

CHAPTER 1--WINNER

Brian Parker was about to open his laminated map of Lucerne, just to verify the square they were nearing was the Mühlenplatz, when his friend Tim Gifford elbowed him in the ribs and announced, “That guy right there. He’s a spy!”

Entering the square, Brian scanned the café to locate the spy Tim had spotted. He locked on to the target immediately and knew why Tim suspected the man: jet-black hair, commanding eyes, strong jaw. He was the type of continental smoothie Brian pictured lounging in a *piazza* in Rome, not a *platz* here in Lucerne. The man wore a dark blue suit but no tie. He leaned across his table with practiced casualness to light the cigarette of his companion, a breathtaking blonde. Brian was too far away to see what kind of lighter Tim’s supposed spy used, but he saw a flash of gold in the man’s hand. Maybe a Colibri, just like Foster Blake used.

Brian turned back to Tim, who was grinning in triumph.

“Not a chance,” Brian said.

“Oh, come on!” Tim said as they walked past the man and his gorgeous companion.

“Look at that guy! Killer looks. Sharp clothes. Hot blonde in a teeny dress. I bet he’s carrying the

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blueprints for a next-generation laser cannon in his briefcase.”

Brian laughed. Tim always made him laugh. The two best friends from Wisconsin had been playing “Spot the Spy” since their European trip began four days earlier in Austria. They had dreamed up the game during study halls back in Wauwatosa East High School while they were selling candy bars to pay for the trip. So far Tim was ahead in the spy game. Way ahead. According to him, every third person who walked through their hotel lobby in Innsbruck had been a spy, plus the entire population of Liechtenstein.

Brian, however, had yet to spot a single spy.

“I keep telling you real spies don’t look like tuxedo models,” Brian said as they walked toward Hug bakery, another café across the Mühlenplatz from their disputed spy. “They don’t want to draw attention to themselves. They want to look ordinary.”

“Lighten up, buddy. This isn’t real; it’s a game.”

“So you want me to cheat?”

Tim shook his head. “Foster Blake would be very disappointed in you.”

“How could I disappoint a fictional character?”

“Look, you’ve read all his books eight times—”

“I haven’t read any of them eight times. Six at the most.”

“Whatever. You own at least three copies of every book. You’ve plastered your bedroom walls with Foster Blake movie posters. You’ve memorized the DVD commentary tracks. Yet here you are, Wisconsin’s biggest Foster Blake fan, losing big time at “Spot the Spy” because you want to be *realistic*.” Tim paused to deliver his coup de grâce. “Face it, pal, Foster Blake ain’t real.”

Brian rolled his eyes. He knew the world of Foster Blake wasn’t realistic, although not

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right off the bat. Four years ago, when he was eleven, Brian caught *Clandestinely Yours* on HBO and was forevermore hooked on Foster Blake. He saw more of the movies and then started checking Foster Blake novels out of the library. Soon he was collecting the varied paperback editions of the novels and buying the movies on DVD. Foster Blake turned Brian into a spy buff. He DVR’ed espionage documentaries on the Military Channel, spent hours scanning real-world intelligence websites and grew to appreciate the serious spy novels of John le Carré and Len Deighton.

But even as Brian realized how far-fetched Foster Blake’s adventures were, his imagination always came back to Agent 17K. “K for killer” was the spy’s catchphrase. Who wouldn’t want to be Foster Blake? Equally suave and tough, unflappable in the midst of danger. And scoring with exotic women by the truckload—the “Blake Beauties,” as film publicists called them in the days before political correctness. Brian never knew such a time, but his mother assured him it wasn’t so long ago.

“Even if I know Foster Blake isn’t real,” Brian said to Tim, “I still want to enjoy the fantasy.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Tim replied. “You’re the one who wanted to come on this trip to live out his spy novel fantasies.” He grabbed Brian by the shoulders and shook him. “So fantasize, buddy, fantasize!”

Brian brushed back a lock of blond hair that had fallen into his eyes. “You do want me to cheat, then,” he said. “Gotcha.”

As Brian and Tim approached Hug, a smiling waitress in her early twenties seated them at a glass top table alongside the Reuss River. They ordered coffees, and the waitress returned with two mugs. Tim took his first sip and nodded toward his spy across the square. Brian shifted

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his gaze in time to see the man and the blonde share a laugh.

Tim said, “You have to grant me that in the fantasy world of Foster Blake, that suave stud over there could be a spy.”

“A superspy.”

“OK, then, another point for me. But I still expect you to spot a spy before the day is over.” He poked his mug at Brian for emphasis. “You’re due, man.”

Brian chuckled again and sipped his coffee. Even if Tim had just equated spotting a spy with scoring a base hit, he understood Brian’s Foster Blake obsession. Few of Brian’s other friends did, not really. Nor were they willing to leave the cocoon of the suburbs, preferring to hang out in ’Tosa on the weekends.

