

Guns and Snowdrops

“Hey! You out there! Stop shooting at us! My wife’s pregnant...with *twins!*”

Beside me, Lady Cherrington jabbed her sharp little elbow into my ribs and jerked her head towards the dirty, broken window and the shrubbery beyond.

“And!?” she whispered loudly, jabbing me again, this time with a hard, bony finger.

“Ouch....and try not to step on the *snowdrops!*”

Crack! Another bullet splintered through the wooden side-wall of Lady C’s ancient, crumbling barn-like garage and thwacked into an old metal watering can hanging from a beam behind us. It swung wildly then crashed to the floor.

“Buggers are getting closer,” muttered Lady C’s equally ancient and crumbling toad-like husband, the Colonel, as he eyed the latest in a line of small bright holes letting in thin streams of winter sunlight along the timber wall.

“That was my favourite watering can,” grumbled Lady C, her bent little figure quivering with anger in the dusty gloom.

I moved closer to the window and yelled at the bushes again.

“Will you *please* stop doing that! You can’t shoot at a *pregnant woman!*”

As I stepped back to re-join the others, I noticed the Colonel slyly creeping sideways until Katka and her huge nine-month-pregnant tummy were between him and the bullet holes. There was a burst of coarse male laughter from outside and the answer came back:

“No? But they are making bigger targets! Easier for hitting! Ha, ha, ha!”

Bulgarian gangster humour.

The Colonel's pale, balding head popped back out from behind Katka like a startled tortoise from its shell. He blinked nervously then hastily crept away from her again, a lot further than before. Meanwhile Lady C glared from her punctured watering can to Katka's pregnant tummy and out at the garden. Unbending from her bullet-dodging crouch and stretching to her full height of four-foot-ten-inches, she glowered furiously at the window. Now positively shaking with rage, she looked like....well, like an incredibly ferocious version of the little Jedi alien Yoda from the Star Wars films. Then she bellowed in her scariest cut glass Cheltenham Ladies' College voice, usually reserved for people who ignore the sign saying 'Private Area - No Visitors Beyond This Point' on her garden open days:

"Fuck you, you fucking nasty motherfuckers! I'm going to fucking blow your motherfucking heads off for that! You see if I don't! Oh, you've made me really motherfucking angry now!"

You wouldn't expect someone of Lady C's generation and background to be a Tarantino fan, certainly not at the age of eighty-nine, but then life's full of surprises. At least it was that particular day, and there were more to come.

I looked down to see her angrily jamming fresh shotgun cartridges into the Colonel's double-barrelled twelve-bore and slamming the breach closed before shuffling sideways towards the window, the gun to her shoulder, ducking and weaving like a demented little octogenarian Bruce Willis on hormone replacement therapy.

"And if you've trampled all over my motherfucking snowdrops, I'll let you have both barrels up your motherfucking backsides!"

As Lady C peered manically through a hole in the window pane, searching for a target, the Colonel snapped rattily from the shadows in the furthest corner of the dark, cavernous garage, where he'd retreated in his haste to put as much distance as possible between himself and the tempting target

that Katka had apparently now become.

“Steady on, Primula old girl. Don’t waste the ammo. We’ve only three cartridges left. Oh! Hell and damnation! That bloody hurts!”

“Did they hit you, Oliver, dear?”

Lady C glanced back towards the Colonel’s dim and dusty hiding place, not sounding anywhere near as concerned about the possibility of him being shot as she was about her snowdrops being trampled (or, for that matter, her favourite watering can being hit). In fact I could have sworn there was a slight note of hope in her voice. And if you’d ever met the Colonel, you’d understand why.

“No! Damn, bugger and sod it. Stupid bloody thing. Completely forgot it was there. Think I’ve fractured my bloody knee on it. Hang *on* though....maybe we could escape in *this*.”

Katka squinted into the gloom at the far end of the garage. It was huge even for a double garage, a massive barn of a place with piles of junk everywhere and rickety steps up to a cobwebby second storey. The sole illumination was from the one tiny window half-obsured by dark laurel leaves, where Lady C was tottering on tiptoes trying to see over the sill.

“I thought your car was being mended after you made Alfred ram it into that school bus coming home from your pub lunch last week,” said Katka.

“Not the bloody car, woman,” grumbled the Colonel. “*This!* Look, over here. Dammit, where’s that light switch? Ouch! Buggeration! Bashed my *other* knee now!”

There was a click and a light bulb came on, dimly illuminating the building’s far-flung corners, in one of which the Colonel could now be seen hunched over, rubbing both knees, beside a military armoured personnel carrier. Very old, dusty and covered in cobwebs, rust and pigeon shit, but indisputably an armoured personnel carrier; or as we would have called it in my childhood days of playing soldiers, an armoured car. The Colonel pulled up his trouser leg and began

examining a frighteningly thin, chalky-white and blue-veined leg for cuts and bruises as he shot Katka a bleary-eyed glare.

“And I did *not* make Alfred crash the bloody car. The damn fool had plenty of room to overtake that bus. Ouch! My blasted knee’s *broken*, I’m sure it is.”

Katka frowned back at him.

“Well from what Primula told me, you were hitting Alfred on the head from the back seat with a rolled-up newspaper and shouting at him to overtake on a corner. You nearly pushed the bus into the hedge. Those poor children were terrified. It said so in the newspaper. And poor Alfred will probably lose his licence.”

“Can you *drive* that, Colonel?” I asked, pointing at the armoured car and trying not to look or sound amazed. After all, this was the garage of a pretty bonkers retired Colonel and his lady wife.

“Doesn’t look like it’s been moved for years, Colonel. Has it got petrol in it? If it hasn’t, Alfred usually keeps a can of two-stroke fuel in here somewhere.”

Katka, one hand on her pregnant tummy and the other on her back, walked slowly towards the ugly lump of rusting British Army hardware in the corner, running her eyes over its dirty armour-plate and half-deflated tyres. The Colonel watched closely as she walked around the armoured car, then he snapped at me.

