

The Czech Adventure - Chapter Three.

We're up early the next morning and there's a crumpled fax waiting for Dobri at Reception.

"Sorry, sir," says the blank-faced concierge. He is attempting to smooth out the fax paper.

"I think is something else. Other English guest tell me to get back from garbage basket."

"Other English guest?" asks Dobri.

"Yes."

"Tall man, well-dressed, umbrella?"

"Yes."

"Right. Thank you," says Dobri and we go out of the main door onto the pavement where the crowds are already promenading up and down, speaking in their many tongues.

"Our good friend Alastair probably read it, too," I say.

"You bet. We'll have to confuse him with the next one."

We walk down towards the Old Town Square to get some breakfast at the Cafe Leuny. We sit at a table overlooking the famous Astronomical Clock where the tourists are waiting for the skeleton to start moving around when the hour strikes. They are blissfully unaware of the East European pickpockets beginning to circle.

"The fax is from Ed. Greenbaum, my diamond expert," says Dobri. "He's in Antwerp and can spare a day to come over here."

"Good. When?"

"Tomorrow is the only 'blank on his screen' as he puts it."

"Tomorrow it is, then"

"Right. We'll set up a meeting with Slama. With samples. Otherwise it's a wasted journey for Ed."

I call Slama on my mobile but somebody answers who can only speak Czech, so I hand it to Dobri. I watch the crowd while he talks. I notice with interest that pin-striped Alastair is amongst the tourists also looking up at the clock. A thin, poorly-dressed man sidles up to him and I watch with growing enthusiasm as he introduces his hand into Alastair's pocket. But the man does not look like a real professional. And apparently he isn't. Alastair suddenly becomes aware of the situation, steps back a pace then forward a pace and in true British fashion fells the would-be pickpocket to the ground with a right hook. Not difficult to do in view of the man's diminutive size and obvious lack of nutrition. A policeman arrives and the unfortunate felon is manhandled away, while Alastair is the hero of the moment with the other tourists. How does he do it? Dobri is now handing me back the mobile.

"O.K. Slama is available. But we have to drive to Liberech to meet him. He has to go over the border to pick up the samples and apparently it's a long drive, so I've arranged it that we pick up Ed and then drive to Liberech and see Slama in his motel."

"Liberech?"

"Probably the ugliest town in the Czech Republic. In the industrial zone. Bring your camera."

We pick up Ed Greenbaum at the airport. He is short and fat, wears an elegant blue

suit and has tight, blow-dried curls all over his head.

“Dobri! How you doin’? Long time no e-mail.”

“Fine, Ed. And you?”

“Hey, ya know, no change. Makin’ an honest living.”

“This is John Problem.”

“Great name, pal. Beats the hell out of Greenbaum.”

“It’s a matter of opinion,” I say.

“So where are the diamonds, Dobri?” he asks.

“We drive for a while. Two hours max.”

“We going to be back in time for my plane?”

“Certainly.”

We drive to Liberech in the Tatra. Dobri is right. Liberech is the ugliest town you’ll ever see, mainly because it’s not been maintained under Communist rule and doesn’t merit money from the European Union like so many other Czech towns, most of which are beautiful and untouched since the 15th. century. Here in Liberech the pavement slabs are up-ended with rank weeds growing through, the roads are rutted, everywhere looks blackened by soot, the hideous sixties buildings have huge stains on them, and the people on the streets look tired and worn. The traffic lights don’t appear to be working but there aren’t many cars about, so we drive quickly through this sad town to Mr. Slama’s motel on the outskirts. The Slapy Motel has the same delapidated, unpainted look as Liberech. Set in amongst some leafless trees, it also has a sinister appearance.

“You sure pick some nice locations, Dobri,” says Ed. “What’s the restaurant like?”

We go into the reception area. At a table behind the counter a man is sitting smoking. He is reading a newspaper by the light of a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling and doesn’t look up when we enter. Dobri coughs courteously. The man still doesn’t look up but concentrates on extinguishing his cigarette in a large overflowing ash-tray. Dobri brings both hands down sharply on the counter-top, rattling the whole reception area, and bellows a few angry phrases in Czech. This has the desired response. Yes, Mr. Slama is a guest. Yes, he must still be in his chalet. No, there is no telephone to the chalet.

“Then we’ll go and find him,” says Dobri. “What’s his chalet number?”

The concierge insists on accompanying us and mutters away to Dobri as we walk across a dirty concrete area to the so-called chalets. I say to Ed,

“Maybe Dobri knows another restaurant.”

“I hope.

Dobri interrupts us.

