

Chapter 1

Maggie and I raced through the courtyard, trying to catch up to the pretty Russian spy. I only wanted to ask her a few questions, but the way she took off running when she saw us a few minutes ago made me think she wasn't exactly there for sightseeing. I decided we should follow her and find out what she was doing here at the Castle.

She disappeared behind a long tan, two-story building. Turning the corner, we found ourselves on a deserted winding pathway where a bright yellow sign stood ominously, probably saying something in Czech about how we weren't supposed to be back there. Ahead of us, a blur of blonde hair vanished behind a tall gray structure.

We turned the corner and slowed down, trying not to make too much noise. I was pretty sure we were in an area of the Prague Castle where tourists weren't exactly welcome. Soon a large, white, and tan brick, square tower came into view. No trace of the spy, or anyone else, for that matter.

Maggie pulled out the notebook from her backpack and thumbed through it quickly. "That must be Black Tower."

"Which isn't really black," I said. "Whatever. Come on. Let's see if she went in there."

The only way to get into the tower seemed to be from the two-story white building next door. We snuck up to the door and tried to open it. Locked. A little bit further down we found a partially open window. No way would an adult be able to squeeze through there, but two twelve-year-old kids could. I looked at Maggie and she nodded.

She pulled her long black hair back into a ponytail, then bent down on hands and knees so I could stand on her back. After wiggling my body through the small opening, I fell on the floor

inside, and then found a chair to put under the window so I could stand on it and pull Maggie through.

Once in, we examined the room. A modern desk complete with a high-tech computer stood along the left wall, and two fancy red chairs and a small round table sat alongside the other.

“Let’s go.” Maggie moved through a doorway into the next room. “I have a feeling she went this way.”

“You have a feeling?” I followed closely behind her. We were both sneaking around like the way they did in cartoons, although somehow, I doubted that made us any more invisible.

“Call it woman’s intuition.”

“Great. Considering you’re still just a *girl*, I’m not getting my hopes up too high.”

She turned around, giving me an evil glare. I started to grin then stopped when the look of evil began turning into anger. At dinner yesterday, Maggie had warned me about her temper.

“I’m just kidding,” I said quickly. “You’re probably right. Check it out.”

I pointed to a giant steel door in front of us. It had an ultra-modern electronic lock, the kind with a numbered keypad, and some type of scanner. The Black Tower had to be on the other side.

Maggie calmed down the moment she saw the door. “How do you suppose she got inside?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Suddenly, the sound of a door opening behind us stopped our conversation. Two men’s voices came from the other room, and they were getting closer.

“Hide!” I whispered and dove behind a black leather swivel recliner. Maggie crawled underneath the desk next to the steel door.

The voices grew louder and the two men walked into the room. They were speaking loudly to each other in Czech. Why did everyone in Slavic countries always sound like they were yelling

at each other when they spoke? For a moment I wondered if that was what Americans sounded like to them. Then the fear of getting caught returned. I watched their feet from underneath the recliner. Their black shoes were shiny and the bottoms of their pants seemed like they were probably part of a uniform. Great, I was about to be arrested by the Czech police. I contemplated how many years I'd get for trespassing, and if they served peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in Czech prisons.

It sounded like one of the two men punched in the electronic code. I took a chance and snuck a peek. The man raised his right thumb and pushed it onto the scanner. The door clicked opened. I ducked down again and saw one set of feet disappear through the doorway while the other set remained in the room. The steel door closed slowly and an eternity passed. Well, maybe only about two minutes. Then it opened again and the two feet walked back out. The men resumed their conversation and left the room. Another thirty seconds and I heard the sound of a door from the next room opening and closing. Then, silence.

I crawled away from the safety of the swivel chair. The building was empty again. "Maggie? You okay?"

"Better than okay." She sprang up from underneath the desk. "We got our way in."

She smiled broadly as she bent down to show me the ruler she had wedged into the doorway, blocking the steel door from closing all the way. I recognized the ruler from our lessons earlier. She must have had it in her backpack.

