

## Chapter 35

# HONOURABLE BARONS

**SATURDAY, 3 JULY 2010**

As is usually the case on country roads, the lead car in a line of vehicles is driven by the slowest, most cautious driver, unwilling to go above twenty miles an hour. I'm in no rush to reach Lake Bled, but this is tediously slow.

Fifty-seven per cent of Slovenia is covered in forest, and the view on either side of the road is mostly trees. The country has impressed me so far, and this unspoilt land will keep dishing out delights.

I've named our GPS system Mouth Sonia, or just Sonia. No reason, except she's a big mouth and a rambler. Never shuts up. When we reach Bled, she takes us down a narrow lane that leads to our hostel at the edge of town, but the road is impassable. A little boy's dream of a dump truck, an excavator, and a steamroller are blocking it. I back up and turn around, rejoining the country lane. There must be another way.

'*Recalculating.*' says Sonia. '*Recalculating.*' She is struggling to work out an alternative route, absolutely stumped by the obstacle. '*Recalculating.*'

There's another lane that connects to the one we need to reach, so we head for it.

'*Computer says no.*' That computer is none other than Sonia.

It turns out it's also blocked, this time by a large mound of sand.

Have we landed in a giant child's playground?

We leave the car by the sand and walk 300 metres to the hostel to check in. I'm half-expecting to stumble upon a full-size Thomas the Tank Engine lying on its side. Then it begins to rain, so we turn back, and the rapid trot turns into a frantic dash when the rain intensifies. As we round the corner and see the Honda, it reminds me of a time machine because, in popular time-travel movies, the protagonist always abandons their time machine to explore and has to race back to evade some unforeseen danger, narrowly escaping back through time. I fondly respect our Honda time machine as we slip inside, switch on the flux capacitor, and reverse blindly in the pelting rain along the narrowest lane. Swinging around, we head back the way we came. I follow a track leading into a dark area of woodland, willing to drive across farmland if I have to, even if it means mowing down a few animals in our quest, but the two tracks with a central grass verge hardly constitute a road, grazing the undercarriage of the lowered Honda. We're deep within the woods, waiting with bated breath for Sonia to respond.

*'Recalculating. Recalculating.'*

We're almost certainly trespassing now, but I don't care. The sun is setting, and the woods go dark, giving Momoko the collywobbles, with the Honda bouncing and sliding from side to side in the wet, gravelly mud. I'm wondering how we have ended up here, lost in some Slovenian forest, the scene straight out of a Ruth Rendell mystery. I envisage a crazed pheasant hunter charging out of the trees in a long, green jacket and a brown cap carrying a shotgun, shouting at me in Slovenian before blowing out all the tyres, leaving us stranded and at his mercy. His name would be Vladimir.

*'Recalculating. Follow this, like, gravel path in the middle of nowhere 800 metres and turn right on Partizanska Cesta.'*

All hail the oracle! Sonia has worked out another route to Pension Bled Hostel.

Lake Bled is indescribable. A kick-ass guitar solo, perhaps. The perfect wave. A chest filled with treasure. It's the number one domestic holiday destination for the Slovenians. The lake has the most beautiful clear water and is surrounded by pine forests and the Julian Alps. A tiny island with a

baroque church set among pines is situated in the lake's centre. People marry here. To reach it, you have to take a traditional wooden boat called a pletna.

Completing a six-kilometre circuit of the lake on our rented bicycles, we pass small churches and restaurants. With the sun out again after a brief storm, we stop at intervals to admire the emerald-green waters, too inviting to pass up a dip.

Further around the lake, the temptation of a second plunge overwhelms me. It's nicely warmed by thermal springs and just so inviting. Like Croatia, Slovenia only gained independence nineteen years ago from communist Yugoslavia. And like many eastern European nations, Slovenia's place on the continent has been revised several times because of wars. It's hard to believe this country suffered hardship in the past. I *can* believe that out of 177 countries, Slovenia ranks twenty-seven on the Human Development Index.

We are so seduced by Bled that we extend our stay. I leave Momoko that evening to update her travel blog and walk into town for the second night to a bar I like selling Lakso for €2 a pint. If only Jordy and Skylar were here. I bet Hansel and Gretel are.

Dawn on Tuesday morning. The fresh meadow breeze and excitement of watching hot air feed into a balloon dispel my mild hangover from last night. The grass and weed here is two-foot high. Hundreds of mosquitoes swarm us. I already have five bites on my right hand and one on my eyelid. A range of insects is skipping about the long grass, sending Momoko into a frenzied panic. Every time I look at her, she's flapping a hand across her face, shaking her wrists, slapping her thighs, or lifting her feet, shrieking constantly. All it needs is some comedy *parp-parp* music to accentuate the moment. How did she make it out of the Amazon?

The balloon takes off slowly and quietly. Fire from the propane tanks heats our skin, so off comes my hoodie. I have some hot air of my own but keep it bottled, worried that I might silently but violently send the balloon soaring into the stratosphere. Now I understand why it's called Lakso beer. Skimming the treetops, the breeze pushes us away from the launch site to the west. Hand on heart, it has absolutely nothing to do with me.

Captain Grega, the balloon pilot, sparks up a cigarette and looks at his bewildered passengers. ‘What do you prefer,’ he says, ‘a calm pilot with a cigarette or a nervous one without?’

It’s a PhD-worthy response to the worried frowns directed at him.

Captain Grega is an interesting character, full of personality. He looks more like the captain of a fishing trawler than a balloon. Thick, grey beard and thinning hair. His skin has a yellowish hue to it, his face weathered and aged from the sun and a life of hard work. He has been a balloon pilot for twenty years but the income from running only a couple of flights a week means he finds supplementary work in the summer and alternative work in the winter.