“Two-stroke? Bloody two-stroke? It’s a military bloody vehicle, not a lawn mower, you arse. And don’t be so bloody silly, I haven’t driven *anything* for over 50 years. Always had a *man* to do that. Ah! Good point. Alfred! Where’s Alfred?”

The Colonel straightened up and threw his shoulders back in a commanding military pose (while still holding up his trouser-leg with one scrawny hand) before bellowing loudly.

“Alfred! Alfred! Where the sodding hell *is* the stupid man?!”

“Out here, sir! They took me prisoner, sir! Remember, sir?”

We all looked at the window as Alfred, the Colonel's ageing gardener/chauffeur and former army batman, shouted back in a high, trembling voice. Twigs cracked and dried leaves crunched underfoot as a short struggle broke out in the shrubbery, followed by thumping noises, an Alfred-sounding moan and more cheery Bulgarian gangster backchat:

"And you will all come out now or we shoot him dead...or maybe we shoot up his backside first and *then* in head, eh Mrs Lady Cherringtons? You throw out your gun now.....*please!* Ha, ha, ha!"

The Colonel frowned and looked from the window to the armoured car and back to the window, memories of recent events visibly seeping back through the whisky-befuddled haze that passed for thought-processes in his balding old head.

"Ah! Yes. Bugger. Forgot about that. Well can *anyone* around here *apart* from Alfred drive one of these?"

"I can, I think. Should be quite similar to Soviet armoured vehicle."

Katka was beside the armoured car, struggling to get a leg up onto its thick metal hide and reach a hatch, her free hand pressing into her lower back and her pregnant tummy bumping up against the grubby beige-green metal.

"They taught us in the Pioneers in Slovakia. Also how to shoot a Kalashnikov machine gun and how to stop NATO vehicles with petrol bombs. Why are you all *staring* like that? And can you please *help* me? I *am* having *babies* you know."

I couldn't help looking up at Katka admiringly as Lady C helped me push her bum up the steps of the armoured car.

"Don't look at my bottom like that!" she hissed over her shoulder.

"I didn't say anything. It's a lovely bottom. I never said it was big. Anyway, I *like* big bums. For God's sake, we've been over this before. You're pregnant. What did you expect? That it'd get *smaller*?"

By the way, your Slovak Pioneers sound much more exciting than our Cubs and Scouts. All they ever taught me in

the Scouts was how to tie knots and burn sausages on a stick. I wouldn't have been much use if anyone had invaded *us* during the Cold War. You're just so amazing. I really love you."

Katka smiled down as she swung open the hatch.

"That's nice. I love you too. But I was talking to the Colonel. He is always staring at my bottom."

After a brief struggle to get her tummy through the hatch, Katka disappeared inside. The Colonel, meanwhile, gazed innocently at the wooden rafters, his mouth pursed in a silent whistle. He never saw Lady C's handbag coming. It hit him on the back of the head with a loud thunk, making his eyes bulge out of their sockets and his thin, bony frame shudder.

"You really are disgusting, Oliver. And take your hand out of your pocket. I know you're interfering with yourself in there," snapped Lady C.

Who in their right mind runs for their life from their home, dragging a drink-befuddled old git of a husband behind them, firing a shotgun at pursuing armed Bulgarian gangsters and *still* finds time to grab their handbag from the hall hat-stand? Not that this was the weirdest part of today. Not by a long chalk.

Lady C heaved open a door at the rear of the armoured car and we pushed the Colonel inside before clambering after him. He sat huffily on one of the narrow benches, rubbing the back of his head as Lady C slammed the hatch shut and shouted through to Katka.

"Can you get it started, dear?"

There was a moment's silence, then the starter motor whined and the engine coughed and roared into life, rocking the ancient armoured car on its creaking, corroded suspension springs. I slapped a hand over my mouth and nose, trying desperately not to breathe in.

"Oh Christ! We're being gassed in here! What the hell *is* that? Do you have *chemical weapons* or something in here, Colonel? Oh dear God, open the door!"

The Colonel smiled maliciously as I gagged and retched,

while Lady C gave me an apologetic half-smile.

“I’m sorry. It’s Oliver. He was eating pickled eggs again last night. I usually hide them from him. Could you try to hold it in, Oliver? It’s a little close in here, and that was one of your more impressive ones.”

I thought I was used to the Colonel’s horrendous farts by now but in the circumstances, and combined with the stink of diesel fumes from the engine, the particularly sulphurous post-pickled-egg stench at such close quarters and in such a confined space had panicked me. Any further discussion of the Colonel’s chronic flatulence problem became impossible as the armoured car lurched forward in a series of alarming and teeth-jarring jolts, bouncing creakily on its springs as it crashed through the wooden doors of the garage. Katka yelped excitedly from the driver’s compartment.

“Yes! I remember how to do this. Wheeeee!”

But Katka’s glee was short-lived. The armoured car crunched over the gravel of the long, curving driveway and swerved sharply to the right, heading straight for the garden gates across the carefully manicured front lawn. Then the engine back-fired twice and we ground slowly to a halt as it died. We could hear Katka swearing in Slovak as she hit the starter again and again, turning the engine over slower and slower as the battery went flat.

“I don’t suppose there’s ammunition for the machine gun is there, Colonel?” Katka yelled through the bulkhead.

“No, he used it all up on the pigeons in the vegetable garden three or four years ago,” Lady C shouted back, frowning at her leaky husband, absent-mindedly scratching his crotch on the opposite bench-seat. “The poor things didn’t make nearly as many holes in the cabbages and cauliflowers as *he* did!”

The Colonel grinned and chuckled to himself, silently miming wild bursts of machine gun fire and exploding brassicas like a gleeful child until his watery eye caught Lady C’s disapproving stare.

Just then Albert, the ageing gardener/chauffeur, piped up from outside the vehicle, his voice sounding shaky and almost tearful.

“Lady Cherrington! One of ‘em’s kicked all the flowers off of your best clump of ‘Bertram Anderson’. That big clump under the pink magnolia tree. Done it on purpose, he did.”

