

**MARK A PRYOR**



**NOBLE PHOENIX**

**An International Thriller**





# Noble Phoenix

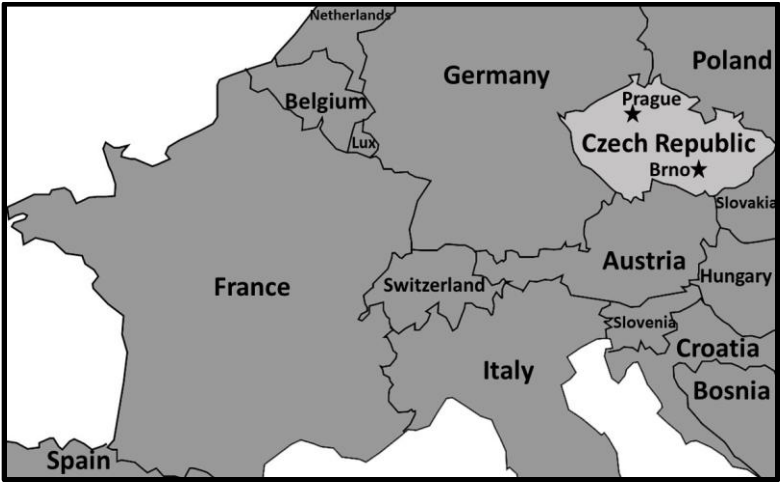
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Mark Pryor  
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# Rite of Passage



# 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.*

# Noble Phoenix

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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!*

# Desperation

## Chapter 2

### 1999 - Brno, Czech Republic

Nine months later, Eduard Prazsky sat beside his wife, Magda, in Doctor Logan's office at the Moravia Fertility Clinic. The availability of discarded embryos made this the perfect location for Logan's research.

Eduard brushed a stray lock of brown hair from his wife's face and whispered, "I love you." She looked so beautiful, so hopeful — so determined. A highly-respected cardiologist, she had reached out to her American colleagues for advice on treating Viktor. One of them told her about the experimental use of stem cells. Before long, she came up with a plan.

Eduard had agreed with his wife, gambling their son's future and his family fortune on the promises of Doctor Logan. All because of two violent degenerates, inspired by hate, who nearly killed his only child, Viktor. *Those bastards should be dead—not just rotting in prison.*

The doctor arrived and settled behind the desk facing them. "Good morning," he said, speaking English with a strong Scottish accent. "I hope you haven't been waiting long."

*English.* One more reason Eduard didn't trust this man. Any doctor working in the Czech Republic should learn the language.

Despite his wife's optimism, Eduard saw no progress. "What's happening to Viktor? Why do the tumors keep coming back?"

Logan glanced briefly at Magda before focusing on Eduard. "I know this is frustrating, Mister Prazsky." He leaned forward and placed both hands flat on the desk. "The stem cells we injected are creating new nerve cells in his brain, but sometimes they also create teratomas — tumors. This time there's only one small tumor, and Doctor Kaplan will remove it with radiosurgery. No knife."

“That’s what you told us last time,” Eduard said. “He’s not getting better. The stem cells are killing him.”

Doctor Logan ran his hand through his thinning hair. “We’re fortunate Viktor survived the attack. Even though the knife penetrated deeply into his brain, it didn’t affect any life-sustaining functions. Nevertheless, without these cell replacement treatments, he’ll be permanently disabled.”

It was true. Their son had been lucky — miraculously lucky. The doctors in Prague had brought him back from almost certain death. Eduard and his wife had called Viktor their phoenix — until the extent of his injuries became clear.

Magda held her husband’s hand on her lap, and looked at him with her deep blue eyes. “Please, dear. It does no good to second-guess our decision.”

Eduard relaxed at her touch. He knew his wife understood this much better than him, even though it wasn’t her specialty. “I don’t know—”

Magda didn’t wait for him to finish. “We knew Viktor had no chance for a normal life unless we tried this. We took a gamble ... a serious gamble. No one has ever done this before. Doctor Logan is taking a big risk with us. He could lose his license, even go to jail.”

“Your wife is right, Mister Prazsky. It’s still early in his treatment, and I believe this is working. But I can’t offer any guarantees.”

Eduard sat back in his chair and let out a breath. “I know you’re right, but this seems so ghoulish. Viktor just lies there, doesn’t open his eyes, and doesn’t respond when we talk to him. A few months ago, he was a normal teenager. He laughed. He played football.” Eduard choked back tears. “Our son doesn’t even smile.”

Magda squeezed her husband’s hand. “Doctor, we’re both worried about Viktor’s progress. How soon before we see some response? How many more treatments are required?”

“I plan to grow enough stem cells for two more treatments. I wish I could tell you how soon he’ll be responsive, but we are in uncharted territory here. There are no past cases to go on.”

The door opened, and the faint sound of yells and chants of an angry crowd interrupted their conversation. Most of the sounds were unintelligible, but two words stood out — ‘baby’ and ‘kill’.

A nurse stepped in. “Doctor Logan. There’s a rowdy group of people at the front desk demanding to talk to you. Shall I call the police?”

He looked at the nurse. “No, Dana. Tell them I’ll be right out.” Logan looked at the Prazskys. “Sorry for the interruption, but there are people who don’t approve of our work at the fertility clinic. This shouldn’t take long.” Logan left the Prazskys alone in his office.

Eduard turned to his wife. “Are we fooling ourselves? Does Viktor have a chance?”

