

THREADS OF FATE

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CHAPTER 1 & 2 SAMPLE / FOR CONSIDERATION

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SADY NA SKALCE, PRAGUE, CZECHOSLOVAKIA
WINTER 1952

Jiri and Karel scrambled across the west side of the park where trees were clustered tightly. Ground fog had risen and settled over the quiet city of Prague after a long and arduous winter. This morning, the chill had reached dew point. The lack of visibility, however, gave the two twelve-year-olds an advantage. They had to keep their profiles low, especially now that both boys were far enough away from their school grounds to be considered truants.

The mid-morning roads were getting busier with slow, trundling, snow-covered automobiles. This meant that there was less chance for anybody to stop should they be in the position to spot the two mischievous miscreants. It was any adult's duty to report such an act – something of an unwritten law. But in the depth of winter, stopping a car engine once you had it running was a pointless exercise. It

may have been the right time to get away with truancy, but still, these were times of zero tolerance. There were many other ways by which truants could be caught. For Jiri, this was his first time playing in such a dangerous game, led by the carefree attitude of Karel - whom did not care for rules, and for the most part, had very little regard for having (let alone using) a moral compass. Nothing was more important than spending time smoking, and drinking while staring over his handcrafted fishing line that dangled over the mighty Vltava River. Karel's uncle owned a fishing boat on the west side of the river, and on a Friday, he was never there.

'He smokes the strongest tobacco,' Karel boasted. He took a moment to catch a breath behind a park supply shed. 'You wait until you taste his red vodka. Gives you balls of steel. Well, that's what Onkel Aldo says anyway.'

Jiri nodded enthusiastically as Karel laughed off being unfit and out of breath.

'C'mon!' Karel said as he bounded for the main street, exposed and at risk. He and Jiri ducked behind a slow-moving Tatra 600, and then darted into a narrow back alley,

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through into the back gardens of the side street that ran parallel to the main road. Together they weaved in and around overflowing snow-covered garbage bins.

A litter of dogs barked at them. Karel ignored them, but Jiri's hesitation earned him their full attention and bloodthirsty rebuke, for he was a stranger in their territory. Jiri's guilt stopped him in his tracks. He hadn't the stomach for wrongdoing or regrets. The first word he ever learnt in school was "následek" which was the common Czech word for "consequence". Naturally they learnt the same word in Latin, German and Russian just to ensure that every child carried a crystal-clear understanding on those first days of orientation.

Coming out of the back street, they finally reached the bend in the main road that ran along the Vltava River. This road was quiet enough, but the two boys still had to cross it without being seen. Karel did his best to approach the street looking taller than he ever could be, with his head down into his poorly-fitted jacket, and his cap dipped enough so that nobody could see the whites of his eyes. His swagger sealed the deal – at least in his mind – that he was just a common

street Joe heading to work. Jiri followed on behind and adopted the same stature, stance and swagger. However, he couldn't hide his roaming sense of suspicion as two cars passed. A horse drawn milk cart caught up alongside the boys. It startled Jiri - just as the milkman shouted, 'stoy!'. The instruction was for the horses to halt, but caught the ears of young Jiri's. He felt no reason not to comply.

'Run!' Karel blasted over his shoulder. He took up high strides along the snow- and ice-capped street. A chain-link fence stretched alongside the pathway, giving no chance for them to make a break for cover. More houses up ahead, and a gap between the chain-linked fences finally presented itself. Karel sped down the gap, down the side-alley as fast as his could. Jiri had only made it to the gap in the fence when he heard the sound of brakes screeching along the main road.

He knew he'd been spotted.

He chose in that moment not to follow Karel any further. He turned to serve his punishment, locking eyes with the driver who was already out of his vehicle. The man reached for the back door of the car and opened it.

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Out of breath, and completely defeated, Jiri slowly walked to the passenger door of his father's dark brown Skoda 1200. As he took his seat, his father closed the door, and without saying a word, headed back to the gap in the fence to give one final glance down the pathway where Karel had escaped. Satisfied that he was only leaving with one runaway today, Nikolai Ivanov returned to the driver's seat. Nikolai lit a small cigar and put on his black leather driving gloves. On the seat beside him was his private notebook, complete with its French-manufactured ballpoint BIC pen - together with his hat and service revolver, along with his badge of honour for the StB - the state security for the SNB police force.

Nikolai was a highly decorated and respected officer with an earned right to work in plain civilian clothes, unlike the other police division, the VB, who worked to represent a visible show of force. They weren't there to blend in nor were they entitled to the authority, nor the autonomy of the StB.

