

***Chris Stacey  
presents***



***JAMES  
BOND,  
ON HER  
MAJESTY'S  
SECRET  
SERVICE***



# **JAMES BOND, ON HER MAJESTY'S SECRET SERVICE**

**A novelisation by  
Chris Stacey**

**Based on the screenplay by  
Richard Maibaum**

**From the novel by  
Ian Fleming**

**Also by Chris Stacey**

Gulfstream  
A Whisper of Death

## James Bond, On Her Majesty's Secret Service

### Details

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### Author's Note

*On Her Majesty's Secret Service* remains, for me, one of the too few times the James Bond film franchise has honestly adapted its source novel. Along with *From Russia With Love* and *Goldfinger*, it is the closest to Fleming's own vision, as presented in his books. There has always been, among Bond aficionados, a great sense of loss that fans were deprived of an authentic interpretation of the "Blofeld Trilogy" due in part to logistical reasons (there was nowhere in the world resembling a real Piz Gloria in 1966) and a belief that *OHMSS* was a "Thunderball on skis." This adaptation does not veer far from Richard Maibaum's 1969 screenplay. That was never my intention. What I have attempted to do is embellish the story we see on screen with a thorough background. For instance, I wanted to explain to the reader why James Bond wants to resign from the S.I.S., why he falls in love with Tracy and where the mission goes wrong. To that end this probably reads more like a Fleming novel than a movie adaptation. Not as good as Fleming of course, although I did often refer to his original work for inspiration. While I have utilised chunks of Maibaum's screen dialogue, the lines are not always where you expect them to be. Some, I am afraid, have been cut out and others not featured in the movie added. I have also created several bridging scenes. In this respect *James Bond, On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (original title: *O.H.M.S.S. '67*) is more like Christopher Wood's *James Bond, The Spy Who Loved Me*. The other, most obvious, difference is telling the story from James Bond's point of view, as Fleming would have done. The incidental scenes featuring other characters, with two notable exceptions, have all been removed or significantly re-interpreted. I'm not expecting praise for this piece - it is something of a vanity project - but I hope readers will enjoy it anyway.

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**One:**  
**The Cinderella Girl**

James Bond shifted the gear lever into fifth and felt the power of the Aston Martin's six cylinder engine thrust him further and faster along the coastal road that shouldered the Normandy coast.

It had been a frustrating night at the tables. The once grand palace that was the Casino at Royale Les Eaux had looked tired, old fashioned, decadent even. The old money was still at the green baize, shuffling red backed playing cards and blue and gold chips as if they were Monopoly money, which to those diamond encrusted hands they surely were. The stench of snobbery had hit him full in the face and Bond baulked from it.

He didn't dislike rich people, but times had moved on. Wealth was no longer the privilege of the upper classes. Those new-fangled pop singers and movie stars, the fashionistas and the arty, modish, revolutionary sets had seen to that. Where had all this money come from? This new, free money unshackled by inheritance and class, which scoured the globe seeking the places of the elite.

Royale was one of the few towns, one of the few casinos, which still pandered only to its exclusive, historic clientele. The old royal houses, the exiled princes and barons, the land owners of centuries, the true upper crust of European society, the descendants of Hapsburgs and Bourbons and the last lineage to the Romanovs – all came to Royale. And mixed with them came the great and good of industry and commerce, the tycoons and magnates, the politicians, the great generals, accepted over decades, who were pandered to and preened before the mighty families of old empires.

Yet even Royale had lost its sparkle this year. It had been the last throw of the autumn season, the final Sunday before the shutters came down for three whole months in preparation for the Christmas festivities. Bond had wanted to witness again one of the great nights in the European gambling calendar. Yet all was not plenteous at Royale. The town was suffering another season of decay as it stayed aloof from the nouveau riche. The paint was peeling on all the walls and the heavy scent of high stakes which used to hang like a cloak along the promenades and in the cafes, was lost among the soporific autumn breeze. The lights illuminating the Casino's grand facade had looked less regal, less golden and somehow significantly smaller. Inside, the smell, the waft of a thousand cigarettes and the tepid fragrance of sweat, had seemed duller than usual, the heave of Gauloises replaced by too much floral Chanel.