Magda pulled a hanky from her purse and brushed it under her nose. “Our son doesn’t stand a chance without this treatment — none. Very few people understand stem cells, but Doctor Logan does. He’s the only one willing to treat Viktor.”

“It feels wrong. We’ve given him millions of crowns. Hundreds of millions. And we can’t tell anyone about the treatments, even though Viktor lies there lifeless. How do we know Logan’s not just swindling us?”

“I don’t think—”

A loud bang interrupted them.

“Gunfire!” Eduard said. “Quick. Behind the desk.”

Magda grabbed her husband’s arm and crouched beside him. “The door isn’t locked.” Her grip tightened. “They can get in here.”

Eduard nodded and started to rise.

Three more shots. Screams.

His wife pulled him down. “No! It’s not worth the risk. Stay here with me.”

Rapid footsteps approached. Maybe only one person, certainly not a crowd.

Dana flung open the door. "Doctor Prazsky!"

Magda poked her head above the desk. "What happened?"

Dana's voice shook as she rocked from one foot to the other. "Doctor Logan's been shot. I think he's dead."

"Where's the shooter?" Eduard asked, moving from behind the desk.

Dana started to cry. "Everyone ran away ... Please help him."

Magda ran toward the door.

Eduard followed her.

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The following afternoon in their hotel room, Magda dropped the phone and collapsed on the couch. She didn't sleep last night. Doctor Logan was dead. The police had questioned everybody in the clinic, and they asked more questions this morning. Then she pleaded over the phone with Doctor Kaplan at the clinic.

She turned to her husband, tears in her eyes. "Viktor's treatments are over."

Eduard sat beside her and held her hand. "How can they do that? Didn't Logan train anyone?"

"He didn't share his research or methods with anyone. He was afraid he'd be arrested for treating Viktor."

"What about Doctor Kaplan?"

To Magda, this was obvious, but her husband wasn't a doctor. "Kaplan is a neurosurgeon. He doesn't know anything about stem cells."

"He knows what Logan was doing, doesn't he?"

"He claims he has no idea." Magda let out a sigh and shook her head. "He's full of shit. He knows what was going on, but he doesn't want anyone else to know."

"Can't we force him to help Viktor? Would money help?"

Magda stood up and hugged him. Her husband was used to solving problems with money, but she knew it wouldn't work this time. "He can't help." Then she broke down and wept.

Eduard held her until the tears stopped, then brushed the hair from her face and kissed her.

Grateful for the loving support of her husband, she looked into his dark eyes. "You don't understand, do you?"

He shook his head.

Magda looked down at her feet. "Doctor Kaplan can't give Viktor the treatments. No one can." Slowly, she raised her head and stared at the ceiling, tilting her head slightly.

"What are you thinking?" Eduard asked. "I recognize that look."

A weak smile formed on her face. She paced around the room slowly, rubbing her neck. Finally, she sat in a chair. "He's already had five treatments. That might be enough."

"You really think so? Why isn't he better?"

"If Viktor's body has accepted enough stem cells, they're already creating new neurons."

"What do we do now? Just sit around and wait for him to get better?"

"Let's get Doctor Kaplan to remove this tumor, then we can take Viktor back to Prague. I work with several doctors who can deal with teratomas. Logan said he's still at risk. If any tumors appear, the doctors in Prague can remove them."

"Don't they need to know about stem cells?"

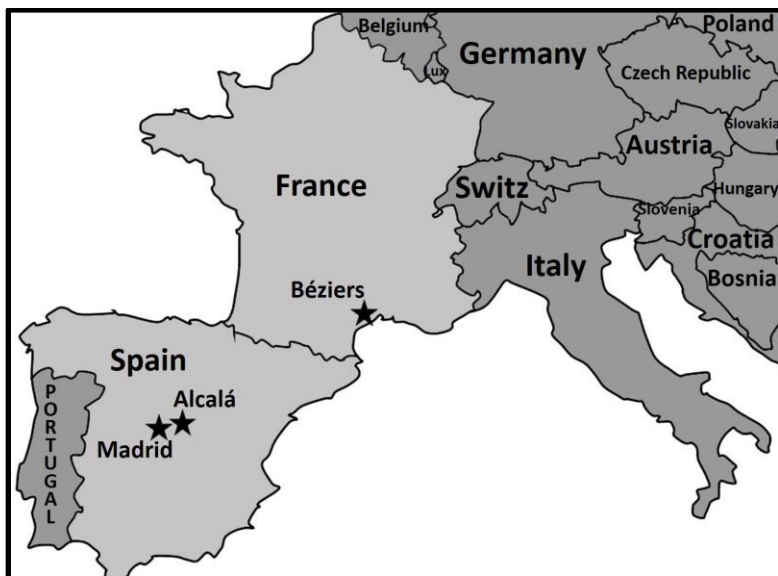
"No, they don't. Besides, this treatment isn't approved for clinical trials. We could get in trouble."

As a police officer, Eduard knew the risk. "You're right. I think we should keep this a secret ... forever."



# Madrid

## Chapter 3



### 2004 - Alcalá, Spain

Even though the cell replacement treatments ended five years ago, Viktor's health and quality of life steadily improved. It was truly a miracle, one worthy of celebration, but behind it all was a secret that could ruin his family. His parents paid for an illegal medical procedure. They broke the law.

This morning, Viktor completed a series of medical tests at Alcalá University Hospital, near Madrid. After lunch, his parents accompanied him to the office of Doctor Moreno, the most respected neurologist in Spain.