"Genius," I commended her. She was one smart kid.

Pushing the door open, she motioned for me to follow her inside. Once in, she put the ruler back down so we'd be able to get out.

We studied our new surroundings. An old stone staircase wound up the center, and on either side were dozens of tiny rooms with no windows. The ones we could see were filled with boxes and filing cabinets.

Maggie flipped through her notebook. “The Black Tower was used mostly as a prison back in the day.”

I started climbing the staircase. “That explains the tiny rooms and no bathrooms.”

“Um, eww.” Maggie closed her notebook and followed me. “Now they just use it to store archeological things.”

“Like Indiana Jones stuff?” I looked back at her.

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, like Indiana Jones stuff, except *real*.”

Our footsteps made no noise on the stone staircase. We climbed about six or seven floors then stopped to catch our breath. I looked down at Maggie, two steps away from me, when I noticed a small body topped with blonde hair coming out of one of the rooms about twenty steps below us.

“Ivana!” I yelled and pointed.

Maggie whirled around in time to catch the blue-eyed spy look up, and surprised to see us, take off down the stairs.

We ran down the old staircase as fast as we could without falling, but the Russian girl was faster. By the time we got to the bottom floor, she was standing in the doorway holding up the ruler. Maggie and I froze.

Ivana studied us curiously, then smiled. “I did not know the CIA had a P-CIA,” she said in her thick Russian accent. “But no matter, you are no match for the P-KGB.”

With that, the blonde spy hopped through the opening, slamming the door on her way out. Maggie and I ran to the giant steel door and tried to open it, but it was locked tight. The electronic key pad and fingerprint scan made it impossible for us to even try to hack through. We pounded and yelled for help, but it was no use. We were stuck inside the Black Tower.

Maggie whipped out her cell phone. No service. She closed it and turned to me, her face bright red. “She stole my ruler.” She took in a deep breath to help calm the anger.

I ran my fingers through my hair, totally freaking out. This was a catastrophe. We snuck into a secret, Czech government building and managed to get ourselves trapped. Once the guys in uniform came back, we’d be found, arrested, and in a heap of trouble. Slumping down on the floor, I leaned my head back against the door. “How am I ever going to explain this to Dad? He’s gonna kill me.”

Maggie sat down next to me. “No he’s not.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because my mom will kill us first. We were supposed to meet her in front of the gift shop five minutes ago. She’s probably out there right now wondering where we’re at. And if you think *my* temper is bad...” Her voice trailed off, but I got the point.

I closed my eyes. My mind flashed back to yesterday when I first saw the blonde Russian spy. I should’ve realized she was trouble from the moment I met her.

Dad worked as a “computer tech” for the CIA. Whenever the US government had “computer problems” overseas, they called in my dad to help. At least that’s the story he told me. But, I knew better. Dad was some kind of spy, no doubt about it. He simply wasn’t allowed to tell me. So I

played along. Ms. Hernandez was my new tutor, hired by the CIA so Dad didn't have to send me off to school. I just met her, and her twelve-year-old-daughter, Maggie, here in Prague a couple days ago.

Yesterday morning, we were all standing outside the Ruzyne-Prague Airport, waiting for our ride to pick us up. Dad kept running his hands through his dark brown hair and rubbing the sides of his gold wire-rimmed glasses, things he only did when he was totally stressing out. Whatever was going on in Prague had to be really bad.

Bored out of my skull, I decided to abandon my group to go use the bathroom. I was just about to walk into the men's room when a hand grabbed my arm and spun me around. The person staring at me was most definitely the prettiest girl I had ever seen in my life. She looked to be about the same age as me, and her blue eyes shimmered under the lights of the airport. Pale blonde hair fell over her left shoulder.

“Моё судно на воздушной подушке полно угрей.”

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. “What?”

She looked at me with an equally confused expression.

“I'm sorry,” I said and grinned. “I don't speak...whatever you speak. Do you know English?”

