

CZECHMATE:
THE SPY WHO PLAYED JAZZ

By

Bill Moody

Bill Moody | Czechmate: The Spy Who Played Jazz

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Author's Note

The principal characters in Czechmate--Gene Williams, Alan Curtis, Lena and Josef Blaha--are like many of the events, entirely the invention of the author. The invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union, however, is historical fact.

On August 21-22, 1968, combined forces of the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies swept into Czechoslovakia and crushed one small experiment in social democracy.

In the days following the invasion, Alexander Dubcek, the architect of what historians now refer to as Prague Spring, was arrested along with his entire presidium and taken to Moscow. Eventually, he was returned to Prague and installed as part of the new, Moscow-oriented regime and served for several months in this capacity. Later, Dubcek was gradually eased out, served briefly as Czechoslovakia's ambassador to Turkey before he was summoned back to Prague and ousted from the Communist Party in 1970.

On his first visit abroad since that time, Dubcek then 66, received an honorary degree from the University of Bologna on the occasion of the school's 900th anniversary. Speaking out for the first time on the events that followed Prague Spring, the former Czechoslovak leader denounced the Soviet invasion that resulted in "incalculable moral losses and economic stagnation" for his homeland.

On January 21, 1969, five months following the invasion, Jan Palach, a Prague University student walked into Wenceslas Square, site of some of the most pitched battles during the invasion. Before a horrified crowd of onlookers, Palach drenched himself in gasoline and set himself on fire in a tragic act of protest.

Until November 1989, when the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, Dubcek was retired from a lowly job with the Forestry Service and lived quietly with his family in Bratislava. The events of the early 1990s in Czechoslovakia have seen many of the sweeping changes Dubcek once dared to make in Prague Spring of 1968 .

Alexander Dubcek died in 1995.

"Love the truth. Let others
have their truth,
and the truth will prevail."

*--Jan Hus--Czechoslovak
Reformation Leader, 1498*

Preludes

East Germany--May 1968

Hidden in the shadows, near the edge of the clearing, Keppler glanced at the luminous dial of his watch and silently cursed all Czechs.

Where was the man? Fifteen minutes overdue and now, even the weather was conspiring against him. He gazed at the sky and watched helplessly as pale slivers of moonlight began to seep through the cloud cover. Another few minutes and the entire clearing would be bathed in a soft glow. An altogether perfect night for a stroll with Helga.

For a moment, Keppler allowed his thoughts to linger over the silken thighs and ample breasts of the young girl waiting for him at the inn. Helga had proven to be a welcome diversion on this operation. He regretted he would have to end it so soon.

He jerked his mind back to the present, once again frowning at his watch. There was nothing to do, but check the drop and call it a night. Perhaps the delivery had already been made. Keppler hoped so. His legs were cramping and even thoughts of Helga were not enough to ward off the chill night air.

He was nearly to his feet when a sound caused him to freeze. Voices and heavy boots tramping on the sodden ground. Silently, he dropped to his stomach and pressed his body into the wet grass as the voices drew nearer.

He had waited too long.

Straining his eyes, Keppler peered through the foliage. He could distinguish the shapes now. Two of them, heads crowned with peaked caps and rifles slung carelessly over their shoulders. Coming right toward him.

East German border guards.

There was no time to pull back farther into the woods. His dark clothing, the shadows and undergrowth would have to be enough. Tiny beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead as the guards approached. The blood pounded in his ears as he tried to quiet his breathing.

The guards passed agonizingly close. One grunted and kicked at the foliage. Keppler held his breath as a tiny leaf floated through the air and settled inches from his face.

He listened to the fading footsteps, the muffled voices and after what seemed an eternity, the guards disappeared from his line of sight. Their voices became fainter until finally, there were no sounds other than the trickle of a nearby stream, the light breeze rustling through the leaves.

Releasing his breath slowly, Keppler lay immobile for another two minutes, then cautiously sat up and massaged some feeling back into his legs. He crawled a few feet away to a tree, rose to a crouch and scanned the clearing.

Satisfied he was once again alone, he moved off to his right, away from the tree to the stream. Lining up a point with the tree at the bank, he paced off seven steps and knelt over the water.

He rolled up one sleeve of his shirt and slipped his hand into the water, recoiling slightly at its iciness. Working fast now, he felt around the stream bed and removed the second stone from the bank. In the hollowed out opening, his fingers closed around a small cylinder. He glanced around quickly, then replaced the stone in its original position.

Wiping his hand on the heavy dark twill trousers, he shook off the excess water and put the cylinder in his shirt pocket and buttoned it securely. He stood up and retraced his steps back to

the tree. After one final scan of the clearing, he turned and headed back into the woods in a low crouch. Once into the woods, he began to jog, then broke into a full run.

Keppler would never know the contents of the cylinder that had nearly cost him his life, nor did he care. That was for others to worry about. It was just one more film canister like all the others. His own mind, flooded with the rush of adrenaline and relief, focused now on a large brandy, a cigarette and the warmth of Helga's bed.

Keppler would probably not even have been surprised to learn that the cylinder in his pocket contained the plans for the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Prague--July 1968

In the Old Town square, Josef Blaha, white-haired, slightly stooped, his face covered in weathered lines, paused to gaze at the enormous clock on top of the town hall. Dating back to the 15th Century, it displayed not only the time, but the paths of the sun and moon.

Blaha watched, fascinated as always, as the hour struck. Two narrow doors in the clock face opened for the procession of the Twelve Apostles, life-sized wooden figures preceded by a skeleton. Blaha checked his own watch and smiled as he compared it to the clock. It was old and much used, but like the clock, it kept good time.

He turned out of the square and strolled slowly, but with some purpose, shoulders bent slightly as if he carried a heavy burden. Twenty years ago, on this very spot, President Gottwald sounded the socialist commitment of Czechoslovakia. The memory was still vivid in Blaha's mind. He sighed and felt a twinge of longing for the ideals of his youth, but he realized sadly, they were gone now, impossible to retrieve.

He turned on Pariska Street, a wide boulevard known to all Prague as tourist street, renowned as it was for the abundance of travel agencies and airline offices. Continuing on, he headed for the Intercontinental Hotel, Prague's most luxurious. Even at this hour, the street was alive with couples arm in arm, bustling groups of noisy students and workers, tipsy with beer and now heading home to the gray blocks of apartments.

Blaha studied their faces as he passed them, noting the lively eyes, the smiles promising contentment and hope, the voices ringing with gaiety. But he was struck only with a profound sadness for all of them.

Soon. Soon it would all be over.

He quickened his step as he neared the hotel. Then almost as what would appear to anybody watching, nothing more than an afterthought, he stopped at a news vendor to buy a copy of *Rude Pravo* from the old shabbily dressed woman in the kiosk. Blaha nodded to her as he placed the coins in the tray, acknowledging that the paper came from behind the counter rather than the copies displayed in front of the kiosk. He folded the paper and continued up the wide thoroughfare to the taxi stand.

A battered gray Skoda stood at the curb. The driver was slouched behind the wheel, a cigarette dangling from his mouth, a black cap all but obscuring his eyes.

"It's a very warm evening," Josef Blaha said.

"Aren't they always in July?" The driver sat up and started the engine.

"Yes, that is so." Blaha opened the door and got in the back of the taxi, annoyed with having to perform these childish rituals, but they were necessary. He was comforted only by the knowledge that this would be the last time he would have to endure them.

The taxi pulled away and headed for Wenceslas Square then turned across the Vltava River that winds through the center of Prague. As they crossed the bridge, Blaha glanced at the thirty Baroque statues silhouetted on the nearby Charles Bridge.