At this point I’d like to say that Lady C is a lot stronger than you’d think. At just four-foot-ten and almost ninety years old, you could be forgiven for thinking it wouldn’t take much to keep her in her seat. Well you’d be wrong. Which is why she managed to burst out of the rear door of the armoured car less than ten seconds later, shotgun to her shoulder, despite the best efforts of both myself and the Colonel to hold her back. Nursing my ribs where she’d cracked me with the gun butt, I clambered out after her. Behind us, the Colonel’s shiny white head glistened briefly in the winter sunlight as he leaned out to pull the hatch closed again with a loud clang.

“Thanks Colonel!” I shouted. “Good of you to back us up!”

From inside the armoured car came what sounded like another fart followed by the Colonel’s muffled voice.

“Always keep your command and control position secure. Important rule of combat. Report back to me at regular intervals; one bang on the door for all clear, two bangs for they’re still here but trying to get in by making you pretend they’ve gone. Got that? They can’t hear this, can they?”

“Oh do shut up Oliver,” Lady C shouted over her shoulder, then stopped dead as, across the shotgun sight, she saw Alfred kneeling on the grass holding a bunch of battered snowdrop flowers in one hand. A Bulgarian gangster stood beside him with an automatic pistol pointed at Alfred’s head.

“My ‘Bertram Anderson’! They were looking so good this year! You utter sodding bastard! How could you? You unspeakable little shit! You despicable low-life, fuck-witted little turd of a man!”

For a moment the Bulgarian looked a bit un-nerved by this furious verbal onslaught and Lady C’s unwavering aim, but

quickly recovered when the second gangster crept around from the front of the armoured car, tiptoed up behind Lady C and snatched the shotgun from her. It must have hurt like hell when she kicked him in the shins, but I guess Bulgarian gangsters are used to much worse and he actually smiled as he hobbled over to join his friend, plucking a snowdrop flower from Alfred's hand and flicking it towards us. Lady C bent to pick it up and held the battered bloom like a wounded bird in the cupped palm of her hand as she let loose an even worse torrent of abuse at the gangsters that included at least half-a-dozen f-words and a c-word that I didn't think she even knew.

Eventually the gangster with the shotgun started to look bored and slowly raised the gun in Lady C's direction with one hand while poking at his ear wax with the little finger of the other. At this, even Lady C must have realized that, as lovely a snowdrop as 'Bertram Anderson' is, it's really not worth getting blasted at close-range with a twelve-bore over it, and she finally shut up.

I mean 'Bertram Anderson' *is* a stunning snowdrop, one of the biggest and best of the large-flowered hybrids, with a huge, shapely flower and a strong stem. It makes a very showy clump and is certainly one of *my* favourites. Maybe not one of the very rarest and most expensive snowdrop varieties around, but really very nice indeed, a real classic, and a favourite with most snowdrop growers and collectors.

Then again, you'd only pay about ten or twelve pounds for a bulb of 'Bertram Anderson', and you can buy it from a number of specialist growers, so it's not actually *that* costly or difficult to get hold of. Not compared to some of the most expensive snowdrops that might set you back forty or fifty pounds a bulb; or a couple of hundred pounds or more for a single bulb at auction if it's a *really* rare new one. And then there are those that are so rare you simply can't buy them, but have to swap with other specialist growers and collectors, if you have something rare and desirable enough to offer in exchange. And lovely, showy and garden-worthy as 'Bertram

Anderson' is, it's not one of those.

But it *is* a superb snowdrop. And that was one of the most impressive clumps of snowdrops in the garden, putting on a wonderful display that year with well over a hundred of the big glistening white flowers. I knew it had taken Lady C many years of careful lifting, dividing, replanting and general cossetting to produce such a fantastic show, only to have a clumsy Bulgarian gangster put the boot into it. Well, you would get a bit cross, wouldn't you? I certainly would.

In addition, Lady C always was especially sentimental about 'Bertram Anderson'. It was, after all, named in memory of a very special gardening and snowdrop-loving friend of hers, found and selected after his death as probably the best snowdrop seedling in his Cotswold garden, not far from Lady C's own garden at Westcombe Manor, on the front lawn of which we were now standing...oh, right! Sorry. The gangsters and the guns, and the pregnant wife in the armoured car with the stinky old Colonel, and the dodderly old gardener about to be executed on the lawn?

Yes, well...as Lady C stopped ranting, everyone turned their attention to Alfred, kneeling on the grass at the gangsters' feet. Seemingly oblivious to the gun pointing at him, he'd carefully placed the handful of battered snowdrops on the lawn, taken a trowel from the pocket of his ancient waxed gardening jacket and, unnoticed by us all, had started digging out a stubborn, deep-rooted weed from the neat turf.

"Come out you little bleeder. Ah! Another one! Bleedin' dandelions."

Alfred tried to lunge forwards after the second weed but was held back by an incredulous gangster grabbing his frayed collar. The trowel flailed and stabbed uselessly in the air inches from the weed as the gangster tightened his grip on the grubby jacket, pressed the barrel of his gun to the side of Alfred's head and growled bad-temperedly.

"Colonel will come with us now or idiot man dies. Is final word. Now I am counting. One...two...uh...is to ten I count,

then idiot man dies. One...two...three...five..."

The second gangster shook his head.

"No. Is four. One, two, three, *four*."

The first gangster glared at him.

"Is four that I said!"

"No, you say five. Is you that is idiot man."

"Shut fuck up, or I shoot *you*."

Clang! The hatch at the front of the armoured car fell open and Katka's head and her large pregnant boobs popped out. I mean they popped out of the hatch, not...*out*. Although in that dress, well, they were always threatening to burst the top button. I really liked that dress. Apparently the gangsters did too. One gave an admiring whistle and the other stroked his moustache as they both flashed macho gold-toothed grins at her. She struggled briefly in the tight opening then stopped and smiled broadly at Lady C and me.

"Yes! Contractions, they start! Must be because I bounce up and down so much inside tank. Please help with getting out. I go to hospital at last!"