She seemed disappointed. Her forehead creased. “Sorry,” she said with a strong accent. “My problem. I mistook you for someone else.”

“Oh. My name's JJ. What's yours?” I gave a half-smile and nodded once, trying to look as cool as possible.

She studied me for a moment, like she was unsure what to do. The smell of flowery perfume floated into my nostrils, sending my head spinning. “Ivana,” she said after a pause and

flashed me a half-smile in return. Before I could say another word, she turned and disappeared into the crowd.

When I walked out of the bathroom a few minutes later, I noticed Ivana talking to some other kid. He was about my height, with brown hair just like mine. Only difference was he had green eyes instead of my dull brown. The two of them glanced over at me and started laughing. As they turned away arm in arm, Ivana glimpsed back at me for a moment, then the two of them vanished into the masses.

Now that same good-looking, blue-eyed girl had deliberately locked me in an old prison to die, or worse, to answer to my dad. I sighed, opening my eyes again. Note to self: learn how to read people better. Pretty does not always equal nice.

Maggie flipped through her notes. “The Black Tower got its name from a big fire they had in 1541. I guess the walls were black for a long time and the name just kind of stuck.”

I wasn’t really in the mood for a history lesson—actually, I was never in the mood for a history lesson—but right now, it was just comforting to hear her voice. At least I wasn’t stuck in here alone.

Maggie’s previous words echoed in my mind... *and if you think my temper is bad*. I shook my head, trying to clear the images of what Ms. Hernandez and my dad were going to do to us. Time for a distraction before I went completely mental. “Okay, Maggie, since we’re stuck in here anyway, let’s go check out the room Ivana was in. Maybe we can get some idea of what she was doing in here.”

My friend agreed and we climbed back up the old staircase and found the door we had seen the Russian girl walk out of. Luckily, it wasn't locked. We entered the room and flipped on the light switch. The place was small with a low ceiling and filled with bookshelves, each lined with books of all shapes and sizes. Some were bound in leather, some in paper, but they all had one thing in common—they were covered in a heavy layer of dust. It smelled stuffy, like my Grandma's old attic.

Maggie's eyes scanned the hundreds of books. "How do we know what she was looking for?" She began walking around.

I bit my lip in thought. Then, it hit me. "Don't touch anything!"

She froze. "Why not?"

I walked over to one of the bookshelves and pointed. "Look at the dust. It doesn't seem like anyone's been in this place in years."

"No one but our dear Russian friend."

I nodded. "Exactly. So, all we have to do is find a shelf where the dust looks like it's been messed up, like a book has been moved."

We split up, searching each bookshelf carefully, trying not to move any dust around. Finally, Maggie let out a squeal of delight. "Over here!"

She pointed to a shelf where one of the books had obviously been dragged out of its place and returned.

I took the book out carefully. It had a dark red leather cover and wasn't very thick. My index finger traced the gold embroidered words on the front. "*The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka."

Maggie glanced over my shoulder at the cover. “I wonder why the Russians are so interested in it. I bet you could pick it up at a library or find it online.”

I shrugged. “Maybe there’s something special about this particular copy.” I skimmed through it. Other than the fact that the pages were kind of yellow, it seemed normal, just like any other book. I flipped back to the inside cover. There was an inscription.

“What does it say?” Maggie asked.

The black ink of the writing was pretty faded, but it was in English.

Dearest Josef, May the blessings of the saints enrich you. Look to Phillip’s hand and Bartholomew’s hat for help. From the hands of the devil may you flourish. With love and flimflam, Kangsly.

I looked at Maggie. “Who’s Josef?”

She shrugged. “Who’s Kangsly? And what the heck is a flimflam?” She took out her notebook and copied the inscription word for word. Later we could do a search on the net and see if we could figure out who these people were. Assuming, of course, we weren’t lined up in front of a firing squad hired by our parents.

After carefully putting the book back, we walked down the stairs and banged on our prison door a few more times, yelling at the top of our lungs. Nothing. We finally sat down, our backs against the giant steel door, waiting for the arrest we knew would come.