Luckily, Tim shared Brian’s wanderlust. Tim was always up for a Saturday afternoon trip into Milwaukee to hunt for classic spy novels in the used bookstores downtown. Tim’s enthusiasm allowed Brian to be adventurous. They always had a blast exploring the city, sometimes journeying to the East Side for an anime festival at the Oriental Theatre.

And here they were in a city 4,400 miles away from home, on their own again. The rest of their high school group had gone to lunch at a fondue restaurant. That was another of the side trips the tour company sprang on them in every city. Most were too expensive for Brian, who decided to save his money to collect complete sets of Foster Blake paperbacks in German and French. Tim skipped out on the fondue restaurant, too. “We’re from Wisconsin, for God’s sake,” he had declared. “Why would we pay that much to eat cheese?”

As the others left that morning, Miss Weninger, Brian’s French teacher and the head chaperone, told Brian and Tim, “Don’t go too far from the hotel.” Luckily, nothing in central Lucerne was too far from their hotel. Brian and Tim spent about an hour hitting the nearby shops

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before arriving at the Mühlenplatz for late-morning coffee. It had been a productive excursion for Brian. His backpack now contained three more Foster Blake paperbacks in German.

As the waitress walked past, Tim leaned back to allow her a good look at his University of Wisconsin T-shirt. If Bucky Badger impressed her, she didn't let on. Brian grinned. Unlike Tim, he didn't want to dress like a tourist. He wore his standard outfit, a polo shirt (dark green today), a pair of Levi's 501 jeans, and black Adidas Sambas. The shirt, like all his others, bore no small animals or insignias because it was nobody else's business where he bought his clothes.

The waitress returned and Tim ordered a cherry strudel to go. “I'll bring it to Stephanie. Maybe if I give her a pastry from Hug, she'll give me a hug.” Tim had longed after Stephanie Tompkins since the eighth grade. The main reason he had signed up for this trip was to spend two weeks on a bus with her.

“You should pick up something for Darleen,” Tim added.

Brian flushed. “I don't know ...” Brian almost asked Darleen Miller to join him on this morning's book shopping excursion instead of Tim, but lost his nerve when Darleen said she was excited about the fondue restaurant.

“Yeah, yeah, you're waiting to make your move when we get to Paris, the city of love.” Tim faked playing a violin as he said this. “But that's our last stop. You don't want to put it off until it's too late, pal.”

“I'll think about it,” Brian said, turning in his chair to hide his embarrassment. He looked across the Mühlenplatz for Brian's superspy and his femme fatale, but they were gone. Perhaps they were off to a secluded chalet to re-enact one of the scenes that always got cut when the Foster Blake movies played on basic cable.

Brian's eyes wandered to the entrance of the square and zeroed in on a newcomer, a man

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in a gray raincoat. The man walked deliberately but not hastily toward the river. Brian sensed the man was headed somewhere important but didn't want anyone to know the urgency of his appointment. He was a short man, about five-foot-two, with tortoiseshell glasses and a gray mustache. Wisps of gray hair poked from beneath his hat.

Gray coat, gray mustache, gray hair—he's the little gray man, Brian thought.

The little gray man noticed Brian studying him. Their eyes locked, and Brian felt a frisson race down his spine. The man's eyes first registered surprise, and perhaps a trace of fear, that Brian was watching him, then they narrowed to assess the boy. The man turned his head, breaking off eye contact. The look had lasted no longer than a second, but in that time Brian knew—he absolutely knew—his gaze had disturbed a man with a secret.

“That man right there,” Brian whispered. “He's a spy.”

Tim looked up. “Him? He's gotta be the most boring guy in the city.”

“Exactly,” Brian said. He watched the man enter the Spreuerbrücke, one of the city's two covered bridges built during the Renaissance. Brian's eyes followed the little gray man until his form became indistinguishable among the shadows on the bridge.

“I don't know if I can give you that one,” Tim said. “I think you picked him out of desperation because I was making you look bad.”

“You're not even going to give me a pity spy?”

“I'll have to think about it,” Tim said. He drank the rest of his coffee and plunked down the mug. “Time to head back. You coming?”

Brian shook his head. “Don't want to cramp your style when you give Stephanie her strudel.” In reality, Brian didn't want to see Stephanie snub his friend again. “Besides, there's one more bookstore across the river I want to check. I still need to find a German copy of

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Snowfire.”

“Isn’t that the one where the villain tries to melt the polar ice caps?”

“That was the movie. In the book he used icebergs as platforms to launch nuclear missiles.”

Tim laughed. “You’re a maniac.” He picked up the bag containing the cherry strudel. “I’ll text you if they get back early. I know you don’t want to miss the Mount Pilatus trip.”