Katka's English, normally very good these days, started to slip a little with the excitement of the imminent births (the last half-an-hour's gun-toting madness, by comparison, had barely seemed to fluster her). She struggled a little more, getting her arms out and pushing as she tried to wriggle through the hatch, then she stopped and frowned, her huge tummy still inside the armoured car.

"Except I am *stuck*! I cannot get free! Twins must have moved. I think maybe I am different shape now. I could get in here but now I cannot get out."

Katka's predicament seemed to have distracted Alfred from his frantic attempts at weeding and he let out a loud moan as he stared at the armoured car.

"No! Oh no! Oh dear, dear, dear! No! Dreadful!"

Katka stopped wriggling and looked down at him.

"It's all right, Alfred. Don't worry, I will be okay."

But Alfred pointed past her with a trembling finger at the

muddy tyre-tracks across the neat, close-cropped grass behind the armoured car.

“Oh dear! Them’ll take some fixing! I’ll ‘ave to re-seed or get some turf in!”

Alfred tried to get to his feet but once again was restrained by the gangster with the pistol, who raised his gun as if to hit him. But before the blow could land, a very large, very shiny, very black, very menacing limousine with darkened windows rolled in through the garden gates, followed by a very shiny, very black, even more menacing four-wheel-drive with blacked-out windows.

Everyone froze and stared as the two cars came to a halt on the neatly-raked gravel and sat there, across the lawn from us, their engines purring and exhausts steaming in the winter chill. Slowly all the car doors swung open and one large full-length black coat after another stepped out onto the gravel, until seven big black coats and seven pairs of very dark sunglasses were facing us across the wet grass.

“Oh shit! Not *more* Bulgarians!” I heard myself groan.

The tall, broad-shouldered and black-coated men stared back at us and exchanged a few quick words amongst themselves. I could barely hear them, but Katka was watching them closely, her hand shading her narrowed eyes from the low sun, and listening carefully.

“No, not Bulgarian. Russian...I think,” she corrected me.

Lady C squinted into the sun and she too shaded her eyes as she looked across the lawn.

“Are you sure, dear? Excuse me! We weren’t expecting you! Are you here to see the snowdrops? I’m afraid we’re not open to the public today! Sorry!”

The black coats simply looked at her in silence.

“Well, Russian or not, they’re very *rude!*” she muttered.

With a wave to get their attention, Katka shouted across.

“Zdrastvuitey! Vy Ruskiye?”

All the black coats glanced at her, jammed in the hatch of the armoured car. One, a little shorter, less broad-shouldered

and with hair less short-cropped than the rest, stepped forward and started walking towards us.

“Yes, that’s right. We are the Russians!”

With a curt wave of his hand, he indicated for the rest to follow. Katka frowned and curled her lip disdainfully.

“I thought so. Then welcome to the party. I hope you bring your own guns.”

Halfway across the lawn, the leading black coat stopped and gave his followers another quick hand-signal, in response to which they lined up across the grass on either side of him, reaching into their coats and pulling out very large and business-like hand-guns.

“But of course. It would be very rude to turn up at a party empty-handed.”

He smiled at Lady C as he walked forward again, then looked down at Alfred, still kneeling with a gun to his head, and finally up at the two Bulgarians. Pointing to Alfred, he frowned at one of the gangsters and shook his head.

“But this is not the Colonel.”

I spoke to Katka out of the corner of my mouth, too worried about all the guns to take my eyes off them.

“Oh bloody brilliant. It just gets better and bloody better. First a garden full of Bulgarian gangsters and now *Russian* gangsters too. Katka? Are you okay?”

Katka’s eyes were closed and she grimaced before letting out a long, slow, shuddering breath and muttering angrily.

“No, not okay! I am stuck in this tank. I am having babies. *Two* of them. And it *hurts*. Contractions are...owwww!...very strong! Bože môj! Sprostý chlap! So no, definitely not okay.”

Black coat leader looked around him, then back at the Bulgarian gangster holding his gun on Alfred.

“So where is the Colonel?”

The Bulgarian looked apprehensive then smiled nervously.

“We are not told you will come here. This is not agreed meeting place for exchange. But it is good. You can have Colonel right now. We have him. He is in there, but soon

he must come out or we will shoot stupid garden man and Lady Cherringtons. You bring money? You can show us?"

The Russian turned to face Katka and the armoured car.

"The Colonel is in *that*?"

The Bulgarian nodded and waved his hand towards the armoured car as if inviting the Russian to inspect it and its contents. Slowly the Russian walked over and rapped on the armour plate with his knuckles.

"Colonel? You are in there? Hello? Colonel? You can hear me?"

Silence. Then, a little muffled through the thick metal, the unmistakable sound of the Colonel yet again nervously breaking wind.

Katka groaned with pain, then giggled.

"Well, I am stuck having twins in bloody tank, but at least there is plenty of *gas*!"

The Russian looked up at her, puzzled. Then his stony face broke into a smile and he started to laugh.

The Slovak 'Maybe'

It was about fifteen months before all this Bulgarian and Russian gangster stuff that I saw Katka for the first time, towards the end of October 2006, at the Frankfurt Book Fair. On the Saturday of the book fair week I was supposed to take over for a couple of hours from my UK publisher's marketing director, who was manning a stand in the British and American hall at the sprawling concrete-and-steel Frankfurt Messe exhibition centre. But, as often happened, I'd overslept and was very late getting in.

Katka and another, older woman were just inside the stand, looking at a book Katka was holding. They were turning the pages and smiling but not laughing, which was a bit disappointing since it was one of *my* cartoon books, and one of

the funnier ones at that. The long, straight, glossy dark hair halfway down her back was the first thing I noticed as I walked up behind Katka - okay, that and a very nice bum - then those amazing almond-shaped green-brown eyes that glanced up as I reached the stand and quickly flicked back to the book. A little *too* quickly for my liking. And I still wasn't hearing any laughter.

James, the marketing director, was pacing up and down between the shelves of books and catalogues, silently fuming.

"Where the sodding hell have you been? You were supposed to be here at ten so I could walk the halls. I'm gasping for a smoke. You know I don't like leaving the stand unattended."

