

CZECH MATE

by Kristin Kisska

*Destination: Prague, Czechoslovakia
Living “Prague Spring” proves hazardous when the
newly-granted freedom of the press comes under
renewed Soviet threat and student Pavla Lašková finds
herself torn between family and friend.*

*Summer 1968
Prague*

The bells of St. Nicholas chimed, startling the flock of pigeons which guarded the statue in the middle of Prague’s cavernous old town square. The birds fluttered past Pavla, causing her to trip and scatter her stack of newspapers across the cobblestones.

Do prdele! Oh, hell. The documents, special edition copies of a freedom manifesto signed by seventy Czech and Slovak intellectuals, would be crumpled. Her brother, Karel, was waiting for her at Charles University so they could distribute them to students that morning before classes began. Now she’d be late. Knuckles scraping raw against the granite pavers, she scooped the papers into a haphazard pile.

No one ventured near the Baroque church to help Pavla gather her mess. She couldn’t blame them. The Party had controlled religion for enough generations that most Czechs were now agnostic. Stuffing the wrinkled newspapers—which a mere two days ago could’ve gotten her expelled from her university—into her satchel, she dashed to make up for lost time.

“Stop, citizen!”

She’d attended enough Youth Communist League meetings to know that the clipped tone of voice could only mean one thing.

Secret police.

Pavla froze, not daring to turn around. The pile of manifestos burned a hole through her messenger bag into her back. What had possessed her to risk walking through the center of Prague from the printer? Freedom of the press had been in existence for less than twenty-four hours. No one had tested yet whether the Party would honor the liberty.

“Identification papers.” A second voice, gravelly—suggesting years of chain-smoking unfiltered cigarettes—barked the command. The metal tips of his boots clicked on the bricks and stopped a few paces behind her shoulder. Grateful the police officer couldn’t see the frustration on her face, she slipped her wallet from her jumper’s pocket. His gloved hand confiscated her personal documentation.

The street lamp shone down on her like an interrogation spotlight, but not a whisper of air stirred in *Staroměstské náměstí*. Somehow, even the few pre-dawn pedestrians in the Old Town Square had evaporated as quickly as her hope. No nearby alleyway offered escape. Just the massive wooden church door of St. Nicholas stood by challenging her, agnostic that she was, to beg God for help. But if her mother’s prayers hadn’t saved her father, why would He answer hers now?

“Lašková, Pavla. Student. Charles University.” Boredom laced his statements as he read her identification, but they all recognized the power he wielded. “Turn around.”

Pavla forced a neutral look on her face, obliterating any trace of fear or guilt before facing them. Both police officers sported leather jackets despite the summer’s warmth. While her hands hovered midair, she prayed—yes, prayed—that her brother would show up to intervene. That she’d see her mother again.

“Comrade Lašková . . .” The policeman paused to light a cigarette with the flame from a brass lighter. Her pulse hammered the cadence of a death march. If the police searched her, they’d find the stack of manifestos in her messenger bag and arrest her for treason. “. . . explain why you, the daughter of a political prisoner, are in front of a church. A subversive—”

“Pavlinka, there you are!” A loud, energetic voice fractured the otherwise silent square as a tall young man jogged toward them, his straight hair bouncing into his eyes with each step. She didn’t recognize him. “Silly *holka*, we were supposed to meet under the astronomical clock.”

Whoever the hell he was, this man must be her angel. If she believed in angels, which she didn’t.

“Papers . . .” The smoking police officer, who’d assumed command over his partner, held out his free hand to inspect the intruder’s documentation. Pavla used the distraction to inch her messenger bag further from view. “Novák, Marek. Broadcast assistant. Radio Prague. What is your business here, Comrade Novák?”

The young man—Marek, she now knew—towered over her. He pivoted as he spoke to the policemen at a quick clip, some excuse

about meeting Miss Lašková to tutor her in applied physics. How did he know her name? Or her engineering curriculum?

Behind Marek's back, which only Pavla could see, he flashed three fingers. Then he moved his hands away.

In her peripheral vision, a figure shifted, camouflaged by the shadows of the massive statue in the center of the square. A third policeman.

Pavla's gut churned. Her brother always said there are no coincidences. With so many police officers together at this early hour, her arrest must have been coordinated. Premeditated. She was trapped just like her father had been. At twenty years old, she was a dissident. The proof was tucked inside her bag, in the copies of the freedom manifesto she and Karel had planned to distribute at the university.