As they pulled up to the curb, Viktor reminded himself to use the name Oliver Klima, the false identity for his medical appointments. He

hated the deception, but he knew there was a risk the doctors could discover his illegal treatments, putting his parents in jeopardy.

Viktor stepped out of the taxi and opened the door for his mother.

Magda reached for her son's hand and winked. "You're looking handsome today, *Oliver*."

"Thank you, Mother." Viktor helped her out of the car.

They entered the modern three-story office building and headed for the elevator. Viktor knew his way. He had been coming here for two years. This was his fourth visit, and he hoped it would be his last.

The 'Klima family' arrived in the reception area and were directed to the doctor's office where a gray-haired man, wearing a white lab coat, met them at the door. "*Buenas tardes*."

Magda responded in English. "It's good to see you again, Doctor Moreno."

The doctor directed them to the chairs in front of his desk while he took the seat behind it. He glanced at his computer. "I have your test results, Oliver." He looked at Magda and continued, "If you have any questions, Doctor Klima, let me know."

Moreno glanced at the file. "Let me begin with Oliver's vision."

Viktor pointed to the small black patch covering his left eye. His curly black hair was long enough to cover the remaining scar on his temple. "I see nothing with this eye."

The doctor nodded. "The damage to your optic nerve blocks the information between your left eye and your brain. But, you seem to have adapted well to the limitations of your vision."

Viktor's blind eye never improved after the attack, and he had difficulty judging distances with a single functioning eye. Despite this, his parents always requested tests, hoping the stem cells could produce another miracle.

He rubbed his scar. Something he often did when nervous. "I see well enough, but I hate it when people stare at my patch."

“I’m sure your friends and family are used to it. Would you prefer they look at your lazy eye?”

Viktor shook his head and looked at his father. “No, it looks creepy. I prefer the patch.”

Eduard spoke up. “He’s had eye muscle repair surgery. Both eyes moved together properly for a while, but within a few months they lost the synchronous movement.”

The doctor nodded. “That’s a common problem with complete vision loss in the eye.”

“What about the MRI?” asked Magda.

Moreno turned the computer screen so Viktor and his parents could view it. He pointed with his pen. “On this image, you can see the empty area on the left where the injury occurred. That area is smaller than it was on the scans from previous years.”

Viktor studied the image. It was comforting to know the stem cells were still working to heal his brain, but they couldn’t let the doctor know the reason for this miraculous growth. Fortunately, his mother knew how to handle this.

Magda nodded. “You mentioned this during our last appointment, but you said we should wait to see how things developed over the next six months.”

“That’s right, and the damaged section has continued to shrink every six months since our first MRI. We don’t know if the same thing happened during the time Doctor Durant was treating Oliver. Those scans weren’t conclusive due to the surgical procedures he performed.”

*Durant.* He had been the French doctor Viktor first went to after the stem cell treatments ended. Four times during those three years, a tumor formed and he needed surgery. When Durant’s questions threatened to uncover the illegal treatments, his mother decided to change doctors.

Eduard shrugged his shoulders. “Is this a problem, Doctor? Isn’t it good to see the area of his injury shrink?”

“In any other part of the body, healing like that would be a good sign. But neurogenesis, the growth of healthy nerve cells, has never been observed in the temporal lobe of any adult brain. The good news is, we haven’t detected any growth of unhealthy nerve cells during the entire two years I’ve been seeing Oliver.”

*Nothing unhealthy.* That’s what Viktor wanted to hear. *Two years. Nothing wrong. No more tests!*

Magda took her husband’s hand and looked at the doctor. “Are you telling us Oliver has gone two years with no malignant growths, and you’re concerned because you suspect his brain is creating healthy cells?”

“That’s right. But this kind of new cell growth is unheard of, and I’d like to do some tests.”

Magda nodded and rose from the chair. “Thank you, Doctor. We’ll have to think this over. Could you give us copies of the results?”

Viktor and his father stood, preparing to leave.

“Certainly, Doctor Klima. The nurse will give them to you on your way out. But I need to tell you about the results of the electroencephalogram.”

“The EEG? Did you find something?” Magda took her seat again. Eduard and Viktor did the same.

“Oliver’s results are normal ... except for one thing. His brain waves have a higher amplitude than normal — about ten times the average person.”

This was nothing new to Viktor or his parents. Doctor Durant noticed this anomaly, too. His mother believed this was most likely a symptom of his newly acquired ability — one they must keep secret.”

He had first noticed this ability a year after a man plunged a knife into his head. Whenever Viktor’s mother was near him, he knew whether she was happy or sad. The same thing happened with his father, his friends — everyone. Eventually, he realized he was sensing other peoples’ feelings.

Magda raised her eyebrows. “You said Oliver’s EEG results are normal, but you’re concerned because his brain waves are stronger than expected?”

“That’s right. The brain consumes more energy than any other organ in the body. Oliver’s brain demands even more.”

“Is that a problem?”

“We can’t be sure without more testing.”

“More testing.” Magda frowned, then stood. “All right. If you think it’s required. We’ll set up an appointment with your receptionist.”

Viktor knew she would agree to the appointment, like she did with Doctor Durant. But he also knew they weren’t coming back. They’d never see Dr. Moreno again. To do so would only draw attention.

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A few hours later, two blocks from the university hospital, the Prazsky family finished dinner in their hotel and went upstairs for the night.

Viktor sat on his bed talking on the phone with Karla. The door leading to his parents’ adjoining room was closed. “We’re heading home tomorrow. I’ll be back at school on Friday.”