"Sorry, I was out with the guys from that Australian book distribution company that we met on the hotel-boat. It was nearly two by the time I got to bed."

But James wasn't listening. Turning on his heel, he started marching towards a side-door, irritably patting the pockets of his pinstripe suit for cigarettes and lighter. As I yawned loudly behind him, he stopped dead and spun around in the middle of the aisle.

"Stop yawning!" he hissed angrily. "How do you think it looks to clients if they see you yawning on the stand? I've told you before, don't do *anything* that makes it look like you're bored when you're on *my bloody stand*."

Which was a bit rich, since I was actually doing him a favour. I wasn't being paid to sit on a chair at his stand. I was mostly at the book fair to meet my German publishers, with whom I deal directly, and to do some book signings for them. *James* was supposed to be looking after the stand, as he did each year. And, as I did every time I went to the book fair, I was helping him out a little.

"I suppose having a *wank* would be out of the question then?"

James froze. He'd turned to stalk off again, but now his pinstriped back was rigid. He swivelled slowly back to face

me, his face purple with suppressed rage.

“*What* did you say?!”

It was an open goal, and I just couldn’t resist it.

“I said, I suppose having a wa...”

James looked like he was going to explode.

“Shut up! Shut *up!* Don’t say it *again!*”

He glanced at the neighbouring stands to see if anyone had overheard, then hurried out through the hall doors, pulling a broken cigarette from the crushed packet in his clenched fist.

That’s when I realized that Katka and her friend were still standing there. They replaced my book on the shelf and left, glancing back over their shoulders and whispering to each other. Across the aisle, the woman on the religious publications stand was sipping her coffee and trying desperately not to catch my eye.

The second time I saw Katka was that afternoon, when I’d finished a book signing at my German publishers’ stand in another hall a long way from the British one.

I just happened to be taking a look around the Eastern European hall on the way back when...well, yes, I think maybe James *had* mentioned, when he returned in a better mood from walking the halls and visiting various bars along the way, that he’d seen the same two women who were at his stand that morning. They were apparently in charge of a Czech publisher’s stand and were offering visitors small cups of very strong coffee and small glasses of even stronger plum brandy, both of which James had felt obliged to sample a couple of times during his circuit of the hall.

Anyway, there Katka was, surrounded by glossy coffee-table books about Czech castles, countryside and flowers, stirring a pot of coffee and humming to herself.

“Hello! I saw you reading one of my cartoon books at my publisher’s stand this morning in the British and American hall. I hope you liked it.”

She looked up and gave me a brief, slightly embarrassed smile.

“Yes, I remember. This was your book? Was very funny.”

Her English wasn't quite as good then as it is now, and her accent was stronger and very sexy in a breathy sort of way.

“What a coincidence bumping into you again in this huge place! So, you're Czech?”

“I am Slovak,” she sighed and started to explain patiently, like she'd done it many times before. “From Slovakia, to east of Czech Republic. We...”

“Used to be part of Czechoslovakia, but you split up in ninety-two or ninety-three, right? A few years ago most English people would probably have mixed you up with Slovenia, or had no idea at all. But we do know a *bit* more about Eastern Europe now. Well, some of us do. Anyway, now I can practice my Slovak. I speak a little. Actually, not that much. Just a few words, from when I was in Bratislava a few years ago...dobry den. Is that right?”

I grinned, pleased that I'd managed to dredge up a couple of words. I was never very good with languages.

Katka sighed again.

“That is ‘good day’ in *Czech*.”

“No, it's Slovak. I learned it in Bratislava. From a...um...Slovak girl that I met.”

She stared at me. This wasn't going as well as I'd hoped. Why did I have to say it was a Slovak *girl*? Showing off? Shit! I *was* showing off, and she knew it. I could see it in her eyes, in the disdainful curl of her lip, and in the tapping of her fingers on her folded arms.

“No, it is *Czech*. We say dobrý deň in Slovakia, but Czechs say dobrý den.”

“Okay...but that's the *same*. I mean you just said the same thing twice. Anyway, aren't Czech and Slovak virtually the same language?”

“No. Similar, but *not* same. We say dobrý deň. They say dobrý den.”

“But you did it again. You just said exactly the same thing twice. You said ‘dobry den’ and then you said ‘dobry den’

again. Are you making fun of me? Or is this a Slovak joke? Sorry, but I don't get it."

Katka gave me a slightly annoyed, vaguely pitying look that I was to come to know well over the months that followed, then sighed yet again. It had been a lovely sigh the first time; very light and charming, even sexy. But now it was starting to get on my nerves.

"Please listen to difference. Dobrý den...dobrý deň! Czech 'den' has *hard* 'd' and *hard* 'n'. Slovak has *soft* 'd' and *soft* 'n'. Did your Slovak girlfriend not teach you this?"

"What's a soft 'd' and a soft 'n'? A 'd' is a 'd' and an 'n' is an 'n', isn't it?"

I grinned. She had to be pulling my leg. And there was that sigh again.

"In Slovak, we have hard conso...consonants? This is right word? Those sound same as English consonants. But we also have *soft* consonants. Sound...*softer*. Please listen to difference *carefully*..."

I listened carefully, nodded slowly and thoughtfully...then shook my head.

"No. Sorry. Can you do it again?"

The sigh was *really* starting to bug me now, but after another two or three attempts, with Katka heavily emphasising the - to an English ear - very slight differences, I was starting to hear it; the soft 'd' halfway between an English 'd' and an English 'j', and the soft 'n' more like a 'ny' than a normal 'n'.

"Now *you* say it....no! That is still Czech! Make 'd' and 'n' softer."

"Look, I've got an idea! Why don't I buy you dinner tonight, and you can teach me some more about soft and hard consonants?"

Katka frowned and shook her head.

"I have better idea. You go away and you practice. If you come back and say it right, then perhaps...*perhaps* we talk about dinner."

She turned away and started rearranging the books on a

table with her back to me, and it didn't look like she was going to turn around again until I'd gone.

