimed the air horn forward and released a loud wailing blast. People moved away from the sound as quickly as the crowd allowed, while the four of them pushed into the empty space.

It took two more blasts before they reached a large opening near the museum. Ten meters away, a man lay on the street. A young couple stood in front of him, obscuring their view. Eduard couldn't tell if he was injured or dead.

The emergency responders rushed forward and knelt beside the victim.

The young couple ran over to Josef, both of them talking at once, saying something about two men wearing masks, an argument, a fight, and a knife.

Eduard glanced at the victim. He looked a bit like Viktor — even wore the same clothes — but the young man's face was turned to the side. A pool of dark liquid stained the street. Then Eduard saw the knife, or rather the hilt. It stuck out of the man's temple. *It's not Viktor. It can't be. He went to the movies.*

The team with the gurney arrived. All four of the emergency responders positioned themselves around the injured man, preparing to slide him on a backboard and lift him onto the gurney.

As they lifted the victim up, Eduard saw his face.

Oh, my God! Viktor!