He closed his eyes as the taxi continued its journey toward the outskirts of Prague. Neither Blaha nor the driver spoke during the twenty minutes it took to reach a small deserted building in an industrial complex, long abandoned. Both got out of the taxi and walked along a path behind the building. They spoke quietly, their voices muffled by the light breeze.

"Well, old man, what have you got for me?" the driver asked. He was American, but Blaha always marveled at his flawless command of Czech. His features, hard and sharply etched were briefly illuminated by the flame of his lighter as he lit a cigarette.

"Something important," Blaha began. He avoided the American's eyes.

They too were hard, like stones.

"I hope so. Washington is getting pretty jumpy."

"They should be."

"What do you mean?" The driver had been gazing around, but now his head snapped back to peer at Blaha.

"The plans are genuine," Blaha said.

"What? You said they were a plant. Our reports are--"

"I don't care about your reports. I was wrong. Things have changed again." Blaha faltered. For a moment, he was unable to go on. He felt the American's eyes boring into him.

"Changed? You mean the invasion is on?"

"It's almost certain."

"Jesus Christ!" The American flipped his cigarette angrily into the darkness. "Almost? When?"

Blaha noted the American could not keep the alarm out of his voice. It gave him renewed resolve to continue. "When I know more, but not now."

"Not now? Listen I--"

"No, you listen," Blaha said, choosing his words carefully. "I will not meet with you again." He registered the American's confusion. "You nor anybody else will get anything more from me until I have a totally safe contact."

The American shook his head. "Oh, c'mon. I don't know what you're trying to pull, but you can't--"

"I can and I will," Blaha said. "A safe contact. Tell Curtis a safe contact or there will be nothing."

Blaha wheeled suddenly and stalked back toward the taxi, leaving the American in stunned silence. But he recovered quickly, caught up with Blaha, grabbed his arm and spun him around. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"I know exactly what I'm doing. I'm finished. This is the last time for me."

He jerked free of the American's grip. "Tell Curtis that too, but get me a safe contact. And hurry. Do you understand? Hurry." He got back in the taxi and slammed the door.

On the ride back to Prague, Blaha was aware of the driver watching him in the rearview mirror. His head rested against the seat and his eyes remained closed until they reached the Metro station. He sat up then, blinked, leaned forward and pushed some notes into the driver's outstretched hand. He got out of the taxi and left without so much as a nod.

The American watched Blaha until he disappeared into the crowd rushing for the waiting trains. Angrily, he jammed the car in gear and pulled away from the curb, nearly colliding with another car as he raced away.

Had anyone been close enough, they would have heard mumbling curses about Prague drivers and crazy old men.

One

London--August 15, 1968

"A musician." Walter Mead nodded and glanced at Curtis, bemusement spreading over his face like an uncomfortable mask. He stopped walking and looked at Curtis. "Risky, but I like it. It's original."

"That's right, a drummer," Curtis said. He pulled open the heavy glass door of the Soho jazz club and followed Mead inside. It was hot and smoky and already crowded. There were a dozen or so people in line ahead of them. Past the line, Curtis could see people were three deep at a long bar along one wall. From somewhere around the corner they could hear the sounds of recorded jazz.

Curtis paid the cover charge for both of them and guided Mead toward the bar. Arty, poster-sized photos of jazz greats adorned the walls. Mead pointed at one. "Charlie Parker and Miles Davis," he said. Inside, the tables were tiered and arranged in a semicircle facing the stage. For some reason it reminded Curtis of pews in a church. This was where tourists and London's faithful came to worship at the altar of jazz. Ronnie Scott's. At least that's what Curtis had been told. Curtis had never been a jazz buff himself. Some Dixieland maybe, but this modern stuff was too far out for him.

He'd made a table reservation, but with Mead's plane being late and the traffic from Heathrow, they were told they'd have to wait for the second set. They wouldn't need that long. Curtis ordered two lagers in pint glasses. He and Mead managed to wedge themselves near the back of the bar against the wall and through a smoky haze, still had a good view of the bandstand.

Three musicians--bass, piano and a saxophonist--were warming up, adjusting instruments, joking, checking out the crowd. Only the drummer was missing. All the tables were full and out of habit, Curtis scanned faces, trying to determine which were tourists, which were locals.

A gray-haired man in a blazer and light slacks walked on stage, said something to the pianist and they both laughed. He took the microphone off its stand and turned toward the audience, one hand shading his eyes from the bright lights.

"Who's this?" Mead asked. Somehow he'd managed to get his pipe going with one hand.

"Ronnie Scott. Owns the club. A musician too. Saxophone, I think." Curtis scanned the area around the bandstand, found who he was looking for just to the side, near the opening to the backstage area. "That's him, talking to the piano player."

Mead nodded and pushed his glasses farther up the bridge of his nose. The man was very young, less than thirty, almost boyish looking. Dark curly hair, easy smile. "Jesus," Mead said. "Not a care in the world, eh? A god dammed jazz musician." He glanced again at Scott as he began to introduce the musicians.

"...and on bass we have John Harvey deputizing for our regular bassist who has taken suddenly drunk." Scott's corny, but totally deadpan delivery brought a few chuckles from the audience.

"Is he kidding?" Mead said. He continued to watch the pianist and their man talking.

Curtis shrugged. "Tradition. Ronnie Scott is famous for his corny jokes. They publish them in one of the trade magazines every year. Ronnie Scott's ten favorites."

They watched as Scott turned once again to the band, nodded and made a last announcement. "In addition to our current bill, we have negotiated for," he paused briefly, "Miles." He let the audience digest this and listen to the murmurs of anticipation before he went on. "That's Miles Schwartz, a very fine clarinetist from Liverpool." The laughs were there again along with some moans and obviously some of the people had heard this one before.

"And don't forget our waitresses," Scott said, as a petite blonde with a tray of drinks passed in front of him. "I asked one the other night if she liked Dickens. She said she didn't know as she'd never been to one." There were more groans and a mock frown from Scott as he tapped the microphone.

"Seriously, we do have a special treat for you, ladies and gentlemen. In a special guest appearance with our own Graham Lewis this evening, the very fine American drummer---but we won't hold that against him--who is, I believe, on his way to Prague for the International Jazz Festival. Please welcome, Gene Williams."

Over the applause, Mead and Curtis watched as Williams stepped on the stage and took his place behind the drums. He raised one of the cymbals and scooted forward. The pianist snapped his fingers for the tempo and they took off in a fast version of an old Broadway show tune that Mead recognized immediately.

Curtis sipped his beer and watched Mead study Williams. He seemed almost as caught up in the music. "What do you think?"

It was actually Curtis who had proposed the plan, worked out the details, amassed enough information to make Langley listen and send Mead over to see for himself.

Mead put down his beer, shook his head at the questioning barman and relit his pipe. He watched Williams, head cocked to the side, an almost pained expression on his face as he slashed at the cymbals. "If it's handled right, if there's cooperation, the risk can be minimized," Mead said. "Anyway, we don't have much choice. We can't afford to lose Blaha as a source."

He turned back toward the stage again to watch Williams. The young drummer was deep in concentration, eyes half closed, but a slight smile on his lips now. "And you think this guy is the best choice?"

Curtis shrugged and nodded. "He's the only choice. Consider him a gift." Even with the obvious drawback-- running an untrained amateur into a hot spot like Prague--Curtis could think of a host of others--Blaha's demand made it a special case. A safe contact, a total stranger to the intelligence community. Curtis knew that's what the old man wanted and he could think of no one more a stranger than a jazz musician. Or, he reminded himself, one with better cover.

"Don't forget," Curtis said. "Blaha is a music copyist, which adds to the case for using Williams. It shouldn't be too difficult to get them together without arousing any suspicion."

Curtis hesitated for a fraction of a second, a pause that was imperceptible to the ear, but registered in his consciousness. No, it was too early for that. For now, it was enough to sell Mead on using Williams.

