

Chapter 1

Heart racing, I sped through Berlin's Tegel Airport. She was there. I just knew it.

"JJ!" Maggie called out behind me.

Ignoring her, I continued my search for the beautiful blonde Russian spy. I stopped just outside the automatic doors and looked frantically at the long trail of taxis in front of me. As the warm weather enveloped me, my heart fell. I was too late. She was gone.

A hand pulled on the back of my hoodie. "Jeremiah Ethan Bennett, Junior. What the heck is wrong with you?"

I turned to face Maggie as she let go of me. "Sorry. I didn't mean to ditch you like that. But, I swear I saw Ivana running through the airport. I tried following, but she got away."

Maggie's eyes narrowed. "Seriously, JJ? This is like the second time in two days that you swear you saw her. First at the Heathrow Airport in London, and now here." She shook her head. "There's a term for this. It's called a hallucination." Her dark brown eyes shimmered in the sun. "Face it. You want to see her again so badly, you're starting to imagine things."

My face felt hot. "That's not true. Ivana was here. I know it."

She rolled her eyes.

My father and Maggie's mom, Ms. Hernandez, joined us, pulling our luggage behind them.

"Where'd you two run off to?" Dad asked as he placed my suitcase next to me. "I didn't want to try and explain to the police how we lost two twelve-year-old kids at the airport."

"It's my fault, Dad." I took off my hoodie and unzipped the front of my suitcase to stuff it inside. "I thought I saw Billy Johnson walking outside. It wasn't him, though."

I hated lying to my father, but when you're an undercover spy, it's one of those things you just have to do.

Dad frowned. "Billy Johnson? The kid that lives in Pahrump, up the street from Grandma's?"

I grinned. "Yep. Wouldn't that have been the trippiest thing ever? Running into a kid from our hometown out here in Berlin, Germany?"

He ruffled my hair. "Definitely would've been...trippy." He laughed, but I noticed a look of concern in his eyes. Dad worried about me because I didn't have a lot of friends. Ever since Grandma died a year ago, I'd been traveling with him.

My father worked for the Central Intelligence Agency, supposedly as a computer tech sent to embassies overseas to solve their computer problems. But, I knew the truth. He was a CIA investigator deployed to different cities to uncover the source of the Agency's problems. Since the "tech" story allowed me to travel with him, I played along. I didn't tell my dad I knew his secret, and I didn't tell him about mine.

I pointed at the sign hanging near one of the doors. "Polizei? I hope that's German for Polish sausage, because I'm starving."

Maggie shook her head. "Polizei means police, moron."

A twinkle shone in Ms. Hernandez' eyes. "If you dedicated yourself as much to your studies as you did to your meals, you would be fluent in more than just English. Perhaps some additional lessons in foreign language would be helpful."

I groaned and everyone laughed.

Ms. Hernandez was the toughest tutor on the planet. If she could cram any extra lessons into our daily routine, she would.

“Man, I can’t wait to get to the hotel.” I moved toward the back of the taxi line. “I totally need some massive foodage.”

“Actually, JJ,” Dad said and gestured for me to get out of line, “we’re getting picked up by a friend of mine. He’s a diplomat at the British Embassy here in Berlin. In fact, I think that’s him now.”

A beautiful black Rolls Royce limo pulled up to the curb in front of us. The back door opened and a tall, thin man with wavy blond hair stepped out and waved at us.

“Glad to see you made it, Jeremiah,” he said with a British accent as the chauffeur began loading our luggage into the trunk.

“Nigel.” Dad extended his hand to the tall man. “It’s good to see you.” After shaking hands, he pointed at us. “Mr. Nigel Taylor, I’d like to introduce you to my son, Jeremiah Junior, or JJ as he prefers to be called, his friend, Maggie, and her mother, Maria Hernandez.”

“Pleasure,” he said and gave us a short nod. “Welcome to Berlin. Shall we?” He motioned for us to enter the car.