He had met Karla the previous fall, when they began their sophomore year at Charles University in Prague. Two months ago, in January, they started dating. They became almost inseparable, getting together or talking on the phone every day, sharing their dreams and aspirations.

There was one passion, however, that Viktor had never shared with Karla, and he wanted to tell her now. She knew he spent time at the gym, but he hadn’t explained what he did there. “I’m taking my black belt test next week. Would you like to come?”

“Black belt?” Karla sounded surprised. “You’re a black belt?”

“Taekwondo. It’s a Korean form of karate. I’ll be a black belt when I pass the test. People often bring their family and friends to watch.”

“That sounds exciting. When is it?”

“Wednesday evening. It’s at a gym close to Prague Castle.”

“I’d love to. Is the testing hard? Are you nervous?”

“I used to be nervous when I tested for lower-level belts, but not anymore. It’s just a matter of demonstrating what I’ve practiced.”

Viktor’s thoughts drifted back six years to the terrible day on the streets of Prague with Delia. That day he had been helpless against those men, and he never wanted to experience that again. When he started Taekwondo, the moves came easily to him, even though his non-functioning eye proved to be a challenge. His limited vision, however, was offset by the strength of his newly acquired sensitivity to emotions. He realized he could detect his opponent’s intentions almost before they did, making his defensive reflexes lightning fast. If anyone ever threatened Viktor today, he knew he could defend himself.

Karla’s voice brought him back to the present. “I can’t wait to see you do your karate stuff.”

Viktor heard the faint sound of a second female voice talking to Karla.

“My aunt just arrived. I gotta go. See you in school Friday.”

Ending the call, Viktor hopped off the bed and knocked on the door before walking into his parents room.

His mother turned to greet him. “You get taller every day, and better looking, too. I’m glad you could join us.”

Viktor plopped in an overstuffed chair and faced the television. “I’m packed, and it’s boring sitting in my room.”

“Make yourself comfortable,” his father said with a chuckle. “Did you lose your razor?”

“It’s the five o’clock shadow look, Father. Women love it.”

Magda rubbed Eduard’s cheek. “Not this woman. Too scratchy.” She turned back to her son. “How does Karla like it?”

“She thinks I’m hot.”

His father poured drinks, dark Alhambra lager for himself and Viktor, and a glass of An Tinto wine for Magda. “We have something to celebrate.”

They all raised their glasses.

Eduard offered a toast. “To our son. Two years. No tumors.”

Viktor took a drink, savoring the flavor, and set his glass on the coffee table. “No more tests. No more doctors.”

His mother smiled. “It’s a good idea to go for testing every five years or so, just to be sure.”

Viktor was a keen observer of body language. His mother’s smile was broad and genuine, showcasing her pearly white teeth. Her eyes were radiant. But he also sensed her emotions, something she didn’t show on her face. “You’re worried about my brain waves. The EEG results.”

“I can’t hide anything from you,” said his mother. “Even though you appear to be healthy, I worry. The doctor might be right. Your brain uses so much energy, it could be harming you.”

“You mean my headaches, don’t you?”

Eduard set his glass on the nightstand. “I’m no doctor, and I can see it. Those aren’t normal headaches.”

Viktor worried about it, too. Sometimes he got so dizzy he nearly passed out. “It only happens when I get upset. I’ve learned to control it.” There were also things he hadn’t told his parents, like how his vision often suffered — objects became blurry, and sometimes he saw double. The thought of losing sight in his only healthy eye was frightening.

His mother nodded. “I hope you’re right.”

Viktor looked at his father. “What is it? I can tell something’s bothering you.”

“That’s the problem. You can tell. You know too much about other peoples’ thoughts.” Eduard reached out and held Magda’s hand. “You can’t let anyone know what you’re capable of.”

“I don’t care what the EEG shows.” Viktor tugged nervously at the edge of his eye patch. “I can’t read minds.”

Magda looked at her son. “We never said you could read minds. But sensing someone else’s emotions is unusual.”

His father shook his head. “This is serious. Do you want people to be afraid of you? You scare the wrong people, and you could be locked up — or worse.”

Viktor didn’t share his father’s concern about sensing feelings. He stood up and scratched his scar. “I’m going to bed. What time is our flight tomorrow?”

“Eleven o’clock,” said his father. “But we need to catch the seven o’clock commuter train to Madrid. It’s a short walk to the train station, but we have to leave early.”

“Do they serve breakfast on the train?”

“We can get something at the station — maybe juice or a pastry. When we get to the airport, we’ll have time to eat a real meal.”

Magda took her husband’s hand. “Remember. We have a dinner date tomorrow night.”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Viktor. “March eleventh. Happy Anniversary in advance.”

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In the early morning, Viktor shoved his gloved left hand into the pocket of his winter coat as he pulled his luggage with the other. Alcalá Station was only a hundred meters away.

His father wrapped one arm around Magda as he pulled their bag with the other. “You’ll warm up once we get inside the station.”

“I know.” Magda wore a cashmere coat, with a scarf wrapped around most of her face. “Which train are we looking for?”

“There are a lot of trains to Madrid. We’re going to the same station we used yesterday on our way here — Atocha.”

Warm air welcomed them when they entered and headed toward the lighted board displaying train schedules. Viktor was still learning how to cope with his sensitivity to emotions. The man to his right was excited, but the woman with him was worried, and she held the hand of a young girl who was confused. Their emotions, as well as the emotions of everyone



else within a ten-meter circle, assaulted his mind from all directions, as though everyone was yelling at once.