“Listen. Something strange is going on. The concierge says that when Slama arrived last night he was very agitated. Said his car had been broken into and all his samples stolen. The concierge doesn’t know what the samples are, of course. Slama made some phone calls but as far as the concierge could tell, not to the police.”

“Terrific,” says Ed.

“Well. We’ll see what he has to say.”

The concierge knocks on the door. There is no response. Dobri hammers on it but there is still no answer. Dobri and the concierge have a brief conversation and the concierge goes back to reception.

“He’s gone to get the master key.”

“Where is this guy Slama?” says Ed. “Why isn’t he answering the door? Would you believe it? Had his goddam samples stolen, for Pete’s sake.”

“Kinda creepy place this,” he adds.

“At least we’ll see if he’s left or not, when we get in here,” says Dobri.

“Easier to check if his car is still here,” I contribute.

“I want to see if he’s cleared his room or not. It might help us establish how to find him,” says Dobri. “Ed’s time is short.”

“Yeah. And Antwerp is prettier,” says Ed.

The concierge returns, opens the chalet door and goes in. We follow one by one. The bed has been slept in, Slama’s mobile is on the dressing-table, his shoes are on the floor.

“His shoes are still here,” I say.

“So where is he?” says Dobri.

“I still say this is creepy,” says Ed.

The concierge is looking in the bathroom and shakes his head.

“Well,” says Dobri, “The only place we haven’t looked is the wardrobe.”

He pulls the door open. We all jump back. Mr. Slama is inside and slowly topples over and rolls out onto the floor at our feet. There is blood on the back of his head.

“Oh wow,” says Ed. “Let’s get outta here.”

“Wait,” says Dobri crouching by Slama’s side. “No. He’s dead.”

He looks at the concierge and barks an instruction in Czech which is obviously about telephoning the police. The concierge leaves in a hurry.

“Presumably Mr. Slama didn’t fall and bang his head?” I say, carefully avoiding looking at the body.

“Oh wow,” says Ed again. “What the hell have you got me into? Are you guys crazy or something? Look, I gotta go. I feel nauseated. And if I miss that plane, I’m in deep trouble.”

“Listen, Ed,” says Dobri. “There is no way you can avoid waiting for the police. You have just been a witness at the discovery of a corpse. Use John’s mobile to call Antwerp and tell them you’ll be late.”

“Yeah, they’ll love it. Late because of a corpse.”

“Then tell ’em you’ve got food poisoning or something,” says Dobri sharply.

“O.K. O.K. Unbelievable. Just unbelievable!”

I give him the mobile and he goes outside.

“Dobri. How are we going to play this? Our connection with Slama and so on?”

“Straight, John. Perfectly straight. We found him because he didn’t turn up for a meeting. That’s all.”

“And the General?”

“Maybe no need to mention that we met him. Complicates things. And no doubt the police will find out all about Slama’s business connections, anyway.”

“What do you think about the General?”

“Wouldn’t like to cross him.”

“I hope Slama didn’t.”

“Jumping to conclusions, John.”

“I know. But.”

We go out and join Ed who continues to grumble about missing his plane. He seems to have forgotten about being involved with a corpse.

“How long are we going to have to hang around here?” says Ed.

“Who knows, Ed. We’ll probably have our passports confiscated by the local police and Homicide Headquarters in Prague will no doubt want to question us.”

“Great. Just great. No goddam passport. Goddam Homicide Headquarters. I’m really glad you guys invited me on this trip.”

“We’re sorry, Ed,” I say. “At least you’ll have time for a good dinner in a fancy Prague restaurant. Until the cops come for you.”

The police arrive in a delapidated car, horn blaring. Dobri talks with them for a few minutes.

“They want our passports until tomorrow. I’ve told them where we’re staying. We have to see the homicide people tomorrow morning. After that, they say we can maybe go about our business and you can go back to Antwerp, Ed.”

“Hey. Great. This is costing me a lot of money, ya know.”

“It’s a pain for all of us.”

“What are you guys doing here anyway? Can’t just be the diamonds.”

“We’re setting up deals with the local breweries,” I explain.

“To do what?”

“Export to the West.”

“Yeah? You’d better look out for bodies in the old oak casks. Give your beer some flavour, eh?” And he laughs uproariously.

I look at Dobri. Dobri shrugs. We get in the car. The police watch us suspiciously but they don’t stop us. Ed lights up a small cheroot, leans back in his seat and says,

“So do you guys have two passports, like I do?”

“Of course,” says Dobri. “But we’ll book you into the hotel, anyway. O.K?”