But the secret police backed off. They returned both of their personal documents and departed without another word. Marek, her guardian angel, had intervened. He'd saved her from her father's fate.

He guided her toward the medieval astronomical clock, a cluster of overlapping golden dials. Inside her jumper pockets, she balled her hands into fists to keep them from trembling. Once they were out of sight of all three officers, she stopped dead.

"Thank you." She breathed her words, not sure she'd articulated them.

"Be careful, Little Rook." The apostles in the medieval tower began their mechanical march. Marek spirited away as the clock's figure of death tolled the time.

Why had the police left them alone? How did he know her family's nickname for her? Or that she'd needed help?

"Wait. Who are you?"

Pavla squinted against the August evening sunshine reflecting off the brass saints as she raced across Charles Bridge. The Baroque statues reminded Pavla of her father's beloved chess set pieces. Hovering beyond the Vltava River was Prague Castle, big rook to her Little Rook.

Since it was summer break, instead of taking classes at Charles University, she'd been working this past month retooling machines at the same factory as her mother in the outskirts of Prague. But every Saturday, she trekked the hour-long tram ride into the city to meet her university friends.

Despite the billowing cigarette smoke inside the pub, she plowed through the crush of students anticipating a chilled, frothy Pilsner and spirited debate. The hot topic was the new Action

Program, reforms to their country's communist regime that First Secretary of the Party Dubček introduced a few months ago. He dubbed it "Socialism with a Human Face." Czechoslovakia now enjoyed freedom of speech, freedom of movement across the borders, a multi-party government, and, granted almost two months earlier, freedom of the press.

The people—she—had a voice. Finally. They could speak their minds. Even Radio Prague's broadcasts were stripped of Soviet propaganda. Pavla could travel to Germany or Austria. She, her brother Karel, and most every other university student welcomed these changes like springtime after a decades-long oppressive winter.

They were living Prague Spring.

Pavla squeezed into an open space at the bar. With her fingers curled around the edge of the worn mahogany, she leaned forward to flag the bartender. Instead, she noticed a familiar face sitting alone. It was the same young man who'd saved her six weeks earlier from the secret police.

Bypassing her friends' table, she plopped three beers in front of him, sloshing foam down one of the glasses.

"I found you, Marek Novák." She dragged a stool from a nearby table. "May I join you or are you too busy tutoring strangers in applied physics?"

"Please stay. Why three?" Half standing, his smile revealed a dimple she hadn't noticed when he'd intervened on her behalf.

"One beer for each policeman who let me go." Pavla clinked his glass as she looked him in the eyes and took care not to cross arms—silly Czech superstitions, but she couldn't afford to tempt fate. "*Na zdraví!*"

"Cheers, Little Rook. To the health of those three . . . clowns." His fingers dwarfed the pilsner glass. They were beautiful in their strength, which lead to solid wrists and the arms straining his sleeves. Was it getting warmer in here? She gulped her beer to hide the telltale blush creeping up her neck.

"Did we ever meet before that morning on *Staroměstské náměstí*?" Not a chance. She'd have remembered him if they had.

"I met someone from your family. He holds you in high esteem."

Karel. That explained his knowing her nickname and her classes. Attending the same university as her overbearing big brother had been suffocating. Even her mother had tried to temper his protectiveness. But if Karel had recommended her to this Czech Adonis, then perhaps he'd backed off his guard. Slightly.

"Don't believe everything he told you. I can be trouble when

pressed, as he knows firsthand.” Pavla poured the third beer into each of their glasses, trying not to stare at Marek’s lips as he laughed at her quip. “So tell me, are you a university student also?”

“Used to be. I work at Radio Prague now.”

“You report the news?” She straightened, leaning toward him. She and her mother tuned into the state radio station whenever the anti-communist Radio Free Europe frequency was jammed.

“Not quite. I started in January, right after Dubček began his reforms, but they won’t let me broadcast without censoring. Though if our new freedom of speech prevails, I hope to report live someday.”

His voice. Oh, she could listen to that deep timbre every night on the radio. And in person. “Why were you—”

“Forget about me. I’m boring. Why did you decide to study engineering? Not many women choose that field.”

“Don’t change the subject, Marek. Why were you in the square that morning? You weren’t too scared to help me. I tried to find you these past few weeks to thank you, but I couldn’t.”

“Meet me for dinner. Tomorrow.”

“I can’t. I live outside Prague when the university isn’t in session.”