It took him a few turns to get the engine started. The thaw at least was on his side today.

'Jiri,' His father said as he pulled away from the kerbside.
'You are not well.'

Jiri looked up and frowned. 'Father, I shouldn't have done what I did... I'm...'

'Jiri, be quiet when I'm talking to you.' Nikolai said without raising his voice.

Jiri buried his head once more into his jacket and waited for his father to continue.

'It is my fortune that I saw you both on the other side of the park. I won't take you back to school today. You know I cannot leave you at home. I have to be at work now.' He then reiterated. 'It is important for you to remember: today, you are not well.'

Jiri said nothing for a few cold foggy breaths. His father looked at him through the rear-view mirror. That heavy feeling was being observed. Jiri couldn't shrink down any further with guilt and his father knew that. He needed his son to be on side. It was important that he didn't push him away...

'However...'

Nikolai maintained his serious disposition; however, he did have something to offer, 'when you return

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to school, not tomorrow, but on Monday, I will have to give you a note for physical education; you will be too weak, but you will watch instead, or be excused for library duties. Is that clear?'

Jiri tried hard not to smile. Jiri hated gymnastics and sports, and was always more of a library worm. He could see the familiar creases pulling on the outer edges of his father's eyes, which meant that he too was struggling to keep from breaking a smile.

Oh for sure, for Nikolai, it was far more important to protect than to punish. It was more important to be on Jiri's level than to be the overlord and ram the rulebook down his throat whenever it was required. Nikolai needed Jiri to also be there for his mother while he himself had to work, often late but rarely through the night. Jiri was also discouraged from making contact with her when she was at her worst, and acted more like a centurion guarding her door, ensuring it was closed and not open to opportunity. It was important that nobody came into contact with her, *when the darkness fell*.

When it came to the communist red cloud that had smothered them in their post-war lives, there was no

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certainty, no perks for position, and no choice but to keep your family clean in the eyes of the people. There was always risk of putting that belief ahead of family itself, and push the nearest and dearest right to the edge of tolerance. After all, fear could easily rule over all if you gave it an inch.

On the bad days, Nikolai would have to be both mother and the father to their son. He was the educator, protector, housekeeper and the one who put the literal and proverbial bread on the table. He came from a strong Slovak family that also branched into German lineage. Still, Nikolai carried a position of power, and that itself gave him leverage when needed. He had to ensure that his Italian born wife and their son had a grounded and stable life amongst the Czech people – most of whom had already gone through enough, what with the German Occupation, and were finally reaching towards stability in their own lives – under tight Soviet control. Life was delicate, however decidedly better than the most recent alternative.

Jiri's mother, Patricia, came from an Italian/Jewish family who had been brought up within a Venetian ghetto. It was savage, brutal and near fatal circumstances that brought

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Nikolai and Patricia together. The Nikolai's had a unique ability in the area of "finding things". Since the moment he met Patricia, together, their abilities to know things through precognition had soon gotten very strong.

Patricia was said to have been a lucky one, having avoided the cull that the German army had enforced on any man, woman, or child of Jewish descent. Being with Nikolai gave her a protection that she felt she could never live up to. If nobody else could have it, she felt that she didn't deserve it.

The trauma from these past event meant that Patricia suffered from severe bouts of mental depression. While Nikolai worked during the day, she spent most of her time creating Venetian masks, clothing, music boxes, toys, and other trinkets indicative of her homeland of Italy in the privacy of their apartment, within the suburban regions of Prague.

Jiri was kept in the dark about the family history, and knew only that he was a vital part of keeping her sane. During those bad weeks that lasted forever, Patricia would

make and box items ready for Jiri to take to the weekend market. This he did automatically, with or without her help.

On good days, as rare as they were, it was as if they were a family again.

One day, Jiri will be told everything. The whole family history is still something of a mystery to nearly everybody except Nikolai and Patricia. As far as Jiri knows, she fell in love with Nikolai when they met on vacation in Italy. Half-truths are easier to remember. He knows about her creative background, and that she once made gifts and home comforts that were Italia-inspired.

His father said he was Prague-born, but Jiri did not want to believe that. The men he knew around him were hardly role models, let alone models of any standard that reflected his father's character. As far as Jiri was concerned, Nikolai came from a place of mystery. Where heroes are born and were sent here to be the example. Beyond Jiri's ideas that stemmed from an overactive imagination, the family history remained as cloudy as the fog that settled thick and heavy on that winter morning.

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One day, he will ask. He will ask about everything and on that day, it will be as if he'd always known.