We fly over Lake Bled and snap another 200 photos.

We fly past Bled Castle, a medieval fortress loftily perched on a cliff 130 metres above the lake.

We fly over a small kindergarten where kids wave up at us.

We fly over the Honda in the car park. It might be my imagination, but I think I hear Sonia say, *At the next country, please turn round and take me home.*

We fly over our hostel in the countryside, still denied access by all the construction machinery and sandpits blocking the lane. I try to discern an alternative route from high up, but I’m still none the wiser.

We fly over a river, then a factory, and see the support crew tracking our flight.

We fly over much of this quaint, alpine region tucked into Slovenia’s northwestern corner, packed with natural wonders and giant kids’ toys.

A small airport used by parachutists draws closer, the balloon casting shadows on the runway and the surrounding fields.

Captain Grega has no qualms about crash-landing in a field of maize, accidentally flattening a dozen stalks which will undoubtedly upset the local farmer. His name would be Vladimir.

All thirteen passengers kneel in a semi-circle as soon as the balloon’s deflated and packed away. Captain Grega sprinkles gravel, flicks sparks from a cigarette lighter, and pours cold champagne over our heads for our baptism.

‘You’re now honourable barons of this town.’

Still basking in the warm glow of our ballooning ennoblement and the

cool fizz of champagne in our hair, we cross the border into Austria. The sun vanishes. It's dark. The mountains, pine trees, and green fields are all gone. I switch my headlights on, like every other car. A message pops into my phone as it does ever so promptly when we cross into a new country. It's Vodafone informing me of the local charges.

Four miles later, we come out of the tunnel on the A1 and back into daylight. For the first time, we see Austria, the scenery no less dramatic than in Slovenia.

'I've like, never heard of *Strawberry Hostel*,' says Sonia, winding us up again as we approach Salzburg. 'Are you sure you don't mean *strawberry farms*?'

Neat courtyards, plazas, steel monuments, and 17th-century buildings are accessible along the cobblestoned streets. Venturing from the centre of Salzburg leads us through back streets packed with modern shops and the all-too-familiar chain stores akin to any other city. The streets also seem like a popular haunt for much of Austria's teenage population.

'Zara!' Momoko squeaks, pointing at the clothes outlet, her face alight with excitement.

I narrow my eyes on her and lower my head.

By the time I look up, she's already tried on two skirts and a top.

Leaving her to it, I do a discouraging tour of the high street with my hands buried in my pockets, rubbing shoulders with eager shoppers and scrawny teenagers in baggy clothes. I hate this because whenever I shop, I feel people are deliberately out to annoy me. Take, for example, the couple in front who just stop walking, resulting in me colliding with them, and the large tour group facing their guide blocking the entire street, tempting me to bowl through them like an angry bull as nothing annoys me more than people with no spatial awareness, and the two young men behind me start clapping loudly and try to out-yell each other, which gets you twatted in England. It's difficult to reinforce to Momoko, or anyone, how much I loathe department stores and high streets. What I should do is break for a calming drink, but instead, I go searching for obscenities in shop signs.

*Wanger*. Amusing.

*Frey Wille and Schmuck Passage*. Brilliant.

Reunited, Momoko and I wander along the streets to a large courtyard where the cobblestones are covered in large steaming piles of horse manure

trampled by hooves and cart wheels. It's a step up from dog droppings, literally, but I'm careful not to add horse to the various excrements I've accrued on the soles of my shoes. I almost fail, missing a pile by a whisker. With a quick glance towards the wife, hoping she hasn't seen it, I breathe a sigh of relief.

Riding a horse-drawn carriage, we lean back as we pass through the busy streets, allowing the horses to take charge, forcing all the annoying shoppers out of the way and sparing my shoes from the turd minefields in the process.

Leaving Salzburg for Vienna, we detour towards Lake Fuschl, hoping for a swim at the famous *Sound of Music* location. The lake perimeter has been claimed by numerous guesthouses and campsites. It makes it impossible to gain access to the lake. Yet another natural wonder exploited by the greedy tentacles of tourism.

Modern tramlines run up and down Vienna's roads, and Sonia is up to her old tricks, guiding us in endless circles again. She has got to stop this monotonous *recalculating* nonsense, it's starting to grate on me. Just take us to HI Hostel Brigittenau and stop fucking around, you dappy tart.

I think I need a break from driving. I've been in the driver's seat for twenty-five days straight, staring at more than 2,900 miles of asphalt. *It's not you, Sonia, it's me.*

It's Groundhog Day, the afternoon playing out like the one before it. More shops, more boring historical buildings, more walking around.

'Zara!' Momoko squeaks and nips inside to try on all the clothes. She has this radar for shops she loves.

Once again, I'm alone among enthusiastic shoppers, elbowing my way through the irritating meatblobs, avoiding the urge to yell every obscenity I can summon.

To stay in good spirits, I go hunting for more funny shop signs.

*Ankid & Kunst.* Good.

*Denkstein and WettCounkts.* Great.

Had Austria never existed, both world wars may never have occurred. The First World War started when Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated, drawing many European countries into war from 1914 to

1918. The Second World War started due to another Austrian, Adolf Hitler. Approximately 62 million people died during that war, over two per cent of the world's population.

From the viewing terrace of Donauturm, Vienna's sky tower, we look across this popular European city. Perhaps this is the best way to view it. I don't have to avoid the shoppers, the shops, or outlets called Zara, drawing Momoko like a mosquito to fresh blood. I can also steer clear of boring buildings and manure mountains.

The Danube River is stretched out below. It snakes west to Hungary, passing through Budapest, our destination later today.