"My guess is Blaha's on to something big for him to pull this. He's never been demanding in the past. It's out of character, but he's kept his word. No contact since the meet he had in July and well, we need a break on this."

Mead took one last look at Williams. The drummer was in full flight now, hands a blur around the drums, playing a solo that had the attention of the other musicians as well as the appreciative audience.

"Let's walk," he said to Curtis.

They pushed out through the crowd and stuffiness of the club. Outside, it had started to sprinkle. Mead looked up at the sky and turned up the collar of his raincoat. "Doesn't it ever do anything, but rain in this fucking town?"

Curtis smiled in spite of himself. He knew it wasn't the weather Mead was angry about, but rather that he was going to have to approve Curtis's proposal. There was no choice.

They walked to Shaftsbury Avenue, then turned toward Picadilly Circus and were soon caught up in the theater crowd spilling out and clogging the already busy sidewalks. Turning toward Mead's hotel down Regent street, Curtis caught a headline at a newsstand.

WARSAW PACT FORCES

MASS ON CZECH BORDERS

Most of the pubs were closing, but the hotel bar was still open. Curtis and Mead settled in a corner table with a double Scotch each and managed to wrangle a few small ice cubes from the bartender.

Mead leaned back, took a long pull of his drink and peered at Curtis. "You know what I keep thinking? Hungary, 1956 all over again only worse. We can't afford to get caught out of this, Alan. We're up to our neck in shit in Vietnam and LBJ is pissing and moaning about the lack of solid information coming out of Prague." He shook his head and smiled ironically. "Some genius at State has convinced him we'd have at least two weeks' notice on anything like this."

Curtis looked up from toying with his glass. The tiny ice cubes had already melted. "I've been out there two years now. The people have been lulled into a sense of security with all of Dubcek's reforms and little static from Moscow," he said. "I don't think so."

"Neither do I," Mead said. "Neither does anyone on the Eastern bloc desk, but all we can do is provide information. We can't act on it. We want to protect Dubcek, but he's playing very hard ball with Moscow and they don't like it one damn bit." Mead downed his drink and signaled the bartender for another.

Curtis had already accepted the assassination of Alexander Dubcek as another Soviet option. Was it because this seemed the year of assassination? Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Alexander Dubcek? Eliminating Czechoslovakia's new leader would effectively cripple the government and put an end to the liberal reforms now taking place in Prague. On the other hand, it would also create a new martyr for the Czechs, something the Kremlin didn't need.

Mead nodded at the bartender and took his drink. "I think we're looking at a full-scale, armed intervention. There's no doubt the plans West German intelligence intercepted were genuine. Everything was there--troop movements, supply projections, equipment, the whole lot. And they have these Warsaw Pact exercises as legitimate cover." Mead paused for a moment looking out the window. The rain had increased now. "But something happened to delay things, set the timetable back." He shook his head again and looked at Curtis. "Maybe Blaha has the answer, huh?"

If he does, Curtis thought, *we have to go after it on his terms. It all comes down to using Williams.* "So this is a go, I take it." It wasn't a question. Curtis knew Mead had already decided, perhaps back at the jazz club or maybe even before he left Washington. He just wanted a firsthand look at Gene Williams. Mead wouldn't be here otherwise. Curtis smiled. The spy who played jazz. No one at Langley could have devised a more perfect legitimate cover than Gene

Williams would have, and since the CIA had no jazz musicians available, it could only be Williams.

"When does Williams leave for Prague?" Mead asked.

"Tomorrow night. I've had him under surveillance just in case."

"I thought you might," Mead said. "Well everybody at Ronnie Scott's knows. Just go very carefully on this and let's hope he cooperates. This could blow up in our faces if anything goes wrong."

Curtis didn't need reminding that the Redskin Program was not one of the Company's great success stories. While it was true that select businessmen and tourists were routinely approached and sometimes encouraged to report any interesting conversations or even turn over photographs they took while traveling in Soviet bloc countries, they were never used in any operational sense, except in extreme cases.

"How are you planning to handle Williams?"

"He did a short stint in Vietnam, no combat, but knows the ropes on security, so I thought the patriotic pitch would be best and the Redskin fund will add a little sweetener."

"What about getting him with Blaha in Prague?"

"Roberts says Williams is bringing in some new music for the jazz festival so we can doctor it somehow so Blaha knows Williams is his contact, then have Williams insist Blaha do the copying of the parts for the band."

"Roberts is the Cultural Attaché, right?"

"Yeah. The Jazz festival is one of his pet projects. He fancies himself as some sort of jazz promoter. He's pretty friendly with the leader, convinced him his band would be even better with an American drummer."

"Roberts hasn't tumbled to any of this has he?"

"No way," Curtis said. "Although he tries. I feed him something once in a while to make him feel like he's in the loop and keep him off my back." Curtis put down his glass. He was suddenly very tired.

"Okay, but no rough stuff with Williams. If he doesn't go for it, well, we'll worry about that when we come to it. I want Grant with you when you make the pitch to Williams. I've told him if there's anything that bothers him, I mean anything, we scrub the whole project and start from scratch. Understood?"

"Sure, no problem. I agree."

"I'll be back in Washington Friday. I'll see if I can turn up more on Williams. The file is pretty light." He paused, remembering something. "Oh, and one more thing."

Curtis looked up. "What's that?"

"For God's sake keep Williams in the dark as much as possible. We want whatever Blaha is running, but we don't want some Goddamn jazz musician skulking around Prague thinking he's James Bond."

Curtis smiled at Mead. He spread his hands. "Sure, you know me."

"Yeah," Mead said. "I know you."

"By the way. What are we calling this operation?" Curtis stood up and shrugged into his raincoat.

"Czechmate."

Two

Gene Williams woke up in Prague--or was it London.

He suddenly couldn't remember. Both cities figured prominently in his future, but nothing surfaced except the dull ache at the base of his skull and a parched dryness in his mouth. He lay quietly for a moment, listening for sounds, slightly disoriented, puzzling over the refusal of his mind to perform such a simple task.

He sat up with a groan as the dull ache became a sharp pain, a throbbing that moved up around his temple. Licking his lips, he opened his eyes to focus on his surroundings, but that too failed to strike any familiar chords.

It was a hotel room like so many others he had occupied in scores of cities and typical of those itinerant musicians can afford when they're paying their own tab.

A pale, threadbare carpet ran across the room and disappeared under a huge monstrosity of a wardrobe that took up almost an entire wall. A small table and chair stood next to the bed and held last night's clothes, carelessly strewn over both. In the corner was a sink. Gene gazed at it longingly. There was thirst-quenching water and aspirins above, but it was a long way across the room and the throbbing in his head was becoming more intense.

He continued looking around the room. The bathroom was...right, down the hall. There's a clue. He thought he had it now, but just to make sure, he got out of bed and carefully walked over to the window and pulled back the flimsy curtains.

Blinking at the light pouring in, he gazed down at the heavy stream of traffic crawling by several floors below. As far as he was concerned, its slow steady movement was right down the wrong side of the street. For an American badly hung over and not at all sure about being in England, it was a reassuring sight. The big red double-decker bus just turning the corner dispelled all doubt and restored faith in his memory. London it was.

He turned away from the window and managed to make it to the sink only a couple of steps ahead of dizziness that nearly made him stagger to the floor. He turned on the tap and leaned over the sink. There was a loud gurgling noise followed by what appeared to be brown water. He let it run for a minute until it cleared enough to fill a glass and wash down four extra strength aspirins.

He splashed water on his face, then drying with a thin hand towel, glanced in the mirror over the sink. He'd often been told how boyish he looked, but not this morning. There were dark circles under his eyes and his face was pale and pasty. Only the shock of dark curly hair falling over his forehead retained anything like its normal appearance. Turning away, he wobbled back to the bed, sat down and waited for the aspirin to work and cursed his own stupidity.