I got in first and noticed it had two bench seats facing each other. A blond-haired boy about my age sat at the end of the back seat.

“Hello.” He gave me a quick wave.

“Hey.” I moved across the other seat so I sat right in front of him.

Maggie came in and sat next to me. She saw the boy and her eyebrows shot up.

He smiled. “And hello to you, pretty lady.”

Maggie opened her mouth and nothing came out. I stared at her, surprised. Maggie was never speechless. Ever. If anything, I could never get her to shut up.

After the adults sat down, Nigel pointed at the boy. "I'd like to introduce you all to my son, William. He's staying with me for a spell while he's on holiday from school. Son, this is Mr. Bennett, Ms. Hernandez, Maggie, and JJ."

"Pleasure to meet you all," he said and reached over and shook each of our hands.

While the adults started some conversation about the weather, William asked us about any movies we'd watched lately.

I told him about the new Disney flick we'd just seen.

He nodded. "Yes, that one was smashing. Have you seen the trailer for *Avalanche Alley*? It looks brilliant."

Maggie giggled.

I gave her a *what's wrong with you* look before answering, "Yeah, it does seem pretty cool."

"Listen, kids," Dad cut into our conversation. "The driver's going to drop myself and Nigel off at the British Embassy and then take you all over to the hotel."

Nigel turned to his son. "Make sure they get checked-in and then hurry back. It's getting a tad late, and I want you home before they lock the front doors."

"Yes, sir."

It took less than twenty minutes to get to the embassy. As we got close, I noticed a bunch of short, fat poles jutting up from the ground keeping us from pulling the car up to the front doors.

"They're for security," Nigel explained. "The pollards are retractable in case anyone of importance should visit."

Dad laughed. "I guess that means we're getting dropped off way out here."

“Sorry, Old Boy.” Nigel grinned. “That’s the breaks.”

As the two of them got out of the limo, I studied the outside of the embassy. Talk about weird looking. The top third appeared normal, like any other tan brick building, with windows all the way across. The bottom third also appeared normal, tan-marbled bricks from one side to the other, except where giant metal and glass gate doors, probably fifteen feet high, guarded the entrance. A coat of arms hung on the wall to the left of the doors, and the words *British Embassy* were engraved in the bricks.

But, the center third of the building was seriously bizarre, like somebody carved out the entire middle and replaced it with...stuff. To the left, and above the entrance gate, stood a blue box with windows all the way around. It reminded me of an observation deck, but why would anyone put an observation deck smack in the middle of a building? Wouldn’t it be better up at the top?

Next to the weird blue box lay a wide column of gray tiles supporting the pole that held the British flag. To the right of the flag pole was a giant, round, purple cylinder with no windows.

Seriously, the place looked like a middle school art class designed it.

The expression on my face must have given away my thoughts because Ms. Hernandez said, “This embassy is fairly new. Originally, this had been the palace of Bethel Henry Strousberg, a railway magnate. The British Embassy used this structure until the beginning of World War II. After the war, Germany and Berlin were split and Bonn became the new capital of West Germany, thus Britain moved their embassy there. Once the two Germanys reunited in nineteen-ninety, they relocated back here, to Berlin. The new building was designed by English architect Michael Wilford. It opened in the year two thousand.”

Way more information than I needed to know.

With the two men gone, William moved over so he sat in the middle of the seat facing us, right in front of Maggie. “How long will you be in Berlin?” He looked at Maggie who turned a slight shade of red.

Ms. Hernandez answered the question. “That all depends on how much work your father has for Mr. Bennett.”

“Hm.” William strummed his chin with his fingers. “I believe I may have to start sabotaging a few things around here.”

Maggie giggled.

It finally hit me why she’d been acting so weird. She was seriously crushing on William.