He recognized the ‘emotional signatures’ of his parents, but the feelings of the strangers around him seemed to blend together. All except for one person whose emotions screamed for attention.

*Hatred.* He sensed intense feelings coming from someone in front of him. He studied the people until he was fairly certain he knew who it was.

He looked at his father and pointed ahead to the left, about two meters away. “The man with the blue hoodie is angry at everyone. More hate than I’ve ever felt before. And he’s struggling with a heavy gym bag.”

“He probably doesn’t like crowds. Keep moving. Tell me when you see which platform our train leaves on.”

“You don’t understand, Father. I’ve gotta stop him.”

Viktor’s sensitivity to feelings often proved to be an advantage, but it would be of no use in stopping this dangerous person. He’d have to intrude into the man’s emotions – another ability he acquired from his illegal medical treatment. It wouldn’t be easy. And then there were the headaches.

The man in the hoodie was close, but moving away. Viktor had to act fast. He focused on the strong hateful emotion, then he amplified the intensity and projected it back. He could sense the increase in hatred coming back from this man. It worked. Viktor had control.

He shifted the emotion from hate to fear and then terror. He concentrated on strengthening it as much as possible. Suddenly, pain struck Viktor like a hammer, right in the center of his forehead. It was the headache that always came, punishing him for his strong emotions. He wasn’t even sure if his efforts paid off.

Fortunately, they did. The man he targeted let out a scream, dropped his bag, and clutched his head with both hands.

Viktor’s eye moved from the man to the bag on the floor. Two wires, red and green, hung out of the side. Ignoring the pain in his head, he

shoved the suspicious satchel out of the man's reach with his foot, and yelled. "*¡Bomba!*"

He sensed his mother's fear, and saw it in her face. His mind must have affected her as well, but not as much as the man with the bomb.

Screams erupted from the crowd. Everyone tried to get away.

Eduard grabbed Magda by the arm and yelled, "Let's get out of here. Now!"

Viktor sensed the fear from his parents and the people nearby. *I did this. Caused their fear.* He concentrated on calming himself. As he did, his headache began to subside.

The man in the hoodie must have recovered as well. He leaned over and reached for the bag.

*The bomb!* Viktor raised his right knee, pivoted toward the man, and delivered a round kick to the elbow. *He won't pick it up now.* Momentum sent the man to the ground, falling on his injured arm.

Eduard grabbed Viktor. "Let's move!"

The shrill sound of a whistle announced the arrival of two police officers. One of them ran over to the man lying on the ground. The other one inspected the fallen gym bag.

Viktor's vision blurred and he felt dizzy. Nevertheless, he did his best to follow his parents as they moved away from the officers.

His father pointed to the overhead board. "There's ours — Atocha Station on platform two."

As they waited in line to access the platform, an official closed the gate.

"*Atención! Atención!*" a man's voice bellowed over the public-address system. "Alcalá de Henares Security orders everyone to leave the station immediately. All trains have been cancelled. Repeat. Everyone leave the station immediately."

Angry voices erupted throughout the station. Men and women turned toward the exits, pulling their children with them.

As Eduard approached the exit, he leaned close to Viktor and kept his voice low. “Did you make him drop the bag?”

Viktor thought his father was unaware of this part of his ability. “I had to. I’m sure he had a bomb.” He ignored the weakness that followed his headaches. Fortunately, his vision began to clear.

They exited the station and his father pressed him further. “How’d you do it?”

*He knows. Mother must know, too.* Viktor had no idea how to explain it. “With my mind. Something else I have to keep secret.”

“Whatever you did, it affected me, too.”

“*Atención! Atención!*” The announcement was repeated.

“What do we do now,” asked Magda. “We’ll miss our flight.”

Viktor heard someone mention *bomb*, but he didn’t hear any explosion. He pulled out his phone and searched for news. “Holy shit!” He looked up at his parents’ concerned faces. “Bombs exploded on trains all over Madrid. They hit Atocha Station. A lot of people died ... dozens.”

“Atocha Station?” said his father. “That was our stop! We would have been there if we hadn’t missed our train.”

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Eduard sat in front of a desk in their hotel. “If you can’t get me two rooms, one will do. Just get us some place to stay for the night.” All trains and flights were cancelled, and there was no telling how soon travel restrictions would lift.

“Yes, Mr. Prazsky.” The hotel concierge nodded and picked up his phone.

Magda tugged on Eduard’s arm. She pointed toward the bar. “The TV ... uh ... look at it.”

A large crowd gathered around the bar, staring at the news report on the large screen. The banner on the newscast read *Terrorist Attack in Madrid*. Eduard couldn’t hear the announcer, but he saw videos of destruction in the background. Train cars with gaping holes. Torn metal,

all kinds of debris, and what appeared to be bodies were scattered everywhere.

All three of them rushed toward the bar, struggling to get close to the TV. As they approached, Eduard heard the news report.

*Ten bombs exploded simultaneously on four commuter trains in Madrid during morning rush hour today. Officials report at least one hundred people died and hundreds more were injured. This is the deadliest terrorist attack in Spanish history.*

*Authorities blamed the Spanish separatist group ETA, but our sources say it was the work of Muslim—*

Eduard strained to hear every detail. If not for Viktor — his special ability — the three of us would be dead.