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U SMALTOVNY RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT
TWENTY MINUTES LATER

Nikolai pulled up at a tall mustard-coloured apartment building in the northern residential quarter of Prague. Through the window, Jiri saw many black coats sharply contrasting against the white snow – which was now once again, falling silently, steadily, and covering the shoulders of the uniformed VB officers who gathered in front of the apartment steps. A small handful of onlookers, rubber-neckers and voyeurs, stood staring. They talked amongst each other, making up their own stories as to what had happened inside that apartment on the fourth floor, as if they were watching street theatre. The police didn't care for their passing glances into the apartment foyer, but kept them far enough away behind old rickety sawhorse stands.

Nikolai turned around and reminded Jiri that he had to stay down, out of sight while he went up to do his job. He

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left Jiri with a blanket and his spun-aluminium soup thermos. Normally, Nikolai would never go without food on days like this, but he was sure that Jiri would need soup more than he. At any time, he could easily jostle one of his own men to get him something else later in the day.

Jiri nodded and reached for a blanket that would give him the cover and the warmth that he needed while he waited. The chill on his forehead made it easy for him to look strained and unwell.

He watched his father walk over to his comrades, waving his notebook in his hand. He towered over them in height, despite being a tad thinner in build. What Jiri's father lacked in bulk, he had in character. Many officers made the effort to shake his hand before he'd had the chance to venture into the darkness of the apartment atrium. What went on beyond that point - from Jiri's point of view at least - was left to his imagination.

Jiri wiped a clear streak across the window with his sleeve which made it easier for him to watch one of the plain clothed StB officers, Nikolai's irritable tag-along, Pavel

Fleischaker, as he made his way through the barriers. Pavel was a burly man whose weight was reflected in his slow-grinding eye movement. He wouldn't move a muscle for anyone if it weren't for those eyes. They worked overtime, clocking, staring down and more often than not, they made a clear-cut case for aggressive intimidation. To Jiri, he was a bully. Jiri never liked it when he visited Nikolai at their home. He always wanted Jiri to get out of sight the moment he arrived so that he could play buddy-buddy with his work colleague. That way, Pavel could cuss without having "little pecker pasta shell ears" listening in.

As Pavel stood on the steps of the apartment smoking a cigarette, there was a moment of familiar paranoia that forced him to direct his view straight to Nikolai's car. Jiri felt he could stare his way through the cold steel of the car door and through that blanket, right at him where he sat. Pavel didn't want that little half-Italian Jew reading into him, whether he was there in the car or not. As Pavel squinted and looked long and hard at Nikolai's car, Jiri looked away and hid.

His little pasta shell ears were burning.

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There were moments alone with Pavel when Jiri realized that he had an issue around kids which made him uncomfortable. To Nikolai's face, he would just be kidding around, but when nobody was looking, Pavel would indicate that there was nothing but animosity. There was no need for words however. The 'throat cut' gesture was usually all he needed to put the message across to the boy.

Jiri wiped along his window as he tracked Pavel along. Pavel had set his sights on a weary man riding a bicycle. The man carried far too many goods, which overflowed within a wooden crate on his lap, and he was obviously struggling to keep it together as he peddled along the cobbled road. Pavel flicked away his butt and headed over to the man, stopping him in his path. Jiri couldn't hear what was being said, but he had an eye for reading lips. Pavel asked the thin-faced man for identification cards. In a panicked fumble, the man let go of a jar of preserved jam. The jar smashed against the ground. Its contents plummeted into a mound of sticky mess. The papers were finally produced and Jiri watched Pavel's lips mouth, 'Coho - Delivery job? Your boss has you down as a fucking pack mule.' Pavel waved his thumb, telling the

very silent, very still biker to get going. The poor man gave no resistance, but it was clear in his eyes that a little piece of his pride and dignity had smashed on the ground along with that glass jar.

Pavel looked down at the smashed mess on the road for a moment before looking about for a uniformed VB officer. Somebody who wasn't doing anything important whom could clean up the mess. Sure enough, one of the officers got caught in Pavel's web and received quick and concise verbal instructions. Before leaving to find the tools to clean the mess, Pavel troubled the young officer for a smoke. Pavel lit up, looked directly at Nikolai's car. Pavel lowered his head enough to make the sincerest of all dagger eyes. He removed his cigarette from his mouth and spat out mucus onto the road before heading back into the apartment for another attempt at serious detective work.

Jiri breathed a sigh of relief. The look in Pavel's eye was telling, and he had a strong feeling that he could sense his presence. Jiri was almost certain that he could see through steel. Pavel could see through anything if he put his mind to

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it. Especially if he knew that there was a possibility that Jiri was on the other side.