Everyone likes to think his hangovers are unique, a personal agony only he can understand. Gene's was. And he had proof, real medical evidence to support his claim. Irregular chemical imbalance, the doctor had told him when he was discharged from the army. A notation had been made on his medical certificate, but Gene was relieved to have some official name to put to it, some explanation for the dizziness and occasional blackouts whenever he had anything more than a couple of drinks.

In practical terms, it meant alcohol, even in small doses, affected him dramatically and made the mornings after an indescribable hell, so he generally steered clear of anything more than the

occasional beer. He'd tried marijuana, but that was worse. Two quick hits and he was away, sometimes out of control, a sensation he neither liked nor could afford in his work.

In clubs, he sipped wine or drank mineral water in rock glasses and let everyone think it was vodka. That was less embarrassing than trying to explain his intolerance for one of the occupational hazards of the music business. It made him something of an oddity among his peers. He'd known plenty of musicians who could drink or get high and still manage to sound good. Gene couldn't. The sticks became rubbery on the cymbals and up tempos became an uphill battle.

Except for an intense love of the music that brought him mind-blowing exhilaration every time he sat down to play, Gene Williams only claim to kinship with the public's image of a jazz drummer was Krupa's first name. But, Gene mused now, Gene Krupa was something of a non-drinker, he'd heard and his much publicized brush with drugs like most of the media's treatment of musicians was greatly exaggerated.

Gene accepted his condition and learned how to handle it, but sometimes, when the occasion warranted, he slipped, disregarded the consequences and plunged into a bottle of Scotch with almost reckless abandon. The dues were heavy and he paid dearly, like he was doing now. If the pounding in his head was any indication, last night must have been more of a headlong sprawl than a slip, good reason or not.

It suddenly got worse as he discovered the room had a telephone. The shrill insistent double ring shattered the quiet and sounded to Gene like a fire alarm. He found it under his shirt and managed to silence it by the third ring. He took another sip of water and croaked a hoarse hello.

"Mr. Williams? Eugene Williams?" The voice was a woman's, sharp, clear and very business-like.

"Yeah."

"This is the American Embassy calling, Mr. Williams," the woman announced. "We have a message for you here. Would it be convenient to pick it up this morning?"

"A message?" His mind still wasn't functioning properly. He fumbled for a cigarette and tried to get it going with one hand. "Can't you just read it to me?"

No she couldn't read it to him, no she couldn't tell him who it was from and yes, he would have to come to the embassy in person to get it. All he wanted to do was lie down again.

There was a brief pause that sounded like she had put her hand over the receiver. Then she said, "Can we expect you sometime this morning?"

Gene sighed into the phone and surrendered. "Yeah, okay. I'll be there in about an hour or so." That would give him time to get under a long hot shower or soak in a tub, depending on what was down the hall, get some coffee and feel human again. "Wait, where is the embassy?"

"I suggest you take a taxi," the woman said, almost as if she'd been waiting for the question. "The embassy is in Grosvenor Square."

"Right. Taxi, Grosvenor Square," he repeated before he realized the woman had already hung up. He looked at the phone for a moment and then put it down.

He sat for another minute, smoking, thinking, intrigued and began to wonder. Except for a few musicians and possibly his younger sister Kate, no one even knew he was in London, much less where he was staying. As far as he knew, Kate was winding up a college graduation jaunt around Europe with some friends. She and Gene had promised to get together if their paths crossed, but he hadn't known he'd be laying over in London till he'd checked in for his flight from New York.

He was expected in Prague--everything was cool with his visa--so it couldn't be that. What then? Some administrative mix-up? Fully awake now and grateful for the slight relief as the aspirins kicked in, he realized the call had shaken him. Unexpected calls like this were like telegrams in the middle of the night. They usually meant bad news and Gene didn't want any bad news. Not now with things rolling so well. He lay back on the bed and tried to come up with an answer.

The London stopover was a no-extra-charge bonus package thrown in by the airline. He'd almost declined, but in the end, he decided to take advantage of the two day break in London to look up an old friend, a fitting celebration of his good fortune at being in the right place at the right time. The cardinal rule of the free-lance musicians.

The travel arrangements were courtesy of Pragoconcert, his next employer and the booking agency for the Prague Jazz Festival. He was due to check in that evening for a five-day guest appearance with a band known only to him as the Prague Jazz Ensemble. But anxious as he was to get to Prague, the chance to see Graham Lewis again and play even one night at Ronnie Scott's had been too tempting.

He hadn't seen Graham for nearly three years. They had met in New York when Graham was attending master classes in the mornings and haunting jazz clubs at night with Gene. London was all right, he decided. Compared to the frenzy of New York, it felt relaxed and perfectly matched his mood. His reunion with Graham was all he'd imagined and Ronnie Scott's club was definitely cool. When he'd been invited to play, the evening was complete.

There was talk of meeting some girls, but that had never materialized and then it was all a haze of going back to Graham's place for what must have been a lot of drinking and celebrating. But now this damn phone call. Short of ignoring it altogether--he couldn't do that, it might be Kate--there was only one way to settle it. He gave up finally, still puzzled and resentful of the intrusion and went off to explore the bathroom--down the hall.

The shower had turned out to be a trickle of lukewarm water, but it revived him enough to get dressed and go looking for coffee. The hotel, he remembered now, was near Paddington Station. He found it easily enough and got coffee at one of the many snack bars with stand up tables. He sipped his coffee, smoked, still nagged by the call.

In the station, the newsstands displayed the various London papers with the headlines about troop movements on the Czech border, but so what. It had nothing to do with him and the jazz festival. He simply didn't connect the two. He finished his coffee and found a taxi in front of the station.

"Where to Guv?" the driver asked.

"Ah, Grosvenor Square, American Embassy."

"Right you are, Yank. The driver slapped down the meter lever and Gene got in the spacious black taxi, wondering how far Prague was from the Czech border. For someone headed for Prague in a few hours, his knowledge of the country was virtually nonexistent. Jazz and politics simply didn't mix.

He was worried only about what kind of band he'd be playing with, would they dig him and what the drums they'd promised to provide would be like. All he'd brought were his own cymbals.

He leaned back against the seat and took in the sights as the driver negotiated the heavy West End traffic. Turning off Oxford street, the taxi finally pulled to a halt in front of a gray, stone monolith that took up one side of the square. Gene got out, paid the driver and jogged up the steps. At the top, he turned and looked back. The center of the square was a park, with stone benches and asphalt paths crisscrossing to the other side. At one end stood a statue of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

At the entrance, a Marine guard checked his passport and directed him to an information desk inside of the lobby. A young girl checked his passport again, wrote out a floor and room number on a slip of paper and directed him to the elevators.

On the third floor, he got out and found the office, knocked lightly before entering. Inside, he saw a man seated at a table reading from a file folder. He looked up at Gene with clear eyes and a quick smile. "Mr. Williams. Come in, please." The man stood and extended his hand. "I'm Alan Curtis."

Curtis was dressed well, his hair was cut fairly short and he wore stylish glasses. He sat down and motioned Gene to sit opposite him. Gene noticed then, another man standing near the window, watching him. "This is my colleague, Donald Grant," Curtis said. Grant only nodded.

"Am I in the right place?" Gene asked. "I got a call that there was a message for me. Gene's eyes flicked back to Curtis, took in the smooth even features, the glasses glinting in the harsh strip lighting. For some reason, car salesman drifted into his mind. A guy who might draw up papers on Jaguars or Mercedes in L.A. or Newport Beach.

He also saw what he thought was his own photo in the file in front of Curtis. He felt the first twinge of alarm then. The whole thing smacked of a suspect being called in for questioning, a witness asked to make a statement. Gene suddenly wished he'd simply ignored the call.