## **Béziers, France**

Over six hundred kilometers north of Alcalá, a man stood in a richly appointed room next to an immense stone fireplace. His neatly trimmed beard revealed a hint of gray, and his stern expression conveyed the arrogance and authority you'd expect from the grand master of a secret international society. When he had been selected to lead Arcadian Spear, he chose the moniker Perseus.

His attention was riveted to the same newscast the Prazskys were watching in Spain.

*... separatist group ETA, but our sources say it was the work of Muslim terrorists.*

*Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar said, 'March 11 now has its place in the history of infamy.' The government declared a three-day mourning period, all*

*parties have called off their campaign events, but the general election will proceed Sunday as scheduled.*

*A man was apprehended in Alcalá station carrying an explosive device, which police neutralized.*

Perseus looked at his aide. “Excellent work, Brother Girard. Other than the bomber they stopped in Alcalá, the Madrid attack was a success.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Girard, a muscular man in his late forties with closely cropped hair, nearly two meters in height, was the personal assistant to the grand master, a man fifteen years his senior.

Perseus grasped the body of a carved ivory dragon mounted on the handle of his antique Greek cane, and raised it in the air toward five large computer screens hanging on the walls. Each screen showed graphs of selected investments, updated in real-time. “The stock market is plummeting, as we planned, but our security and defense investments will move up.” He looked up at Girard. “Our partners are pleased.”

Girard bowed slightly. “Several groups are organizing protests. I’m not sure which party will benefit in the election.”

“I don’t give a damn about Spanish politics. It’s the rest of Europe and America that matter.”

“Every western government has made public statements of support,” said Gerard. “I’m sure they intend to increase spending on security.”

“As they should. But, we can’t leave it to chance. Make sure Germany immediately calls for a European Union security meeting while tempers remain high. Make sure our man Huber is engaged.”

“I’ve spoken to Huber. He expects the chancellor to be receptive.”

“Good. But we need to keep up the pressure.”

“Yes, Your Grace. We have everything in place for the attack on the high-speed line — three weeks from today.”

# Reign of Terror



# Dresden

## Chapter 4

### 2017 - Dresden, Germany

“Father.” Viktor waved as he approached the speakers’ platform in front of Frauenkirche, a towering Baroque stone church in New Market Square. The mid-morning sun challenged the chill from the autumn air.

Eduard, the interior minister of the Czech Republic, returned the wave. He stood next to a spectacled man with curly gray hair — Gerhardt Huber, the German interior minister. The man was a full head shorter than Eduard.

As Viktor approached, Huber reached out and shook his hand. “*Guten Morgen*. You must be Major Prazsky. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” A broad smile graced his face, but his gaze remained focused on Viktor’s eye patch.

Like his father, Viktor was fluent in German. His mind sensed Huber’s emotions, insecure and condescending, betraying the insincerity of the man’s outward smile and friendly greeting. These conflicting signals told Viktor the man couldn’t be trusted. Despite this assessment, he returned the compliment with the respect this man didn’t deserve. “It’s a pleasure to meet you as well, Minister.”

Huber released his handshake. “The story of your heroism in Kabul is well-known across Europe.”

The mention of Kabul brought Viktor back to that day at the embassy, five years ago. He was with Military Intelligence, a captain at the time, when an Afghani man approached the gate. As soon as Viktor sensed the emotions of this suicide bomber, he used his mind to distract the man, and then his Taekwondo expertise to take him down.

Eduard smiled. “My son was awarded the Medal of Heroism. And now he is a member of the European Parliament.”

One of the men on the security team, wearing a traditional dark suit, stepped up and whispered in Huber's ear. The minister made his excuses and left.

Once they were alone, Viktor hugged his father. "I'm glad I came to Dresden to see you. We're both on the road so much."

"I'm happy you came." Eduard stepped back to look at his son. "Did you enjoy the EU parliament meeting in Leipzig?"

"It was a special assembly. I met representatives from Arab states, too. Now my delegation's planning a trip to Tunis."

Eduard glanced at a group of people walking toward the platform. "It looks like the mayor invited a lot of borough officials, plus half the city council. And they each brought their spouses."

"You don't think much of Huber, do you, Father?"

Eduard raised his eyebrow. "No sense in hiding anything from you when you can practically read my mind."

"Just your emotions, Father. Not your mind."

"I know. It doesn't matter whether I like the minister or not. Close Czech-German relations are important. He's my counterpart and we have to work together."

Viktor nodded. "I saw some skinheads gathering on the south side of the square. Did you expect a demonstration?"

"That's Aryan Reich. They don't like Huber and they plan to march as a protest."

"You're worried. Do you think they'll start something?"

"We've been watching Aryan Reich closely for quite some time. I told Huber there's a good chance the demonstration will become violent, but he won't reschedule the speech."

Viktor saw another member of the security team approaching, a wire running to one ear. "I think they want you on stage. I'm going to find a spot near the news vans. See you later."

"Be careful. Stay away from those rabble-rousers."



As Viktor walked away, he heard the man speak to his father. “*Guten Morgen*, Herr Minister. Please follow me to your seat.”

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From his vantage point on the platform, Eduard had a clear view of people gathering in front of the stage. He looked south over the heads of the crowd, searching the area where Viktor had seen the skinheads.

There they were at the edge of the square, a group of neo-Nazis dressed in black uniforms. *Sonofabitch!* He counted about a dozen, heads shaved, chanting something unintelligible.