Still Bond had donned his best tuxedo and entered the Casino Royale. And Bond had taken a seat at the famous table, that same kidney shaped bowl where he'd once faced the double agent Vlacek. And Bond had tried to relive that magical night when hundreds of thousands of francs had changed hands and the brutish Communist brothel keeper had been exposed. But Bond knew you cannot relive the past. And Bond had lost several smooth thousands at baccarat. Old Francs, of course. They still didn't use the shiny currency of Georges Pompidou at Royale.

And now Bond was tired and the stupidly extravagant evening had drawn to a close. The dark of a long night was beginning to recede and the beautiful pink fan of morning was spanning the horizon, washed by the rolling, breaking waves, equally as discontented and ruffled as James Bond.

There had been nothing in those people, nothing in their countenance that appealed. It was as though the wealth of centuries, the breeding of generations had ceased to matter, and now the great of society were as mucky and uncouth as the upstarts. Their manners, honed through the years, counted for nought. Their attitude suggested boastful pride, snobbery and hate. Bond, who at times had drunk and dined with these glitterati suddenly found their stubbornness coarse and shallow. It was time, he considered, to move on.

Silently Bond composed the letter in his head, as he switched into third, missing fourth, and took the left hand turn at a dangerous speed.

*“Sir,*

*“I have the honour to request that you will accept my resignation from the Service effective immediate.*

*“The reasons for this submission, which I present with much regret, are as follows...”*

It had been a frustrating two years. Operation Thunderball had been a success and a failure for the Secret Intelligence Service. The mysterious criminal organisation SPECTRE, the Special Executive for Counter Intelligence Terrorism Revenge and Extortion, had attempted to blackmail the world. Bond had witnessed the death of SPECTRE’s lieutenant, the piratical villain Emilio Largo, shot by a harpoon bolt fired by his mistress, the beautiful Domino Derval. But the story had not ended there. While Bond, along with his American partner Felix Leiter, had recovered two stolen atomic bombs and thwarted a nuclear catastrophe, the principate had escaped unhindered. The head of SPECTRE, a man known as Ernst Stavro Blofeld, remained at large. It had been Bond’s task for the last eighteen months to hunt the quarry down.

Bond had followed clues around the globe. How close had he got and on how many occasions? At first he’d been lucky. The Deuxieme Bureau had investigated the offices of a charity, based in Paris, called Centre International D’Assistance aux Personnes Deplaces. They found it conspicuously artificial. Worse, the bogus offices fronted an elaborate meeting centre from where SPECTRE had plotted its assassinations and entrapments. One of the employees at this so called International Brotherhood for Assistance of Stateless Persons had cracked under interrogation and given a description of Ernst Stavro Blofeld. Bond had studied the artist’s impression until the two hundred pounds of flesh, the bald head and small, black eyes was imprinted on his consciousness.

Now Bond saw Blofeld in everything and nothing; every hint rendered the pursuit more hopeless: a word here, a sighting there, a murder somewhere else, but nothing tangible, nothing concrete, nothing worth the expense. And now the authorities were taking action. Bond had received the caustic telegrams and ignored them. He’d disposed of the messages, the one’s that told him to return to London and report fully and categorically, and fled from the front line in a moment of pique. Childish maybe, but born from a sense of pessimism.

He had encountered the agents of SPECTRE before, men like Doctor No and Red Grant. He knew Blofeld’s spider’s web of operations stretched worldwide, that no government, no military, no police or scientific laboratory was closed to their influence. He had been ordered to “hunt high and low and leave no stone unturned” – an unremarkable cliché from an otherwise eloquent Prime Minister. After Paris, the chase took him to Toronto, but Horst Uhlmann had died silent, and then Bond heard nothing, except whispers.

Yet whispers always turned into screams. He'd heard the shouts in Singapore and Tehran and most recently in Orleans. This time he'd been certain the trail was hot. And then it had gone cold. Just like before there would be no evidence, a missing contact or a body found dead. The head of SPECTRE was as elusive as the famous Pimpernel. Bond felt he was as far away now as he had been when he'd kissed Domino goodbye in Nassau and boarded his flight to London. And now the final summons home had arrived. Again and yet again.