Curtis smiled. "Well, Mr. Williams, may I call you Gene?"

"Sure, whatever," Gene said, a little nervous now, glancing again over at Grant. "What about this message?"

Curtis briefly glanced at Grant. "Well, we wanted to make sure you'd come in. We needed to see you. You see we have a little problem and you're in a position, or will be very soon, to help us out." Curtis spoke with just the right amount of friendliness and solemn gravity to get Gene's attention.

"Oh, sorry," Curtis said. He reached inside his coat pocket and took out a small leather case, opened it and pushed it across the table.

It was a photo I.D. with Central Intelligence Agency across the top.

Gene glanced at it, tensed, sat up straighter and looked at Curtis. "Hey, what's this all about?"

Curtis put the case back in his coat. "I'm sure after I've explained, you'll understand why we got you down here under, well, rather false pretenses." Curtis smiled again in a disarming way. Nothing to fear from me he seemed to convey. He closed the file folder, but not before Gene confirmed the photo was indeed of himself.

"Bear with me for a minute, okay," Curtis said. "This is just routine. You see we monitor all U.S. citizens traveling to Eastern Europe."

Gene felt himself relax a little. So it was his visa and not bad news from home or anything about Kate. But why the file, his photo? The whole setup was weird. Surely the CIA didn't personally interview everyone going to an Eastern bloc country. Or did they? Gene had never been to Europe, let alone a Communist country, so what did he know.

"Is there some problem with my visa because I was--"

"No, nothing like that," Curtis said quickly. "In fact, your visa is better than a regular tourist visa, at least as far as we're concerned. Can we get you some coffee?"

"No, I'm fine," Gene said. He spotted a large clean ashtray at the end of the table. "Okay if I smoke?"

"Sure," Curtis said, sliding the ashtray toward him.

Gene lit up and listened impassively as Curtis went on.

"Let's see, the purpose of your visit is to appear at the Prague Jazz Festival, right?"

Gene didn't answer. If they knew where he was staying in London, they certainly knew why he was going to Prague and probably a lot more was in that file in front of Curtis. This was all just dressing, but Gene couldn't imagine where it was going.

"Okay," Curtis said, "I'm going to level with you, Gene. We've got a little problem and you're in a position to help us out. I don't know how much you know about us, Gene, but the Company doesn't always get good press these days."

Gene shifted in his seat. In fact, he knew a great deal about the CIA. His short stint with U.S. Army Communications often overlapped with the Embassy Center, and given the numbers employed there, some contact with agency personnel was unavoidable. *Curtis knows all this*, Gene thought.

"Much of our work," Curtis continued, "is pretty routine, dull even. Occasionally though, we call on one of our citizens. Someone like yourself who, for perfectly legitimate reasons, happens to be traveling to a country we have an interest in." Curtis paused and smiled again. "Your appearance at the jazz festival, for example, is what we call perfect cover to help us out with our little problem."

Gene looked away and locked eyes with Grant still watching everything from the window. He dragged deeply on his cigarette. Panic raced inside him. How to handle this? Shock? Outrage that he was being approached? Polite refusal? More than anything, Gene wanted to make the Prague festival. A major international jazz festival. He had a number of impressive credits, but that was not one and he wanted it badly. One phone call, he realized, and his visa could be revoked. That was all it would take to put him on a plane back to New York, the dream shattered if that's how Curtis wanted to play it.

"No offense, Mr. Curtis, but I'm just a musician. I don't see how I--"

Curtis pounced quickly. "I assure you, it won't interfere with your appearance at the festival in any way. I know it must be important to you and of course, there would be some form of compensation for your trouble. As I said, it's a small problem, no more than an errand really, but it would help us, help your country, if that doesn't sound too corny."

Gene briefly closed his eyes then stubbed out his cigarette. "I don't think so," he said cautiously. "I did my service already."

Curtis opened the file again. "Yes, Gene we know. Your record is excellent. Spec Four, communications, even a top secret clearance, which makes you an even more desirable candidate."

A desirable candidate? Gene could only stare hypnotically at the file. Curtis made it sound like an accusation. He guessed his entire life was in that file, but he was just as certain that there was nothing there remotely useful if Curtis wanted to get nasty. *Damn! Why me*, he thought as despair crept into his mind.

But Curtis didn't give up. He asked Gene questions about what he knew of the political situation in Czechoslovakia, Alexander Dubcek, the troop movements, even hinting at the

possibility of a Soviet invasion. Gene couldn't answer any of them. With characteristic single mindedness, he had completely separated the two, but, of course, they were intertwined.

"There's the real possibility there might not even be a jazz festival," Curtis said. "Did you know that?"

It had never occurred to Gene.

"I don't know how you are on history, but we don't want what happened in Hungary in 1956 to happen now in Czechoslovakia. I'm sure you don't either, and with your help, we might be able to do something about it."

"My help?" Gene couldn't stifle a laugh. It sounded so ludicrous. A jazz musician stopping the invasion of Czechoslovakia. "I don't even speak Czech," he said.

"Not a factor at all," Curtis said. "A simple pickup and delivery is all we're talking about." Curtis narrowed his eyes then, boring into Gene who realized that look was to crumble the last of his resistance.

Gene felt cornered. Despite his initial resolve, he felt himself wavering. He was not a trained agent and they certainly wouldn't entrust anything really important or dangerous to a total amateur would they? He was going to Prague, so why not. But no, he caught himself quickly. That was precisely what Curtis wanted him to think. He knew there was more, much more that Curtis wasn't telling him. Probably more than he wanted to know.

He was going to Prague as an invited guest, a performing artist. The idea of sneaking around doing whatever it was Curtis wanted him to do, didn't appeal at all. He sighed. If it meant losing out then so be it. If that was the price he had to pay then he wasn't buying.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just really don't want to get involved in this. I appreciate your problem, but I don't think I'm cut out for this kind of thing." He searched his mind for more reasons, but came up with nothing. He lit another cigarette and avoided Curtis' eyes.

Donald Grant joined them at the table then. "Mr. Williams, I understand your reluctance. I know it's kind of a shock to be asked, even temporarily, to help us out, but we're not asking you to be a spy. It's more of a courier job really." He and Curtis exchanged glances.

"Suppose I'm just not interested?"

"Then you simply refuse."

"Okay, I refuse."

"Just a minute," Curtis said. "Before you refuse, I just ask that you hear me out. If you still feel the same way, we'll thank you for listening and you can be on your way. Fair enough?"

Gene shrugged. What choice did he have. He didn't want to piss off the CIA. "Okay, I'll listen, but that's all."

Curtis nodded and smiled. He poured himself a glass of water from a carafe on the table and offered one to Gene.

"We have a friend, Gene, a Czech, who as it happens is not an agency employee per se, but he occasionally does some things for us. We'd like to contact him. Since you're going to Prague anyway, we're hoping you might help us out, save the taxpayers some money and do yourself a favor at the same time."

Gene noticed Curtis said regular people, not spy or operative. Who was he trying to bullshit with that line. Save the taxpayers' money? Give me a break.

"What do you mean, do myself a favor?"

"Well, naturally there would be some compensation for your time and trouble. We're authorized to pay you two thousand dollars, deposited in the bank of your choice. Tax free I might add."

Gene sat for a moment, his mind swimming in confusion. He didn't like the sound of the whole deal and he knew there was more. There's always more.

"Look man," he said. "I understand where you're coming from, but I just..." He paused and looked away for a minute, suddenly remembering a story by Herman Melville he'd read in college. "I prefer not to," he said.

Curtis sat back, allowed himself a smile and studied Gene for a moment. "Bartleby," he said. Gene nodded.