I narrowed my eyes and studied him, hard. He seemed average size, like me, but with blond wavy hair, green eyes, and a few freckles spread out across his cheeks. He wore regular jeans and a green polo, but looked like a Gap model for a TV commercial.

Leaning back, I listened as he told Ms. Hernandez about his father’s job as a diplomat. His accent worried me. Chicks dug accents, and by the way Maggie acted, she was already totally into him. Not good. We didn’t know anything about him. And, knowing Maggie, she’d want to tell him everything about the K-CIA and what we do. That could put our whole operation in danger. I crossed my arms and glared at him.

We reached the hotel and William led us into the lobby while the chauffer handled our luggage. As Ms. Hernandez went to the front desk to check us in, the three of us sat on a sofa.

I took a quick survey of the hotel. Compared to others we’d stayed at, this one seemed pretty small. The lobby had a gift shop and a business center on one side, and windows with

couches around the rest of it. The front desk only had room for two agents, and the bell desk sat next to it.

William took a pad from the nearby table and pulled out a pen from his pocket. He scribbled something down and handed it to Maggie. “Here’s my mobile number. Give me a ring if you get bored. Perhaps we can go to the cinema together.”

Maggie’s face lit up. “Yeah, definitely. I’ll call you. I mean, we’ll call you and hook up. I mean...” Her voice trailed off and she bit her lip, looking very uncomfortable.

William stood and smiled. “I look forward to it.” He glanced at his watch. “Off I go. Dad throws a wobbly if I get back after they’ve locked the front gates.”

I frowned. Throws a wobbly? British kids speak weird.

“Bye,” Maggie said and waved.

After we watched him walk out the front doors, I turned to Maggie. “I don’t trust him.”

She frowned. “We just met him.”

“I’m just saying, we don’t know anything about him, so before you go getting all googly-eyed and run off to elope, we should find out more about him and his fancy accent.”

Her eyebrows knit and she crossed her arms. “JJ, are you jealous?” She sounded annoyed.

My eyes widened. “What? No! But, you’re my best friend, and I don’t want to see you fall for some smooth-talking British guy who steals girls’ hearts and then turns them into mindless zombies before casting them off into the wild. All I’m saying is that we should get to know him a little better first. That’s all.”

She raised her hands in a stop motion. “Hold on. I’m supposed to take dating advice from you? Okay, let me remind you about the girl you’re head-over-heals for. First of all, she’s a

Russian spy, working for an organization that's trying to destroy the United States. She's drugged you, planted a bug on you, and, oh yeah, she trapped you in a tomb and left you there to die. Is that the kind of guy I should be waiting for, because I'm pretty sure William is none of those things?"

Ms. Hernandez walked up to us carrying hotel keys in her hands. "Are you two ready to go to our rooms?"

Maggie stood. "I am *so* ready."

As we made our way toward the elevator, I thought about everything Maggie said. She was right. Ivana did try to kill me, more than once, and she did work for an evil organization bent on conquering the world. But, there was just something about her. Something...magical.

I sighed as we stepped into the elevator. Maybe that's how Maggie felt about William.

We exited onto the third floor and Ms. Hernandez handed me a key card. "Here is your room key, JJ. Unfortunately, they didn't have two rooms close together, so we are on opposite sides of the hallway." She pointed to the right. "Get settled, and we'll come pick you up in a half hour for dinner."

I headed to my new temporary home, the last room on the right, which turned out to be nicer than I thought. It had a small kitchen and a table for eating, a decent-size living room area with a big flat screen hanging on the wall, and two separate bedrooms, a larger one that I would leave for my dad, and a smaller one, still bigger than the room I had as a kid growing up. The décor and furniture were modern, with lots of bright colors and shiny surfaces, and the entire hotel room smelled like flowers.

A knock on the door took me out of my thoughts. The bellman brought in my suitcase, and after he left, I rolled the bag into my bedroom and dropped it on the floor. Ms. Hernandez

had said to get settled in, but I really didn't feel like it. We'd probably be here for at least a few days, so I'd have plenty of time to unpack. Instead, I pulled the comforter back and plopped down on the bed.