“Next Saturday, then. Here.” His knee grazed hers, launching shockwaves through her. His sandy hair, square jawline, hazel eyes, and of course that dimple were an intoxicating combination.

She glanced away, remaining silent. Not because she didn’t want to accept his invitation. In fact, this moment was perfect. But she didn’t want to curse him. Bad—tragic—things happened to people she cared about.

Then again, he might be different. He possessed a defying sense of courage she’d never witnessed. All her progressive, freedom-fighting friends were vocal in support of their country’s recent changes, but no one had ever challenged the police directly. Except Marek.

She nodded and held up three fingers.

“Pavlinka! Don’t talk to him!”

The grip on her arm spun her off her chair, away from Marek, and through the crowd before she could inhale her next breath. Her brother, Karel, dragged Pavla outside the pub into the balmy summer evening and whipped her around. Though quite late, the sun had yet to escape the horizon. Hundreds of spires stood silhouetted above them in the faux-dusk.

“Let. Go. Of. Me.” After ripping her hand from Karel’s grip, she shoved, sending him scrambling backward. “So what did I do wrong this time?”

“You were almost arrested the morning we distributed copies of the *Two Thousand Words* manifesto?” Though only a couple years older, his frown lines had been etched into his brow ever since the day he’d inherited the title head of the Laška family. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“*Ježíš Kristus*. You’re not my father. Besides, that was six weeks ago.” Pavla crossed her arms but drew a shaky breath. As children of a political prisoner, both she and Karel were branded with invisible bullseyes. It was a matter of time before they’d be suspected of contributing to the anti-Soviet resistance, a charge that would be easy to prove. “How did you find out?”

“Gossip gets around. Trust me.” He spat his words. Gone was her patient big brother who helped her fine-tune her skills at chess—the game of strategy their father, a master chess player, had taught them both before he was arrested.

“I got away. Case closed, Karel. You must have some other reason for embarrassing me in front of my friends.”

Karel placed his finger on his lips, then motioned for her to follow him around the corner. Peeking in through a sliver separating the smoke-stained curtains, Pavla watched Marek order another beer.

“Why were you talking to that scoundrel, Pavlínka?” Perspiration beaded on the bridge of Karel’s nose, fogging his wire-rim glasses. He wiped them on the hem of his button-down shirt.

“This is ridiculous. I can talk to whomever I want. Besides, Marek said you spoke highly of me.”

“Lies! The only thing I’ve ever told him was to stay away from our family. Plus, your *friend’s* name isn’t Marek Novak. It’s Zdeněk.”

“That . . . cannot be true.” She frowned at him sideways. But her rational-to-a-fault brother fidgeted with his glasses, a nervous tic he’d acquired after their father disappeared, evidence that as much as she didn’t believe it, Karel did.

“Zdeněk Stiburk. He was a few years ahead of me at the University. He was arrested as a dissident and sentenced to a labor camp.”

“Impossible, Karel.” Her voice sounded hollow inside her head as she replayed every conversation with Marek. “He’s here in Prague. No one has ever returned from prison. Not even Father.”

“Exactly!” Karel grabbed her shoulders but released them before she could shove him off. Again. “How did Zdeněk escape? Was he miraculously granted clemency? Ridiculous. There’s only one way. He bought his way out. With information.”

“Are . . .” Blood pooled to her feet. She steadied herself against the building’s cinder block facade while trying to process Karel’s accusation. “Are you telling me Marek is a party spy?”

“*Do prdele*, Pavlínka. You may be book-smart, but your naiveté will get us all killed. Why do you think Zdeněk was crazy enough to intervene once the police had stopped you? Anyone else would’ve been arrested for obstruction of justice.” His face twisted as if he’d bitten into a tart lemon. “Look, the Soviets have planted informants everywhere. In our police force. In our communist party. In our university. On every street corner in Prague. They don’t trust Dubček’s changes. They believe Czechoslovakia is going soft on communism.”

“But Dubček’s been meeting with the Soviets about Prague Spring all along.” She shook her head. If her brother was wrong about the political situation in the country, maybe he was also mistaken about Marek. “Brezhnev knows every change made to relax the police state. Czechoslovakia hasn’t eliminated communism; we’re adding a human face. Just like it stated in that manifesto we distributed.”

“Wrong!” The vein in his neck throbbed. “The Warsaw Pact nations are meeting in Bratislava this very minute. What are they discussing? Reining in our new liberalization policies. Condemning the *Two Thousand Words* manifesto. Restoring censorship.”