"Well," Curtis said. "I gave it my best shot, but I understand, Gene, I really do. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to us though. No hard feelings. We're disappointed of course, but thanks for coming in."

And just like that he was dismissed. Meeting over. He tried not to let the relief show on his face.

Curtis stood up and offered his hand again. Gene jumped to his feet and shook with Curtis. Grant gave him a polite nod, but didn't say anything.

"Just one thing," Curtis said. "I'm afraid I will have to insist you keep our little talk confidential."

"Sure, no problem," Gene said. He was relieved. Relief flooded his mind, erasing all traces of the earlier pounding in his head.

"Fine," Curtis said. "I do need you to sign this for me then. He produced a printed document from his brief and slid it across the table. "Government paper work, you know how it is."

Gene glanced at the paper. It was a statement concerning the National Security Act, a security debriefing. He didn't read it carefully. He'd seen something similar when he was discharged. What the hell. Curtis had to cover his ass. He signed and dated it and gave it back to Curtis. He headed for the door.

"Oh, Gene," Curtis said.

Gene paused, his hand on the doorknob. "Yes?"

"Break a leg in Prague, eh? I'm sure you'll enjoy the festival. It's quite an event and Prague is a beautiful city."

"Thanks," Gene said. "Thanks a lot."

He went out and closed the door behind him. He practically ran for the elevators and stabbed at the down button. He kept glancing back at the office door, expecting Curtis to call him back any moment. When the doors opened, he pushed the lobby button and leaned against the back of the car. He closed his eyes and let out an enormous sigh.

On the way out, he smiled at the girl in the information booth, he smiled at the Marine guard and didn't even cringe when someone called, "Have a nice day."

He jogged down the front steps two at a time, crossed the street and paused in the square only long enough to give the statue of Franklin D. Roosevelt a mock salute before walking quickly toward Oxford Street. Glancing in shop windows, he decided the CIA wasn't so bad after all. They had a job to do and maybe it was necessary to use a private citizens once in a while. He clapped his hands together. But not me, baby.

Curtis had given him a lot to think about, however. He didn't know a damn thing about what was going on in Prague and maybe it was time he found out. At a newsstand near Marble Arch, a *Time* magazine with Dubcek on the cover caught his eye. He grabbed it and three newspapers. He still had a few hours before his plane and across the busy intersection, Hyde Park looked inviting. He could laze away the afternoon, grab something to eat and catch up on Prague politics.

He could hardly wait to get there.

"Melville?" Donald Grant said.

Curtis shook his head. "Hey, he's not dumb. I thought he'd buy it."

"So what now?" Grant said.

Curtis didn't answer right away. He got up and walked over to the window. He glanced down in the square and caught a glimpse of Gene Williams melting into the crowd. He looked at his watch. "We'll let him think about it for a while then hit him again. He turned back to Grant.

"Did you get the backup stuff I asked for?"

"Yeah, it's all ready," Grant said. "Mead said no rough stuff though, remember?"

Curtis smiled. "Yeah I remember, but he won't know unless you tell him."

"That's true," Grant said. He was smiling too.

Three

Prague--August 16, 1968

In the office of the Czechoslovak Communist Party Central Committee, Eva Simenova looked at the wall clock for the third time in fifteen minutes. Eva was young, pretty, and as always, annoyed at having to work on a Saturday. She'd worked for the Secretary for more than seven months now, and except for the occasional extra hours, she was content with her job and knew she was better off than many twenty year-old girls in Prague. Lately though, there seemed to be more to do than usual. Secretary Indra was keeping the staff busy at all hours. Eva felt especially proud that she had been singled out for praise and even given her own key to the office.

Normally, she didn't mind the extra work, but today was different. If they had to work much longer, she was going to be late for her meeting with Jarda. Just thinking about him made her eyes sparkle. Jarda was so handsome and Eva was sure he really liked her, maybe even enough to marry her.

She sighed wearily and resigned herself to at least another hour with files and letters, hoping Jarda would understand. She had even thought about asking Secretary Indra for permission to leave early just this once, but he'd been in his private office the entire morning. He seemed to spend more time than usual in there lately and everything seemed more secretive.

Besides, like many of the girls, Eva was frightened of the Secretary. She could never say exactly why, but there was something about him that gave her the chills when he looked at her, so she nearly jumped out of her skin when the door to his office flew open and he clapped his hands loudly.

"It's getting late, ladies and I've decided you all deserve an early day. So finish up what you're doing and let's all go home. Quickly now," he said and clapped his hands again rapidly.

Eva and the other girls needed no prodding. Squealing like school children let out of class early, they gathered up their things and scurried out of the building. Outside, the late afternoon sun was warm and beautiful. Eva's mind was already on how she and Jarda would spend the evening. A quiet romantic dinner she decided, then perhaps a stroll along the river.

From up the square, she could see the tram approaching. As she fumbled in her purse for change, she suddenly remembered she'd left her lipstick in her desk drawer--the expensive one Jarda had given her from the Tuzex store. She raced back up the stairs, opened the door and stopped suddenly.

Secretary Indra was hunched over the telex machine, obviously having just completed a transmission. He turned to her as she came in. "What are you doing here?" he shouted, his eyes blazing at Eva.

Eva froze. "I'm sorry...I forgot my--"

"I don't care what you forgot you stupid girl. Get out! At once!"

Struck with fear by the Secretary's outburst, Eva's eyes darted to the telex as an answering message began to spew out of the machine. The Secretary's eyes followed her gaze and the distraction was enough for Eva to grab her lipstick and flee the office. She raced back down the stairs just in time for the tram.

Out of breath, she dropped gratefully into a seat and puzzled over the Secretary's strange behavior. And all because of a telex message from Moscow? She knew about those. Everybody did.

It was her job, wasn't it?

In Hyde Park, Gene Williams bought a box lunch at a crowded snack bar and staked out a deck chair along the edge of the serpentine. The enormous park was crowded with office workers, shoppers with packages and carrier bags and the usual throng of tourists taking advantage of the bright sunshine that had just broken through.

Gene worked his way through the lunch, alternately reading and watching the ducks and swans splashing around in the water, clamoring for scraps of food, boldly stomping out of the pond, demanding attention with their insistent quacking. Gene gave the remains of his dry sandwich to one exceptionally loud chorus and settled down with a cigarette to continue his education on Prague politics.

He was drawn to several articles. There were a number of profiles on Alexander Dubcek, recounting his meteoric rise to power and his current position that at 46, made him the youngest Communist leader in the world. But even a quick scan confirmed Alan Curtis' assessment: Dubcek was in trouble with Moscow.

There was also a recap of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 that Curtis had alluded to. The parallels between that and what could happen in Czechoslovakia were obvious and well-drawn. Several columns were devoted to assessing, evaluating and predicting the Soviet's next move by informed Kremlin watchers. The general consensus was that Dubcek would eventually bend under the pressure and Moscow's hard line policy would be restored. Of the massing Warsaw Pact troops, most writers were of the opinion that it was all for show, a bluff designed to intimidate Dubcek. The exercises were an annual affair, they reasoned, and no one seemed unduly alarmed or thought that they signaled the probability of an invasion.

Gene put aside the articles, his head whirling with facts and opinions he could never hope to sort out. He felt better informed, but chose to believe those that took the bluff theory route. The jazz festival would take place as scheduled. He wondered if Curtis was being a bit dramatic.

"Gene? It is you, isn't it?"

Gene turned in his chair at the sound of the vaguely familiar voice and found a small, slim man peering down at him curiously. He wore a straw hat and clutched a large cigar in his hand.

It took Gene a minute to recall the name. He hadn't seen George Stevens in years. Mary must be nearby somewhere. They never went anywhere alone. Old family friends. George was an insurance broker, Gene remembered, and also very boring, but his residual good humor won out.

"Hello, George. How are you?" Gene pulled himself out of the deck chair.