I was at the end of the aisle, heading for the hall doors when Katka's older friend from that morning clutched at my arm, out of breath and pink in the cheeks, struggling to catch up in a tight skirt and very high heels.

"Excuse me, please! Hello! My name is Elena. I am friend of Katarina."

I took her outstretched hand.

"I'm sorry? Katarina? Oh, on the stand back there? Katarina? Yes, of course. You were in the British hall with her this morning. I didn't know her name. Nice to meet you."

"Please, you like coffee?"

She pointed to a small coffee bar in the corner of the hall.

"I may speak to you about Katarina, yes? I know her well. I am Slovak also. We are only Slovaks in our office in Praha...in Prague. All others are Czech, so we are *special* friends, you understand."

Elena blew gently on her espresso to cool it and looked around as if checking we weren't being watched. Then she shook her bright red dyed hair and leaned in close as I tried very hard not to look down her - really very impressive - cleavage.

"Katka is...sorry, Katka is small name for Katarina, short name, you know this?"

I shook my head.

"So, Katka is...hmmm...sometimes *difficult*. Very special person, very lovely person, very nice after you are knowing her better, really, really, very special girl. I love her very much, like mother almost. But she is...*difficult* sometimes."

Elena shrugged as if to suggest it was really quite a minor drawback in the grand scheme of things.

"I hear you are talking with Katka. I am in next stand looking at book of...oh, does not matter...I hear you and Katka talk."

She frowned and waved an admonishing finger in my face.

“It was not good. It was really quite bad. But she likes you. Do not smile! I *think* she likes you. Quite a lot before, but perhaps now not so much after all of that rubbishness! She thinks you have nice hands. You are artist, perhaps?”

“Cartoonist. I draw cartoons.”

Elena nodded and sipped her coffee.

“Mmmm. She thinks also you are very funny.”

It was my turn to shrug.

“She said she thought my book was funny, but you weren’t laughing when you were reading it, so I guess she can’t think I’m all *that* hilarious.”

“Ah, it was *your* book with cartoons we look at? Yes, we thought this was funny. But no, I mean after we leave your stand in British Hall, we look for word ‘wank’ in English dictionary. When we find it, first Katka screams then she laughs. She thinks it is very rude what you say to your friend but also very funny. I am different generation. For me, I think it is mostly rude and just little bit funny. But your friend he was being rude to you, so it is okay you make fun out of him, I think. It is fair.”

Elena reached into her shoulder-bag, brought out a half-litre bottle with a brightly coloured label and poured a shot of clear liquid into her coffee before reaching across to my cup.

“Slivovica! It is very good plum brandy, the best make. For guests to our stand. You were guest at our stand, but did not drink, so I bring this for you. No? Okay. So, Katka. You must understand, she is really not *easy* girl...”

I could feel my cheeks starting to burn.

“No, no, of course not! I never thought she was *easy*! I wasn’t trying to...”

Elena frowned.

“...not *easy* girl to make *happy*. She likes you, but you have lot of work to do. You want to take her to dinner? I will help you.”

She swallowed a mouthful of the coffee and plum brandy then took a pad and pencil from her bag.

“First we practice soft consonants for ‘dobrý deň’ then I teach you little more Slovak to help make better impression. How much do you know of Slovak language from before in Blava? From being in Bratislava?”

“In Blava? Oh, right. Bratislava. You call it Blava? I hadn’t heard that.”

Elena tapped her teeth with her pencil and nodded.

“Sometimes, yes. Is short name. How much Slovak? How many words?”

“Well, apart from dobroy den...how was that?”

Elena nodded again.

“A little better. But not much. Actually, still quite bad. How many Slovak words?”

“Um, well...oh, yes...please is prosim, isn’t it? And thank you...that’s um...no, sorry, I’ve forgotten. Pivo! Yes! Pivo is beer.”

Elena was resting her elbow on the coffee bar and her head on her hand, watching me with a mixture of disbelief and incredulity.

“How long you were in Blava?”

“About three or four weeks. Why?”

“And during complete whole month in Blava, *with Slovak girl*, you learn ‘good-day’ and ‘beer please’? That is *all*?”

She put a lot of emphasis on ‘with Slovak girl’ and shot me a look, not dissimilar to the one Katarina had given me.

“Well, she did most of the talking for me. She spoke very good English.”

“Yes. It is very good that everyone speaks English so well, I think, or you English would have only yourselves to talk to on holidays. Okay. First the soft ‘d’ and soft ‘n’ then we work at some vocabulary. Perhaps we think of polite and nice words for you to say to Katka after ‘dobrý deň’, because you cannot ask her for beer. She is not waitress, and we have only slivovica on our stand, no beer.”

Twenty minutes later we had the soft consonants in ‘dobrý deň’ pretty much nailed. Even Elena seemed pleased with my

efforts. Or maybe it was the second slug of slivovica she'd despairingly helped herself to after one of my less successful attempts.

"So, now I will write down more very useful Slovak words. I will also write for you how these *sound* in *English* to make it easy for you to learn to speak them. You will not need to write them...no, I am sure Katka will not ask you to *write* Slovak for her...no, certainly not. Well, I hope at least. With Katka, you are never quite sure! First, 'ako sa máš?'. This is 'how are you?'. 'Prepáčte'. This is 'excuse me'. Say this first, then 'ako sa máš?' Okay? Hmmm. This is enough for now. Enough to show you properly learn some Slovak in Blava. Or to make Katka *believe* this."

The slivovica was really starting to take effect now as Elena gave me a huge lopsided smile and, with a dreamy look on her face and her voice slurring slightly, added:

"Oh, and also, perhaps...'Máš krásne oči' is 'you have beautiful eyes.' I write this for you also, but mention beautiful eyes only if she is seeming to like you very much. Perhaps after dinner and when she has drunk some wine. Men are not good at this, I know, but please, please, *please* try to wait for best time...not straight as soon as you sit at table. Okay?"

She reached across and squeezed my knee with a conspiratorial smile.

"So, good luck! You will need it. Perhaps not so much with those nice blue eyes you have, but you will certainly need *some* luck...every man does with Katka!"