Pavla stared at him, at a loss for words. Could the freedoms the Czechoslovakian people recently gained be at risk?

“There are no coincidences, Pavlínka. If Zdeněk is on probation, the only way he can remain safe is to expose citizens who are resisting the Soviet regime. He even tried to corner me several times over the past few months.”

“I don’t believe you!” She shifted away. Marek’s name was Zdeněk? Czechoslovakia’s Prague Spring could end? Nothing Karel said made sense.

“You want proof?” He took a deep breath before dropping his voice a notch and placing his hands gently on his little sister’s shoulders. “Look up Zdeněk’s name in the university’s registrar’s office. They keep photographs of all former students. You won’t find a record of Marek Novák anywhere.”

Pavla shook her head, thoughts colliding in her mind. “But he saved me.”

“Mark my words, Little Rook. The Soviets will regain power.” He slipped into the shadows, backing away. “You have to protect yourself, no matter what the cost.”

“You lied, Marek. Or should I call you Zdeněk?” Pavla leaned

over the same table where they'd chatted the previous week, hissing at him. She'd considered skipping their rendezvous that night, but couldn't override her curiosity. "Why?"

The din of students crowding every inch of the beer pub may have diffused the audibility but not the acid lacing her accusation. Her words hit their mark. He paled, standing as if an accused prisoner facing his sentence.

Marek's height and sheer mass dwarfed her, but she stood her ground, gripping her fists, still incredulous that Karel's bizarre theory about Marek had been correct. How could she have let a dimple and broad shoulders influence her perception? "Why didn't you tell me the truth?"

"I'm glad you came, Pavlínka. I can explain everything. Let's go to a restaurant—"

"No. I'm not going anywhere with you." Her chin quivered, her nose flaring with each breath. "How do I know you won't alert the police?"

"I didn't when you were carrying copies of the Two Thousand Words manifesto. Why would I now?"

"You knew I had the papers?"

"Yes. And if you look at the bottom of the declaration, you'll find my signature on it with the other sixty-nine intellectuals." He waited for her to respond, but she pressed her lips tighter. "Forget dinner, but at least give me five minutes to defend myself."

He pulled out the stool she'd occupied the week before, but she flinched and shifted aside. How could one piece of furniture embody loss? In that one gesture, her romantic hopes evaporated into the grim reality of secret police and neighbors betraying neighbors. Instead, she borrowed a chair from a nearby table and sat as far away as possible, crossing her arms.

Waiting.

"*Tak*. So, what would you like to know?" He placed his hands on the table and trained his eyes on her.

"Why did you lie to me?"

"About my name?"

"About telling me that my brother spoke highly of me."

"I never said that."

"Yes, you said, 'I met someone from your family. He holds you in high esteem.' That could only be Karel."

"I meant your father."

Pavla's throat ran dry. Her father was dead. How dare he invoke his memory? She stood to leave, never to set eyes on Marek again.

"Your father—Václav—saved me. I was sentenced to the same

forced labor camp. For two years he gave me half his daily food rations. Apparently, I reminded him of Karel.”

“He’s . . .” She stopped mid-turn and swallowed, grasping for some thread of truth among the lies and propaganda. “My father’s still alive?”

“He was when I left in January. He asked me to find you and your family. To make sure you’re safe. To send his love. He reminisced about you every day. I tried to tell Karel several times, but he wouldn’t talk to me.”

“Prove it.” Pavla sank into the chair, trying but failing to absorb all this new information that seemed to fit together seamlessly. What was she missing?

“A month before your father was arrested, he took you to your forest chata. Outside the cabin, you got between a mother boar and her piglets. Your father heard the squeals and grabbed you just before she charged. You both escaped by climbing a tree, but the boars wouldn’t leave. The night grew colder, so your father wrapped his shirt around a stick and lit it on fire with his cigarette lighter. He used the torch to scare them away.”

“Did he mention how old I was?” Searching Marek’s eyes, framed by squint lines etched like wings, she found honesty. She’d never told anyone outside her family what had happened, but those boars had terrified her almost as much as the secret police.

“About five years old. Your father misses playing chess with you, Little Rook. I’m surprised he survived all these years. The labor camp is worse than you can imagine.”

Still not able to face Marek, she forced her fists to relax. “Few are released from the forced labor camps. So why you? Why not my father?”

“Because new evidence proved I was innocent. I changed my name to protect my family.” The vein pulsed on his forehead. She could relate. Sharing a name with a convicted political prisoner was its own circle of hell.