Bond could imagine M, the crusty old Admiral, stalking his office as he debated what to do about Agent 007.

Perhaps the Armourer, an engineer and quartermaster known simply as Q, might try to distract him with the latest technology: "I've been saying for years, Sir, that our special equipment is obsolete. I'd recommend an entirely new approach: miniaturisation. For instance, radioactive lint can be placed in an opponent's pocket and used both as an antipersonnel device and as a location fix."

Bond inwardly grinned at the thought. Secretly, he had a lot of respect for the Armourer. His ingenious gadgets had got him out of numerous close scrapes over the years.

M however only saw the pound signs and the zeros in the debit column of a balance sheet. He'd be more likely to dismiss Q with a terse wave of the hand.

"What we want is a location fix on, 007," he'd bark. "Number Ten's making ugly noises about Operation Bedlam."

And then impatiently to his dutiful secretary he'd demand: "Miss Moneyppenny, did you check with communications?"

Luckily, Miss Moneyppenny was likely to be on Bond's side. She had something of a soft spot for him, though goodness knows why, he never gave her much encouragement, merely flirted in the outer sanctum when the mood took him, tossing his trilby hat across the office and stealing a cheek to cheek kiss.

"The replies to our Cairo, Amsterdam and Madrid enquiries were all negative, Sir."

Yes, Moneyppenny would back him up, bless her. Whatever crimes against the Service Bond had committed, he knew she would always give him the benefit of any doubt.

The sound of a car horn burst into his thoughts.

The road had been empty of all traffic, both in front and behind. The car's sudden appearance startled Bond. It was an American car, a Ford. A red Mercury Cougar. And it was moving very fast.

His eyes twice flicked up to the rear mirror as the little red sports car gained ground, almost colliding with his bumper before the driver eased up on the throttle. Bond's Aston Martin was cruising at eighty. The Cougar kept pace. The dipped headlights flashed at him, insisting he pull over. Bond checked his mirror again. It was a convertible. The top was down and Bond could see the driver's hair flying backwards, like a loose curtain. The hair was long and dark. It was a woman driver. Slightly annoyed, Bond cursed his ill fortune. He'd better watch it or they'd have an accident.

Bond guided the DBS through a tight Z-bend that rounded a little, low promontory. The Cougar zipped dangerously close. As he exited the turn, Bond increased pace along the short straight. The girl, whoever she was, moved out to pass him. Bond held his line, approaching the next corner at speed. She tried to cut in, but Bond was too quick, the Aston Martin too nimble. He was into the corner, breaking late and changing down as he spun the wheel with one hand. The Cougar hung belligerently on his tail.

Bond was impressed. Whoever this girl was, she could really drive. She cornered beautifully, if recklessly, and she understood the mechanics of the slipstream, moving out from behind his car at the last possible moment, using the small vacuum of air to accelerate rapidly forward. On the next straight, out of curiosity, he let her slip by.

Bond inclined his head a fraction. She had long chestnut brown hair and a chiselled, hard face. Bond could see the concentration etched deep, a portrait blown ruddy by the wind. The smooth, slightly pointed chin jutted forward into the night, the high forehead bare except for the swirls of long hair that twisted around her, caught in the one hundred mile an hour rush of air. Her mouth was set in a determined pout, almost a grimace. The hands, devoid of gloves, grasped the wheel lightly, completely against what he expected. Above all, in that brief glimpse, Bond saw she was exceptionally beautiful.

The Cougar's tail lights winked at him. There is nothing more exciting in life, Bond thought, than being over taken by a pretty girl. It opened the mind to all sorts of possibilities and fantasies. Suddenly he was jerked out of his malaise. His senses tingled. Alert to the thrill of a chase, Bond's heart rate went up, his breathing increased. His eyes squinted into the dimness of the dawn, homing in on the rear of the red sports car. Bond charged after her, pushing the DBS up to a ton himself. She entered a long bend and he was gaining. The DBS was hardly hindered by the curve in the road. The tail lights grew bigger. Forty yards to go, now thirty. Then the girl was out of the bend and onto the straight. The Cougar pulled away at an insane speed, the engine wailing under protest, the wheels screeching across the tarmac. She was too fast and too reckless. The girl had a bloody death wish.