I grinned back at Elena as she slid the piece of paper towards me.

"So what's Slovak for 'I love you'?"

Elena's smile instantly turned to a frown.

"What? No! Too soon! Silly boy! You will scare her away! Bože! Men are as stupid from England as from Slovakia!"

"Oh, so I can say she has beautiful eyes, but not that I love her?"

Elena's frown deepened.

“Yes, because Katarina *does* have beautiful eyes. But you do *not* love her yet! You do not *know* her! She is not silly little girl you get to your bed with drinks and ‘I love you’. She is educated woman, with master’s degree from university in Blava, who speaks *five languages*. She is very clever woman, not stupid tart from Ukraine!”

“Sorry, no, look...I was just joking. I’m not really that daft. It was just a joke. I’m the funny guy, remember? Cartoonist? That’s what I do...I do funny.”

“No, it is not funny. Last night in hotel bar, Italian guy gets drunk and asks Katka to go to bedroom. He says ‘I love you’ and he touches her zadok...her bottom. Katka makes him wear his beer. So no, is not funny. Do not make such big mistake. Do not be masturbator. Katka will not like you if you are masturbator like Italian guy.”

A woman further along the bar almost choked on her coffee then stared at us.

“I think you mean ‘wanker’, Elena.”

She swung her bag over her shoulder and slid, a little unsteadily, off her stool.

“Yes, wanker. We also find word ‘wanker’ in dictionary. This means ‘person who masturbates’ and is also slang word for ‘very stupid man’ yes? You cannot say ‘masturbator’ in same way as ‘wanker’ to mean ‘stupid man’? It is not less rude to use more formal word? No? Okay, this is not important. Most important is to remember this...no ‘I love you’, and no touching zadok. German beer is very cold! Oh...wait...”

Elena turned and tottered back to the bar on her high heels, took my crib sheet of Slovak words and phrases, and scribbled one last sentence.

“One more: ‘Prepáčte, som sprostý Angličan’. There, that is to say when you mess up things, say wrong Slovak words, do or say stupid things men always do and say. Okay?”

With a cheery wave and a tug at her bra-straps, she was off. And after an hour practicing my new Slovak vocabulary on a very uncomfortable modern bench outside in the pale autumn

sunshine, I reckoned I was ready.

Elena disappeared into a little cubby-hole at the back of their stand as soon as she saw me arrive, so it was just me and Katka. At first Katka ignored me, busying herself with some brochures and glancing towards the curtains that Elena had disappeared through, as though willing Elena to reappear and deal with me. But she had to look up when I launched into my prepared Slovak speech.

“Prepáčte, prosím. Dobrý deň. Ako sa máš, Katarina?”

For a moment her expression was distant and business-like, but then she smiled.

“This is better. Your Slovak actually sounds quite good. You even make soft ‘d’ and soft ‘n’ quite well...for foreigner. You speak with terrible foreign accent, but yes quite good. And you remember more Slovak words. Excellent.”

The curtain at the rear of the stand twitched and Elena’s fist stuck out, thumb up. I couldn’t help grinning, and unfortunately Katka followed my look. Elena’s thumbs-up disappeared back behind the curtains, but Katka had already seen it and her smile disappeared too.

“Elena! You will please come out here! Now!”

As Elena re-emerged, looking a little sheepish, Katka turned back to face me.

“May I look in pockets?”

Before I could answer, Katka’s hand dived into one jacket pocket after another, finally pulling out the evidence she was looking for. Unfolding the sheet of paper and reading it, she rounded on Elena.

“So, your old matchmaking tricks again? Elena, how many times do I say, please do not do this, giving to men papers with Slovak chatter-up words? You remember what happens yesterday when you try to put me together with Italian man? It is never ending well, Elena, so please stop doing this.”

It looked like I’d really dropped Elena in it, though she didn’t seem that bothered, folding her arms, rolling her eyes at the ceiling and sucking her teeth throughout Katka’s ticking-

off. Still, I felt I should try to put things right.

“I’m sorry, Katarina. It’s my fault. I saw Elena at the coffee bar and I asked her to help me with some Slovak words to say to you. I just wanted to talk to you again.”

Katka turned back to me and held out the paper.

“No, *I* should be sorry. I apologise. I should not look in pockets. Excuse me, please.”

She started to walk away but I reached out and touched her shoulder.

“No, wait. It really *is* all my fault...prepáčte, som sprostý Angličan.”

Katka stopped and turned back again. Her mouth was still serious, but her eyes seemed to be smiling, and then she was laughing.

“No, no you are not. Really you are not. It is nice you try to be blamed for Elena’s meddlings, but I do not think you are stupid Englishman.”

Elena was putting on a coat and reaching for her bag. I tried to give her a look that said “So, ‘som sprostý Angličan’ means ‘I’m a stupid Englishman’? Thanks for that!” She shrugged and grinned back, a little tipsily - I guessed she’d been at the bottle of slivovica again. This seemed like a good moment, so...

“Listen, Katarina. Can I call you Katka?”

She nodded.

“I’d really like to buy you dinner. Or maybe have a drink, go to the Jazzkeller or something? Elena, why don’t you come too? I don’t think James has a meeting tonight. That’s my colleague from our stand. James *loves* the Jazzkeller, and there’s a good band on tonight.”

Elena shook her head.

“No. Thank you, I have other invitation tonight. You both have nice time, yes? Was nice to meet you!”

Reaching around Katka to offer her hand, Elena was off up the aisle in a cloud of strong perfume and slivovica fumes, a little unsteady on her heels as she waved goodbye, her bag

clinking as she walked. Katka watched her go with a wry smile.

“I think I must count our slivovica bottles again.”

She started to re-arrange books and brochures, tidying the stall ready for the end of the day.

“So, Katka, if Elena’s got a date does that mean you’re on your own tonight? If you’re not doing anything, how about dinner? I could still ask James to join us. You’d like him. He’s a bit stuffy and old school tie, and tells terrible jokes, but he’s okay when you get to know him.”

Katka was watching me out of the corner of her eye as she dusted a low table with a cloth.