George Stevens beamed and pumped his hand vigorously. "Hey, Honey, look here. It's Gene Williams." He waved to a slim woman coming down the path toward them in a stylish pants suit. Her hair was pulled back and a pair of oversized sunglasses perched on her head. Of the two, Mary was the easier to take, but Gene cringed at the prospect of spending his last couple of hours in London with either of them.

"Hello, Gene, good to see you," Mary said, smiling broadly and leaning close to kiss Gene on the cheek.

"Well, isn't it incredible," George said. "Small world I always say." He grinned at Gene and adjusted the camera slung over his shoulder. He wore a bright sports jacket, dark green slacks and white shoes. His loud voice was already drawing curious stares.

Gene sighed. "Yes, I guess it is. You two just sightseeing?"

George bobbed his head enthusiastically. "Got it all right here boy," he said patting his camera. "My God what a city this is, Gene. Mary and I have just been soaking up the culture, haven't we, Honey." He turned toward Mary for confirmation.

"Oh, George, Gene doesn't want to hear about boring old London when he's headed for mysterious Prague." She took in Gene's surprised look. "Your mother told us you were going to Prague before we left. It's a big jazz party isn't it?"

"Festival," Gene corrected her. "How are the folks?"

"Oh, they're fine. In fact they're meeting us at the airport when we go home."

"When is that?"

"Tomorrow," George said, glancing at his watch. "When do you leave, Gene?"

"Tonight."

"Have you seen your sister?" Mary asked. "Your mother said she was traveling around Europe as well."

"Yeah," George said. "We would have loved to show Kate around London."

Gene managed to suppress a smile. It had been a game when he and Kate were kids--avoiding the Stevens. "No, I haven't caught up with her yet. She's with some friends."

"Well, c'mon, George," Mary said. "We've got things to do. Nice to see you Gene. Any message for the folks."

"Tell them I'll try to get home after Prague."

"You go on, honey," George said. "I want to have a little man to man with Gene."

Mary shrugged and started up the path. George put his arm around Gene's shoulder and they began to walk slowly behind her. His voice took on a conspiratorial tone. "Now listen, Gene. You want to watch your step out there in Prague. You'll be right in the thick of the Commies."

Gene nodded. "Sure, George, but don't worry. I was invited, remember. And I'm only going out there to play music." Even as he said it, Gene felt another rush of relief. It had been so close. He wondered what George would say to hear about his near recruitment to the CIA.

"Yeah, I know," George said. "But you remember what I said, eh."

"Sure, George. Take care."

He watched for a minute as George caught up with Mary. She turned and gave a final wave before they both disappeared in the throng of people. Gene glanced at his watch. It was time for him get back to the hotel and pack. He turned across the park and thought about dinner in Prague.

They came twenty minutes after he returned to his room--Alan Curtis and Donald Grant, both looking less friendly now. Later, he would think they must have staked out the hotel or had him followed the minute he left the Embassy. He couldn't have been more surprised to see them when he answered the knock on the door.

"Hello, Gene," Curtis said, walking past him into the room. From Grant he got another bland stare, as he shut the door behind them.

Gene stood for a moment, unsure and feeling that alarm in his mind again. Curtis pulled out the chair from the table and sat on it backwards, leaning his arms over the back. "Sit down, Gene," he said, indicating the bed. "I'm afraid we have some bad news."

Gene's suitcase was open on the bed. On top were some music score sheets, an arrangement a friend in New York had given him on the chance it could be used at the festival. He moved his bag aside and sat down, looking at Curtis.

Ten more minutes and I would have been gone, he thought. *But no, they would have found me, had the plane delayed.* His reprieve had been short lived and now they were going to pull the plug.

"What do you mean bad news? Let me guess. My visa has been canceled, right?"

Curtis looked amused. "No, nothing like that. It's a personal matter. We thought we'd better come in person since you went to the trouble of coming over to the Embassy this morning."

"I didn't come because I wanted to. Remember? What personal matter?"

"Had any thoughts about changing your mind?"

Gene glanced over at Grant. *Here's my out. Just say yes, sure I'd be happy to become a temporary spy.* "No, none at all."

Curtis sighed and shook his head. "Well I'm sorry to hear that, Gene I really am. Aren't you sorry too, Donald?"

"It is very disappointing," Grant said.

"You see, Gene, with a little cooperation from you, we might be able to help you out with your problem."

"My problem." What was it going to be? An irregularity in his passport? An anonymous phone call from the Czechoslovak Embassy. Well, Curtis could do whatever he wanted. Gene wasn't buying today. "Don't tell me. Let me guess. Owing to my membership in the Democratic Party, the Czechoslovak government has decided I shouldn't be allowed in the country."

"It's not funny, Gene." Something in Curtis's tone told Gene Curtis wasn't lying. He patted his coat pocket and produced a photo copy of what looked like a newspaper clipping. "We just got this, official confirmation from Madrid. This was in yesterday's paper."

Gene took the clipping. There was no way of telling what paper it had come from. He began to read and suddenly felt like he'd been kicked in the stomach.

UPI, Madrid. Spanish police here today reported the arrest of Katherine Williams, 21, U.S. citizen from Vista, California. Williams is reportedly being held and charged with illegal possession of narcotics. No arraignment date has been scheduled, pending further investigation. The U.S. Embassy is making inquiries into the case.

Gene read it and read it again, not wanting to believe, but it was there, right in front of his eyes. He felt a wave of nausea sweep over him, his throat tighten. Little sister Kate, who never touched anything stronger than coffee, in a Spanish jail on drug charges? Kate was an athlete--swimming, surfing, tennis, you name it, Kate did it. But drugs? No way. This had to be a mistake.

He looked up at Curtis then, saw his expression, his face hard and set and knew it wasn't a mistake. Curtis knew it too. "This can't be right. I know my sister. This isn't her scene. She--"

"Maybe you don't know her as well as you think." Curtis said.

It was seeing the now half smile on Curtis' face. "Fuck you, Curtis!" He sprang off the bed, but Grant was behind him pinning his arms. He struggled for a few moments, consumed in impotent fury, then slumped back.

"Okay, let him go," Curtis said. Gene jerked free of Grant and glared at Curtis. The clipping had dropped to the floor in the scuffle. Curtis picked it up. "Sorry," Curtis said. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded, but we see it all the time." He got up and paced around the room. "Tourists, college students going abroad for the first time, even businessmen occasionally. They think their American passport makes them immune from the laws of other countries. Granted, this is not much, but sometimes foreign authorities like to make an example. Your sister was just unfortunate to be caught."

"No way," Gene said. He could only think of Kate, alone, frightened, lost in a Spanish jail.

"The point is," Curtis continued, "maybe we can do something about this. Speed things up, a quick trial if she's charged, light sentence, maybe even outright release."

Now he was getting it. The friendly patriotic pitch hadn't worked so they'd let him stew for a couple of hours before they brought out the big guns. The formalities were over. This was the real game, only it wasn't a game and Gene didn't know there were no rules. "You did this," he said to Curtis, a strange feeling of unreality seeping through him.

Curtis sighed and glanced at Grant. "No, Gene, I'm sorry you think that, but one thing we do not do is plant drugs on unsuspecting tourists. We had absolutely nothing to do with your sister's arrest."

"We just want to help if we can," Grant added.

"Oh, fuck you, too. What is this good cop, bad cop? We all know you set this up." But Gene knew that instant he was going to do whatever necessary to get Kate free and back home safely.

"I think you're being a bit dramatic, Gene," Curtis said.

"Am I? And you guys are just loyal, dedicated civil servants, right? You wear American flags in your lapels, go to church on Sundays and eat apple pie." He stood up then. "Why didn't you just frame me?"