As his friend walked alongside the Reuss back to their hotel, Brian looked around. This slice of Lucerne fit the popular image of Switzerland so perfectly that Heidi could have skipped past at any moment. Skinny buildings with gabled roofs and rows of windows were squeezed together like books on a shelf. Many of the façades were painted with intricate frescoes. Biblical scenes and wine drinking were the favored motifs. Behind Brian, the Reuss bubbled by. Beyond the rooftops were the snow-capped Alps, and beyond the Alps was the warm July sun in a cloudless sky. Brian smiled. He was in Europe! He felt like—no, he *was*—a man of the world. He hummed “The Foster Blake Theme” and tapped the staccato beat on the glass tabletop with his fingertips.

The ’Tosa East group had arrived in Lucerne late in the afternoon two days earlier. Yesterday a tour guide whisked them to the standard tourist sights. This afternoon the group would ride the inclined train up Mount Pilatus (Tim was right, this was a side trip Brian wasn’t about to miss) and tomorrow morning they would depart for Munich.

Brian finished his coffee, left what he hoped was a generous tip, and hitched his backpack over his shoulders as he stood. Before the group left for Mount Pilatus, Brian had a mission. He was one title shy of a complete set of Foster Blake paperbacks in German. Even though he would be in Germany tomorrow, Brian figured he might as well try to complete the set

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here while he had some free time. One more book, one more bookstore. Seemed like fate.

Brian walked to the Spreuerbrücke. He recalled yesterday’s tour guide saying the Spreuerbrücke was the older of the two wooden pedestrian bridges that spanned the Reuss. The other, the Kappelbrücke, was the more famous. With its picturesque water tower, the Kappelbrücke appeared on almost every postcard mailed from the city.

As he neared the Spreuerbrücke, Brian realized why it attracted fewer tourists. Historic though it may be, the Spreuerbrücke was a shabby-looking structure of dark, mismatched brown planks. Just as Brian was thinking that the bridge belonged in a haunted forest, he noticed the series of triangular paintings beneath the peaked roof. Each depicted the Grim Reaper interrupting a feast or ceremony. They reminded him of the German woodcarvings from his history book, the ones made during the Black Death. A plaque at the bridge’s entry bore a poem:

*“All living things that fly or leap
Or crawl or swim or run or creep
Fear Death, yet can they find no spot
In all the world where Death is not.”*

Cripes, Brian thought. *Can’t a person cross a bridge without being reminded he’s going to die?* The skeleton paintings were spaced every ten feet, and as Brian walked beneath them a sense of doom pressed down upon him. The only thing missing was the Headless Horseman hurling a flaming jack-o’-lantern.

Brian stepped off the bridge feeling silly that a tourist attraction could spook him. He pulled out his map. The bookstore was off to his left, near the train station. The map showed a series of narrow alleyways that curved behind the nearby Jesuit church. They formed a short cut that Brian followed toward the church.

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The alleys were oddly barren. Brian saw only a few people dart across his path. A man wearing black jeans and a leather bomber jacket that matched his dirty brown hair stepped from a side alley and turned toward Brian. He carried an umbrella, even though no rain had been forecast that day. As they passed each other, the man glanced at Brian dismissively. Brian was struck by a pair of alarmingly pale blue eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. Something else about those eyes unnerved Brian, but he didn't get a long enough look to figure out what it was. He turned to see where the man was going, but the man had already gone.

Moments later, Brian spotted someone slumped in a side alley. He had seen homeless people sleeping in alleys in downtown Milwaukee but didn't expect such a sight in tidy Lucerne.

Two realizations hit Brian at once: One, this was the same alley that the man with the pale blue eyes had just exited. Two, the person lying in the alley wore a familiar gray raincoat.

Brian rushed to the little gray man and was relieved to find him alive. He stooped beside the man and propped up his head. The man's eyes, also gray, focused on Brian. He said something in German, but the only word Brian recognized was *Mühlenplatz*.

Brian shook his head. “I don't understand.”

“You are the boy from the Mühlenplatz,” the man said. “American?”

“Yes,” Brian replied.

“Please contact your embassy. Ask for Jack Silver.” The man shook with every syllable. He was expending all his effort to keep talking. “You must. Urgent.”

Brian looked him over quickly but could see no wound, no blood. “Relax,” Brian said. “I'll get help.”

“No time,” the man said. “Tell Silver someone in Prometheus turned.” He was grunting between words. “Tell him DeJonge doesn't suspect.”

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Brian was gobsmacked with panic and this man was talking in riddles. “Doesn’t suspect what?” he asked.

The man’s answer was a deep, guttural groan. He squeezed his eyes shut as his body shuddered. Brian looked down the central alley and saw a police officer. He waved frantically, and the officer came running.

The man’s eyes reopened. “Tell Silver.” His voice was a hoarse, obscene whisper. The strain of talking turned his face purple. “Skym.” A final spasm convulsed through the man, and he went limp in Brian’s arms.

Brian heard the police officer’s steps echoing behind him. He lowered the dead man’s head to the ground. As Brian’s body went numb from the inside out, a grim thought hit him. He had won the game. He had spotted the spy.