“No, I have no plans for tonight. It is just Elena I am with in Frankfurt, no other people from our company, so...maybe.”

“What? You’d like to have dinner?”

Katka nodded.

“Mmm, maybe.”

She continued tidying and polishing as I followed her around the stand.

“We could have dinner, then go and listen to some jazz? You, me and James. Does that sound okay?”

“Maybe.”

Katka straighten up from her cleaning, smiled at me and headed for the curtains at the rear. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly before trying again.

“So, do you want to go?”

I raised my voice as Katka disappeared behind the curtains, and she raised hers back. I was trying not to make mine a ‘getting-a-bit-annoyed’ kind of raised voice.

“Maybe!”

That’s when I got annoyed and left. Halfway up the aisle I turned to go back, thought better of it, turned again and finally found myself back at the stand feeling like a complete idiot. Which I assumed was how Katka wanted me to feel. How had Elena described her? ‘*Sometimes difficult*’? Bloody right! She was giving me the brush-off and trying to make me look like a

desperate, needy prat while she was at it. So why was I back here for more? I turned to walk away again.

“Okay, now I am ready. Where do you go? You do not wait for me?”

Katka had appeared through the curtains, her coat over her arm. I stopped and stared.

“What? Sorry, you *do* want to have dinner then?”

“Maybe.”

This time I was really going. I was almost at the end of the aisle and heading for the hall doors when Katka caught up and tugged at the sleeve of my jacket.

“Do you always walk very fast? It is difficult to stay up with you.”

“What? I’m sorry, but what do you *want*? Don’t you think you’ve taken the mickey enough for one day? With your soft ‘d’ and soft ‘n’, ‘come back when you can say it right’, and ‘maybe, maybe, maybe’?”

Katka stopped and stared at me, smiling a little awkwardly.

“Look, I’m sorry I thought you were Czech, but you were on a Czech publisher’s stand. It said it right there on the front of the stand...Prague, Czech Republic. It’s a mistake *anyone* could have made. I just wanted to talk to you, ask you out for dinner. But this has turned into the most tortuous, mind-bending, confusing and humiliating encounter I’ve ever had with a woman. And I’ve had a few odd ones over the years. Admittedly that’s mostly been my fault, but in this case I’m prepared to share the blame. If you didn’t want to have dinner with me, why not just *say* so?! A simple ‘get lost’ would have done the trick...it always has in the past.”

Katka’s smile had faded away, to be replaced by a puzzled frown.

“But I *do* want to have dinner with you. I *said* yes. And what is ‘taking mickey’?”

I can honestly say I’d never, ever been aware of my mouth actually dropping open until that moment. I mean, mouths don’t, do they? Not unless you’re in a cartoon or something.

But I swear mine did right then. I just looked blankly at Katka for a good four or five seconds as the power of speech slowly seeped back.

“When did you say yes? I never heard you say yes. You just kept saying *maybe*.”

“Maybe means yes.”

“No it doesn’t! Maybe means maybe. It means perhaps. It means I haven’t made my mind up, I’ll let you know, I don’t want to say yes but I’m too polite to say no. It does *not* mean yes!”

“I am sorry. I always think ‘maybe’ is same as ‘yes’, not same as ‘perhaps’. In Slovak ‘možno’ is ‘perhaps’. But ‘môže byť’ is ‘maybe’. This means what you ask *may be*, is informal way to say ‘yes, it *may* be’...is really quite *definite*...just like to say ‘yes’, but more like ‘yes, it *will* be’. You understand? A way you would say ‘yes’ to a friend, not very formal.

But, thank you. Knowing this mistake is making me understand some problems I have before with some English people, and big problems with some English boys I meet in Praha. Hmmm. Yes, this is explaining a lot. Thank you. So, you will give me name and address for restaurant for tonight, yes? And what time we are to meet?”

She took a small notepad and pen from her coat pocket and held them out to me, smiling again now.

“Okay. So you meant ‘yes’ every time you were saying ‘maybe’? See, I thought you were saying...okay, never mind. The restaurant? Yes, um, why don’t I pick you up in a taxi? What’s the name of your hotel?”

Katka shook her head cheerfully and pushed the notepad at me.

“No, I like to walk. In foreign city it is shame to sit in taxi when you can walk and see things properly, hear, smell, feel everything properly instead of looking through taxi window. We will meet at restaurant. It will be *long* walk I hope, yes?”

I took the pad and pen and started writing.

“Yes, it’s quite a long way from the centre, but just about

walkable I suppose. Depends where your hotel is. It's not a fancy touristy place, just a small family-run neighbourhood Italian restaurant that James and I go to a lot when we're here, but very good food. Very authentic. Do you have a map? I'll give you my mobile number in case you get lost."

Katka took the pad and glanced at the address.

"I am never getting lost. Even in deep forest in Slovakia I am never lost. It is a good ability. When we train with Slovak Pioneers I was always one to have trust of map-reading, in forest and on mountain, and I never make my Pioneers group get lost. Also I was very good at shooting Kalashnikov machine gun. I win regional Pioneers shooting prize in grammar school."

"A Kalashnikov? An AK47? Really?! How...um...old were you?"

"Fourteen, perhaps fifteen years. Was during communist regime. What time shall I be at restaurant?"

"Fourteen?! Bloody hell! Well, is eight o'clock okay? That'll give us time to go on to the Jazzkeller later if you like. I'll phone and book a table, and I'll see if James wants to go too."

Katka took back the pad, held out her hand to shake mine then turned to walk off.

"Oh, Katka! Sorry, I never told you my name! It's..."

"It is okay, I know your name."

She reached into her inside pocket and pulled out a book.

"It is on your book. Elena went back and got copy for me from your stand, probably when you were busy learning Slovak soft consonants and new Slovak words."

"Really? James *never* gives out free samples."

"Elena is very persuasive woman."

Katka grinned and shouted over her shoulder as she disappeared into the crowd heading for the front of the Messe building and the main doors.

"I think it is perhaps your friend James who she meets tonight. So we will be on our own together. It will be nicer."