More skinheads appeared. Dozens more. Riot police rushed toward the intruders. *This is getting ugly fast.*

He spotted Viktor. *There you are. Be careful.*

The mayor of Dresden walked up to the microphone, shielded by bulletproof glass. All of Germany wanted to know what their government was going to do about the violent neo-Nazi attacks last month.

Eduard turned to listen to His Honor’s opening remarks.

“*Guten Morgen meine Damen und Herren.*”

As the mayor spoke, Eduard turned to look at Huber in the seat next to him. He leaned over and whispered. “They’ve arrived, Gerhard. At least thirty of them so far, heading into the crowd. The police haven’t tried to stop their march.”

Despite the cool weather, Huber’s hair was wringing wet with sweat, causing his glasses to slide forward. He adjusted his spectacles to sit higher on the bridge of his nose. “I’ve had enough of their bullshit,” said the minister, his voice shaking despite his bluster. “It’s time we teach them a lesson.”

“The people,” said Eduard. “Innocent people could be hurt.”

The police director walked over to Huber. “Aryan Reich is on the move. We have control of the situation, Herr Minister.”

Huber nodded. “Keep a lid on them if you can, but don’t take any shit.”

The mayor was finishing his remarks. “Now, I am pleased to present our esteemed interior minister, Gerhardt Huber.”

The crowd cheered when the minister rose and waved as he walked up to the microphone and stood on the special step he requested. The kind of step used by a vain man, insecure about his short stature. Huber smiled and slowly shifted his gaze above the crowd. He waited for the cheering to subside.

“Today is November ninth — a day we should always remember. Seventy-nine years ago, during Kristallnacht, the Nazis destroyed synagogues, businesses and homes across our country, setting fires and smashing windows. They murdered dozens of people. It was a sad day for Germany, for Europe, and for the world.”

A scuffle broke out at the edge of the square. Police marched toward the area with riot shields and clubs to push back the skinheads.

Huber’s face was pale and glistening with sweat. He gripped the lectern and glanced at Eduard before facing his audience. “Semper Synagogue was the largest in Germany, standing proudly for a century before the Nazis destroyed it. Today, New Synagogue stands on that very site, only a few blocks from here. It is an inspiration to us all. It is a reminder of the strength of unified Germany, and a defiant condemnation of the horrors brought on by the National Socialists.”

Eduard looked at the people directly in front of them, mostly supporters, hanging on the minister’s every word. Behind them, the reckless mob of neo-Nazi skinheads, perhaps fifty or more, forced their way toward the podium. Both federal and Saxony police encircled the mob, separating them from the crowd. More officers were positioned to intervene if the confrontation escalated.

Huber took a drink of water. “Today, Aryan Reich, a hateful neo-Nazi group, wants to return us to this shameful past.” He raised his hand and made a fist. “We will not allow it!” He slammed his fist on the lectern with a loud thud. “We will crush them before their hatred—”

The blaring sound of an air horn erupted from somewhere across the square, stopping Minister Huber mid-sentence.

Eduard spotted the skinheads attacking police as well as the people in the crowd. Yells and screams broke out. Police wielded riot shields and clubs, hitting people indiscriminately.

Although a few spectators joined in the fighting, most clamored to escape the mob, running into vendor tents, knocking over tables.

A security guard stepped in close to Huber and held his hand over the mike. "We need to move you to safety. Now!"

Eduard reached for Huber's arm, but the minister pulled away and refused to leave.

The mayor and city officials led their spouses off the stage.

Riot control trucks and police entered the square, moving toward the skinheads. Officers on foot pushed the crowd aside to make way for the trucks. Pandemonium broke out as people tried to get away. Police fired tear gas grenades and pepperball rounds at the neo-Nazis. Fire hoses unleashed strong streams of water, knocking people off their feet. The wind blew away the tear gas, and the skinheads kept coming.

Huber turned to the head of security, his voice shaking as he screamed, "Wilhelm! Give 'em everything we got! They asked for it. Show 'em no mercy!"

Wilhelm switched off the microphone and forcefully pulled Huber away from the stand. "Your mike was live," he told the minister. "Everyone heard that."

Huber's eyes went wide. "Shit!" Then, in a voice barely louder than a whisper, he said, "Let's get out of here."

The security team led the way down a short set of steps as police held the crowd back for their safety. They headed into their hotel adjacent to the platform.

Eduard followed the team upstairs to their conference room. Huber took charge, phone to one ear, barking orders to his police force outside

and to the four security guards in the room. Eduard felt powerless, a mere visitor from a neighboring country. *I'm glad Magda stayed in Prague. I hope Viktor's okay.*

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Viktor had been listening to the speeches and studying the people around him in the minutes before the air horn. From his position near the news van, nearly fifteen meters away, he could sense the feelings rising from within the crowd. *Excitement. Anxiety. Hate.* They were all there, but a bit too jumbled to identify which emotions came from which individual. Those around him truly admired the mayor, but many disliked Huber.

He was surprised that many were irritated when Huber talked about the synagogues. *They have no sympathy for the Jews.* Still, most were enthusiastic when he promised to crush the skinheads.

He flinched when the airhorn blasted. The crowd's enthusiasm turned to fear and confusion. His father was moving away, following Huber and the security team.

Viktor pushed against the moving sea of people heading toward the exits of the square. He turned sideways and inserted an arm or a shoulder into every gap he could find. For every two steps forward, he was pushed back a step by the men and women carrying him the other way. Their screaming assaulted his ears as their panic and anger assaulted his senses. Much of their anger was directed at him for being in their way.