Marek glanced at his watch, revealing a jagged scar on his wrist. “I know you have more questions, but I must cancel our plans for tonight. Forgive me. I’d still like to take you to dinner. Soon. I can pick you up . . .”

There it was again. That dimple.

She paused. “Tomorrow.”

After he had departed, she peeked through a slit in the curtain. On the street corner, a man wearing a dark leather jacket lit a cigarette.

The police officer with the gravelly voice.

Pavla and Marek had lingered far too long over dinner and three beers—always three—at the restaurant. Every night this past week, he'd driven out to her mother's flat in the outskirts of Prague to meet Pavla for dinner. After hearing stories of her father at the labor camp and poring over their family photographs with Marek, her mother was as attached to him as she was. Karel would accept him, given time.

Who needed sleep? It was late-August, and this was Pavla's last week working in the factory before the hops harvest began. Then her university classes and her political activism meetings would resume.

In the night's silence—strolling hand-in-hand with Marek along the street lamp dotted boulevard—she found peace. She pressed her lips against his. They kissed under the waning crescent moon.

Finally.

Humming in the distance grew louder until the air vibrated. A squadron of military airplanes flew low overhead. In the dim silvery moonlight, the silhouette of parachutes floated to the ground like the puff seeds of a dandelion.

“*Ježíši Marie!*” Marek grabbed her hand. “Come!”

They raced back to his rusty Škoda and fumbled to unlock the doors, not daring to glance behind where Prague's airport lay. Marek almost ripped the stick shift out of the floorboard while changing gears as the tires rumbled over the cobblestone roads.

“Paratroopers?” Pavla gripped the dashboard to keep from hitting the windshield.

“Soviets.”

“Because of Dubček's reforms?” Karel had warned her that Brezhnev didn't support Prague Spring. His tolerance of Czechoslovakia had apparently run out.

Marek clenched his jaw.

“Where are we going?” Pavla swallowed bile as they bulleted toward Prague's center.

“Radio Prague. We need to inform the people. So they can prepare.”

Minutes after midnight, the radio station's phone rang. Soviet tanks had crossed several borders into Czechoslovakia. Rumors circulated that this invasion could be the largest Soviet deployment of military force since World War II.

They, together with a small crew of night-shift employees, drafted statements to read to the country. Marek's radio broadcast went live—realizing his dream. He and the other journalists were on a constant news loop with updates and a message from Dubček.

The Russians are invading. Stay calm. Don't fight back.

"Marek!" Pavla squeezed his arm when it seemed he had a moment to catch his breath. Karel's warnings were coming true. "Brezhnev's irritation escalated after Dubček allowed freedom from censorship and the press. One of his first objectives of the occupation may be to take control of the television and radio stations."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Do you have any extra radio equipment? I can set up an underground station to continue broadcasting if they attack the station."

"Brilliant, Pavlínka." He graced her with a flash of his dimple while shoving a box in her arms. Together they raced around the station gathering coiled wires, metal boxes covered with switches and knobs, and headphones.

She followed Marek and his colleague, Jiří, into the dark street, schlepping her burden against the flow of people chanting and marching through the streets. Why didn't they go back inside? While she fought the instinct to hide and protect herself, the crowd swelled to thousands in the dark of night. The Czechoslovakian people shared one mission.

Resist the Soviet occupation.

After stowing the gear in the trunk of his Škoda, Marek stopped her from sitting in the passenger seat. "Pavlínka, no. You can't go. Defying the Party is treason. The Soviets will find the underground station."

"Too late. We're all dissidents now." She kissed him, then snatched his keys and hopped in the car with Jiří. Unrolling the window, she yelled back as they sped off, "Keep broadcasting from Radio Prague, Marek. The people need you!"

After jerry-rigging a makeshift underground radio station in her empty dorm room, Pavla left Jiří behind and joined the Czechoslovakians' nighttime pilgrimage toward Prague's epicenter, *Václavské náměstí*. At every corner, people tore down street signs and flipped the arrows to misdirect the Soviets.

Regardless, by dawn, an endless stream of tanks plowed into Prague. Tens of thousands of demonstrators waving Czechoslovakian flags swarmed around the tanks. Soviet soldiers fired guns at protesters, but the crowd refused to disperse.