"Because your medical records state you have an intolerance for alcohol and drugs." Curtis' voice was matter of fact now. "It just wouldn't wash."

Gene sat down again and bowed his head. "What do you want me to do?" he heard himself say.

"Fine," Curtis said. "I knew we'd come to an understanding." He seemed almost cheerful. "Naturally, the first thing we do is see about getting your sister released. We have, shall we say, certain influence in these matters."

"I bet you do. Just make it go away."

Curtis seemed not to hear. "Don't forget the compensation I mentioned this morning. I think you'll find it quite generous, given the little we're asking you to do, plus aiding your sister."

"You can use the money for her," Gene said. "Bail, bribes, whatever it takes. Just get her out." He glared at Curtis, hating him and all he stood for. "Let's just get on with it."

Curtis seemed not to notice or care. He quickly took on a business-like tone. "Okay, here's the rundown. It's very simple really. About two months ago, West German Intelligence came up with this." He took a small object out of his pocket. "Know what this is?" It was a small metal container with a screw top used for 35 mm film.

Gene shrugged. "Film, I guess."

"Microfilm to be exact." He returned it to his pocket. "On it were detailed plans for the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Everything but when. That's what we don't know. More

recently one of our sources in Prague came into some new information that we think just might give us the missing factor in this equation, or, and this is what we're really hoping, that the whole operation has been scrubbed. I don't think I have to tell you how much we'd like that to be true."

Gene lit a cigarette and listened. Overwhelmed that he was being drawn into a world he had no knowledge of, no conception. Agents, microfilm, invasion. Curtis' words frightened him.

"There's just one problem, Gene," Curtis continued. "Our source in Prague refuses to pass on this information through normal channels. He wants a totally safe contact, someone without any intelligence connections." He pulled his chair close and pointed at Gene. "Someone just like you, Gene."

"But why?"

Curtis looked away. "Frankly, we're not entirely sure. He may be overreacting to the show on the borders, think he's under suspicion, it's hard to say. But he's adamant about a safe contact and this is where you come in. No one suspects you of being anything, but what you are--a musician. Perfect cover. Our source is happy, we get the information and you've done your country a service."

"How does he know I'm his...contact?" It was strange even to say the word.

Curtis smiled and seemed pleased with himself. "That's the beauty of the whole thing. He tapped the music sheets on top of Gene's suitcase. "Music." He smiled again as if he'd just explained the meaning of life. Gene stared back at him blankly.

"Our source, his real job is music copyist. That's his cover, although he was doing it long before he came to work for us. Good reputation, does fine work so I'm told, often for the Prague Symphony." Curtis picked up the pale green music sheets, covered in penciled notes. "This is for the festival, right?"

Gene shrugged. "It could be, but the music may already be set. A new arrangement would have to be rehearsed. I can't just go in and demand--"

"You'll have to," Curtis said, looking at the score. "How does this work?"

"This is the conductor's score. It's sent to a copyist who uses it to make individual parts for each instrument in the band. During a rehearsal or performance, the leader can refer to the score, follow along, see what each instrument is playing."

"Okay, after the parts are copied, the score is returned with the parts?"

"Yes, in case the arranger wants to make changes later."

Curtis sat down again looking at the score. "All we want is to let our source know it's you he's to contact. Is it possible to change something in the score, do something to the music that only a music copyist would pick up on as unusual, so he'd know it's our signal? It would have to be subtle. Something out of the ordinary, but at the same time, not be noticed by a layman even if he were looking right at it. See what I mean?" Curtis looked at Gene expectantly.

Gene stared at the score, thinking, an idea forming in his mind. If this source was as professional as Curtis claimed, any minor mistake would be routinely picked up and corrected. Arrangers were not known for neatness and good copyists corrected errors in notes, key signatures or sharp and flat signs. But there was a way, he realized. Something that would leap off the page like a red flag.

"We could change one of the clef signs."

"I don't follow you," Curtis said.

"Look," Gene said, pointing to the score as Grant came over to look as well. "At the beginning of each line there's a clef sign for every instrument. These first five are for the saxophones so they have a treble clef sign." He pointed to the S-like symbol. "See, the sign is the

same for the trumpets. Now the trombones are bass clef instruments, different." Again Gene pointed to the symbol that looked like a capital letter C written backwards with a dot in the middle.

Curtis looked up from the score as if waiting for the punch line of a joke. "So, what are you suggesting?"

"Here, in the rhythm section parts. The piano is treble clef, but bass and drums are bass clef. If that sign is wrong or deliberately changed, a copyist would, I think, pick it up immediately. One thing arrangers do not do is confuse clef signs. If we put a treble clef on the drum part and with the music coming from me, he should know it's some kind of signal."

Curtis looked at Grant and smiled. "That's it then. You've got it." He looked in the desk drawer and found a pencil and handed it to Gene. He and Grant both watched as Gene erased the bass clef sign on the drum part and wrote in a treble clef symbol.

But even as he replaced the original symbol, Gene wondered about the seemingly unnecessary precautions. He realized there was a lot Curtis wasn't telling him. He folded the music and put it in his suitcase.

"Now, the important thing is for you to get this music to our source as soon as possible after you get to Prague. His name is Josef Blaha. If anyone questions you about it, you can just say, oh I don't know, you heard about him through friends in New York. You'll have to think of something. I'll leave that to you. After that, he'll probably contact you quite openly. After all, it wouldn't be unusual for him to confer with you about the music."

Resigned, Gene nodded. Curtis seemed to have thought of everything. But he could only think how complicated Prague was going to be now. Making excuses, lying, secret meetings and still try to give a good performance with the band.

"The car is here," Grant said, looking out the window.

Gene looked at his watch. It was getting close to plane time, but Curtis had obviously thought of that too.

"We have a car to take you to Heathrow and don't worry about the room. We'll take care of it."

"What a guy," Gene said.

"Hey, c'mon, Gene. I can't tell you how valuable this is to us. And one other thing. Leave your sister to us. Don't even contact your family yet. It might, well, hamper our efforts. But don't worry. We'll get right on it." He handed Gene a business card. "If absolutely necessary, you can contact me at this number in Prague."

Gene took the card and absently put it in his shirt pocket. Curtis and Grant headed for the door. "Hurry it up, okay. We'll be outside."

Gene nodded and finished gathering up his things.

"Oh, one more thing, Gene. Don't worry, this will all be over before you know it."

"Well what do you think?" Curtis asked Grant as they left the hotel. A dark green Rover was idling at the curb. Curtis held up five fingers for the driver.

Grant shrugged, his eyes roving about the street. "It should work. That bit with the music beats anything we could have come up with, but Williams? I don't know. He's a wild card. You might have some trouble there."

"Yeah, I know," Curtis agreed, "but he can be handled."

"I hope you're right," Grant said. "Well, it's your show from here. I'm just glad I'll be back in Washington when he finds out that story about his sister is a plant. What's he going to do then?"

"By that time, it won't matter. We'll have what we want and the money should soften the blow. He'll understand."

"You think so?" Grant looked skeptical.

"You just tell Mead we're a go. I'll get word to Arnett in Prague." He laughed. "I just remembered something. Arnett hates jazz. He's going to love tailing Williams. Can you picture that?"

Grant smiled. "Not unless that band knows some Johnny Cash tunes."

If you enjoyed this sample, *Czechmate: The Spy Who Played Jazz* can be purchased at your favorite Independent Bookseller or on-line. It is available as a Trade Paperback and in all eBook formats.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jazz drummer and author Bill Moody has toured and recorded with Maynard Ferguson, Jon Hendricks and Lou Rawls. He lives in northern California where he hosts a weekly jazz radio show and continues to perform around the Bay Area. The author of seven novels featuring jazz pianist-amateur sleuth Evan Horne, Bill has also published a dozen short stories in various collections.

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