As he fought his way through the crowd, he almost bumped heads with a strange man heading to the edge of the square. It wasn't the man's appearance that got Viktor's attention, it was something he sensed. While everyone else was in a panic, this man was excited ... actually happy.

Viktor's phone rang. He recognized the caller. "Father! Where are you?"

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Eduard stood by the fourth-floor window, phone at his ear, talking to his son, as events unfolded on the square. “I’m upstairs in a conference room of our hotel. You can’t come up. Security won’t allow it.”

Viktor assured his father he would stay away from the action.

By the time Eduard ended the call, the scene below had escalated. Police fired rubber shotgun pellets and launched stun grenades. Flash. Bang. Each round brighter and louder. Skinheads swung clubs at the police and batted the grenades away. Many of these grenades flew into nearby restaurants. Patrons ran to escape the fires. Smoke and tear gas reduced visibility.

Flames erupted from several restaurants and ground level shops. Police continued to direct their water cannons on the crowd, apparently unaware of the fires. By the time they turned the hoses on the buildings, flames had reached the upper floors.

Eduard spotted skinheads approaching their hotel. A smoking grenade flew toward the entrance below. His mind flashed back to an incident with his boyhood friends, Daniel and Albert, and the fire at his school in Prague. *This is bad — very bad.*

Eduard grabbed Huber by the arm. “We’ve got to get out of the building ... *now!*”

The minister ignored him and continued talking on the phone. The four security guards seemed frozen by fear. None of them attempted to interrupt Huber.

The fire alarm wailed. The sound galvanized the security guards into action. “Minister Huber!” demanded one guard. He grabbed Huber and pulled him toward the exit.

Eduard ran to the door. He used the back of his hand to test for heat. *Still cool.*

He opened the door cautiously. White smoke flowed from the hallway into the room and rose to the ceiling. It came from the right side of the hallway. “Quick! Turn left to the stairs. Stay low.”

All five men followed his lead.

Eduard checked the stairway door and then opened it. Smoke rose in the stairwell, hugging the ceiling, leaving the air below clear enough to see and breathe. *We gotta take a chance.* He started down.

Smoke and water escaped under the door on the second floor. *The sprinklers must have gone off.* “Don’t touch the door! Down the stairs. Watch out. Wet floor.”

Huber and the four security guards moved downward past Eduard. Once he accounted for all of them, he followed.

As they emerged from the building, police and security personnel rushed over and ushered them away.

Behind him, Eduard heard screams from the hotel. He spun around to see a young couple on the third floor frantically waving from their balcony window. *Gotta save 'em. Daniel and Albert died waiting for help. It never came.*

Looking around, he saw no firefighters nearby. Flames engulfed several buildings in other parts of the square. He looked back toward the couple at the window. *No one’s going to help.*

Without a second thought, he ran back into the building. He heard people behind him yell, “No!” He ran faster.

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Viktor watched in horror as smoke poured from his father’s hotel. More buildings were burning. *Where is he?*

He spotted Huber with four men, all of them covered with soot, soaking wet. *Where’s Father?*

As he rushed toward the minister, one of the wet security guards stepped in the way and held out his hand. “Halt!”

“I’m Viktor Prazsky. My father is Minister Prazsky. I’m looking for him. Do you know where he is?”

Huber nodded to the guard who stopped Viktor. “Your father helped us out of the building.” He shook his head. “Then he ran back inside.”

“Ran back? Why did he do that?”

The man pointed to the young couple on the third floor. “He must be trying to save them.”

Viktor studied the couple. He memorized the location of their room. “Which door did he enter?”

The man pointed.

Viktor sprinted into the building and ran up the stairs, two at a time. At the second floor, smoke and water poured into the stairwell. The wail of the fire alarm made it impossible to listen for the sounds of people. He checked the third-floor door. Warm, but not hot enough to suggest flames on the other side.

He forced it open against the water pushing against it. It was dark, and ceiling sprinklers sprayed water everywhere — on the floor and in his face. A thick blanket of dark smoke hugged the ceiling. Viktor ran hunched over toward the area where he thought the couple were located. He heard coughing, and sensed the emotions of three people. One of them was familiar.

Hope and worry rushed through Viktor. “Father!”

Shapes of people appeared in the distance. They were hunched over as they moved toward him.

“Viktor?”

He was relieved to hear his father’s voice. “We have to get out of here — *now!*”

His father rushed to him, followed by two people who clung together. All three were soaking wet and coughing.

Viktor grabbed his father’s arm and yelled, “We don’t have much time. Follow me.” He turned and ran toward the stairway.

His father barked orders to the others. “This way. Gotta move — *fast*. Stay low. Watch your step.” He pushed ahead of Viktor. “I’ll lead. Make sure these two keep moving.”

“Go ahead. Be careful.”

From behind, a woman shouted. “We’re with you.”

Then a man’s voice called out. “Let’s get outta here.”

His father touched the door. “It’s warm, but we have no other options. Stay with me.” He opened the door. The smoke was thick, the air hot. He headed downstairs.

Viktor tried to avoid breathing the thickest of the smoke. He heard coughing coming from behind, and he sensed the couple following.

“Almost there,” said his father. “One floor to go. Down the stairs! Out the door — *quick!*”

Eduard grabbed his son and shoved him forward. “Don’t stop.”

The others followed Viktor on their way to the exit door.

Three of them escaped the building as a loud bang and a blast of heat and flames shot from the door they had just passed. Eduard’s limp form tumbled down the stairs and stopped at Viktor’s feet.