After a few minutes, my phone beeped. The text came from Maggie saying that William had invited us to go see *Avalanche Alley* later tonight. Her mom had said it would be okay since William had a driver.

I rolled my eyes. *William had a driver*. I guess that made him like the coolest guy in the world or something. Of course, this would probably be the only chance I'd get to see the movie, so I texted back that it sounded great.

Within a half-hour, Ms. Hernandez knocked on the door and the three of us headed out to the restaurant. This was my favorite part of traveling to new cities. I loved trying new foods.

The smell of cooked meat overpowered the air as we walked into the restaurant. Good sign. We sat down and the waitress handed me a menu which, thankfully, had food names and descriptions in both German and English. I ordered *schnitzel*, a boneless cut of meat coated with breadcrumbs and fried, and *kartoffelpuffer*, potato pancakes. No matter what, I knew I couldn't go wrong with meat and potatoes.

Maggie ordered the same as me and her mom ordered something called *sauerbraten*, which she said was one of the country's national dishes.

The food came about twenty minutes later and did not disappoint. The meat was super thin and huge, it covered more than half my plate, and the potato pancakes weren't like pancakes at all, but more like a round dense hash brown patty type of thing, seasoned with onions and spices. Super good. I could've eaten like fifty of them.

After dinner, we headed back to the hotel and Ms. Hernandez left us in the lobby, reminding us to thank William for picking us up. After she left, Maggie turned to me.

“Are you sure you’re okay with us going to the movies with William? I know you think he’s like the spawn of the devil or something.”

I cringed a little. “I know, I know. I over-reacted. I just...there he is.”

William walked through the front doors and waved at us, a huge grin on his face.

Maggie beamed as he joined us. I wondered if that’s how I looked every time I saw Ivana.

“Are you two set to go?” he asked.

We both nodded and he motioned for us to follow him.

Maggie turned to me and muttered under her breath, “Be nice.”

Like I wasn’t going to be? I may not trust the guy but he was still the son of my dad’s friend. It’s not like I could be rude to him. Dad would kill me.

As we reached the car, I nodded my approval. Though not a Rolls Royce limo like the last one, it was still a Lincoln Town Car. All three of us fit comfortably in the back seat with Maggie in the middle.

As the driver pulled away from the hotel, William picked up a bag from the floor.

“Do you have video game hook-up on the telly in your room?”

I nodded. “Yeah, the TV in our living room has one.”

“Brilliant,” he said. “Then perhaps you’d be interested in this.” He pulled out a video game and handed it to Maggie.

My jaw dropped and I snatched it from her hands. “No...way. *Aliens and Zombies Four*? But, this doesn’t come out for another month.”

William grinned. “Dad has connections.”

Forget everything I ever said about William before. Maggie needed to marry this guy. Immediately. I traced the cover of the game with my fingers before placing it gently inside the bag. “William, you rock.”

Maggie glowed. I knew her well enough to know she was throwing me her *I told you so* look.

“Master William,” the chauffer called from the front seat. “It appears the street in front of the theater is closed to traffic.”

“Just drop us off here,” William said. “We can walk the rest of the way. I’ll text when the show is over.”

“Very good, sir.”

The driver pulled to the side, let us out, then moved back into traffic and left us there.

I was about to say something about the video game when, suddenly, everything went dark. Somebody had slammed a heavy bag over my head. I tried to protest but strong hands grabbed my arms and lifted me up. From the side, I heard Maggie scream.

Struggling, I felt myself get thrown onto the floor of a vehicle. Two loud thumps sounded next to me, probably Maggie and William, and then a door slammed shut. If I had to make a guess, I’d say we were in the back of a giant van. Wheels screeched and we were on the move.

Panic gripped me. We were being kidnapped, and I had no idea why!