As Pavla draped a discarded flag over a lifeless, bloodied victim, someone turned up the volume of a portable radio. Marek's voice pierced the chaos, advising protesters to remain calm. The Soviets had arrested Dubček and were flying him to Moscow for

questioning. He ended his broadcast with an anti-Soviet call: “We are with you. Be with us, too.”

I’m with you, Marek. He was still broadcasting from Radio Prague. Thank God, he was safe. She closed her eyes, his voice projecting strength while everything she held dear collapsed. Her country. The democratic reforms she, Karel—who must be somewhere among the protesters—and her father had risked their lives to promote.

Pavla struggled against the mob to return to Marek. She skirted past collapsed building facades, flag-covered bodies forgotten on street corners, and trucks loaded with flag-waving Czechs.

Tanks stood sentry, facing the station’s building. Through the haze of gun smoke and chanting, she crept behind the Soviet soldiers aiming at the unarmed protesters who’d formed a human barricade to protect the radio station. More bodies littered the ground.

Scrambling around one of the tanks, Pavla tripped on a loosened cobblestone. White hot pain exploded through her knee. Breathing through the pain, she struggled to stand, but combat boots stepped in her way, blocking her.

“Comrade Lašková. We meet again.”

That gravelly voice.

Behind the gun’s barrel pointing at her head was the same secret police officer who’d almost arrested her two months before when she’d dropped the stack of manifestos. The same one who invaded her nightmares ever since. Now, he was dressed in a Soviet military uniform.

As she raised her hands in surrender, a single file line of radio reporters exited the station. All were handcuffed, except one.

Marek.

Somewhere in the mob, several portable radios blasted a continuous stream of static, the result of the now-occupied Radio Prague. The noise sputtered, then Jiří’s voice rang clear from the radio waves. Live. He repeated the word craved by every Czechoslovakian—*Svoboda*. Freedom.

The commander motioned Marek over. Why wasn’t he handcuffed? Karel’s warnings flashed through Pavla’s brain like a warped montage. Was he a spy?

“How is Radio Prague still broadcasting?”

Marek faced the commander unblinking, a duel.

“Agent Novak, where is the other studio?”

Seconds ticked by as if each one held an eternity. Still, Marek wouldn’t speak. A soldier shoved him to his knees, face-to-face with Pavla. Why wouldn’t he save himself?

Marek's eyes met hers, and she knew. To save himself, he had to betray her. And he—her guardian angel—refused, but she could save him. They were pawns in this twisted game of chess, but every Soviet bullet was real.

"I did it." Each syllable condemned her for life. Perhaps she would be reunited with her father. "I set up the other radio station."

Pavla was dragged into a standing position, shocks jolting through her split knee.

"Don't believe her," Marek ordered as handcuffs were clicked around his wrists. "Comrade Lašková knows nothing. She's innocent."

She shook her head. The satellite radio had been her idea, her crime. Not his. Why risk returning to the forced labor camps?

"Agent—no, Prisoner—Novák, you failed every task of your mission. You were assigned to infiltrate and disable Radio Prague."

"I performed my assignment." Marek slumped, squeezing his eyes shut.

"You fed us counter-intelligence and interfered with recruiting members of Prisoner Vaclav Lašek's family. Now, this? You undermined last night's Soviet Operation Danube by broadcasting from Radio Prague." The commander stepped between them and pointed his gloved hand at him. "The Party does not tolerate double agents."

"I'd rather die than return to the forced labor camp."

Marek craned his neck, searching over his shoulder until he found her. Behind his back, tethered in handcuffs, he held three fingers. "Boars, Pavlínka. The Soviets are like wild boars, but you're smart. Fight them. Use their weapons against them."

I love you, she mouthed, wishing she could teleport back to two hours earlier when her life had been perfect.

"Re-education may have been an option had you not signed the *Two Thousand Words* manifesto." The commander placed the barrel on Marek's forehead.

No!

The tanks' clanking and the peoples' yells disintegrated into nothingness. Silence washed over Pavla until all she could hear was her heartbeat, much like her father's chess clock. Her strategy materialized.

Her move.

Pavla snatched a nearby soldier's gun and aimed at the commander's head. Anyone who believed a pawn couldn't take the opponent's king hadn't played against her.

"Don't shoot him, Pavlínka."

From behind, cool metal pressed against the back of her head

followed by the telltale clicks of a trigger being cocked open, creating a broken triangle of death.

“I warned you to stay away from Zdeněk, Little Rook.” This voice she’d loved for forever. But why? How?

“Karel?”

“Checkmate.”