Bond slowed. Let her go. There would be other women. Bond pulled out his gunmetal grey cigarette case. Using one hand he flipped it open and extracted a single cigarette. He replaced the case in his jacket, took out his lighter and struck it. Bond sucked the sweet tang of his blended Morlands deep into his lungs, soothing his pulse, and concentrated on the road ahead.

The Route de Fecamp led along the low Normandy coast and took in the great gambling cities that had flourished between the wars: Le Touquet, Deauville, Trouville Sur Mer and lastly Royale Les Eaux. Behind and beyond them sat Le Harve and Caen and the Cherbourg peninsula where the flat deep sandy beaches rose in height and the limestone cliffs loomed.

Bond should not have been here at all, but that last fitful, wasted journey to Orleans had worn him. He'd composed a short report to headquarters explaining his latest failure, dispatched it by courier and buried himself in a night or two of baccarat, hoping to forget about his job, about the world and about Ernst Stavro Blofeld. His appetite for the hunt was ebbing and he knew it. At least at the Casino Royale he could refresh his palate for gambling.

Unfortunately, Bond had left a sour man. He drove away from the scene of his discontent as abject

as he'd arrived. There were no hotels available in Royale, even the usually reliable Splendide had regretfully apologised, so Bond had chosen instead to frequent the Versoix. It was a small pleasant establishment, privately owned by a one armed war veteran, and no more than forty minutes' drive away. Bond was almost there, just a few more turns and the little fishing village would appear nestled into the hills, shrouded in dark except for the lanterns along the single jetty. He thought of the excellent white Pineau Monsieur Versoix kept especially for him. He'd take one measure of the deep golden liqueur, eat a long early breakfast and then retire. Retire to bed or from the Secret Intelligence Service? The question nagged. Cigarette finished, Bond started to compose the letter again:

*"Sir,  
"I have the honour to request that you will accept my..."*

The red Cougar stood abandoned by the roadside. The driver's door was flung open but there was no sign of the driver.

Bond braked. Where the hell was the girl? He pulled in beside the sports car and scanned the expanse of beach. The twists of the coastline saw this mile wide bay framed by the twin embrace of land. The sun was on the horizon, peeking over one grey-green arm, casting shades of scarlet over the rolling hills of water. The tide was receding. The beach was already almost a full hundred yards deep. Half way up, fishing nets were strung aloft to dry beside their boats, waiting for the oyster catchers to start the day. They cast curious, wispy shadows on the pale sand. The tide was turning. The big breakers were starting to crash onto the shore and the waves ran up the flat lea, regressed and ran up again, each time exposing further inches of land.

He saw her. She was walking, almost aimlessly towards the water edge, her head and back perfectly straight.

Bond opened the glove compartment. This was an oversize drawer, specially kitted out for him by Q Branch, and big enough to hold a small pine case. Bond released the catches. The case contained the broken down components of a .25 calibre sniper rifle. Bond took out the infrared telescopic sight and pressed it to his eye.

Bond sucked in a shallow breath. He hadn't been wrong in his initial observation. The girl was extraordinarily attractive. Bond followed her movements ensuring the crosshairs stayed fixed over her heart.

He put her at twenty five, perhaps older, and most likely rich. She wore a silky aquamarine evening gown, embroidered with silver brocade for style and slit at both sides for flattery, revealing long shapely legs. The dress was equally high at the back, but slashed almost to her navel at the front, exposing acres of tanned skin. A single brooch pinned the two halves together and preserved her modesty. The sleeves of the dress came down past her hands. When she raised her arm to blot out the sun, Bond saw the fingers were absent of all rings. The girl's hair blew about her face, but he could still make out the strong features and the defiant pout.

Despite her countenance, the girl acted lost, distracted. She seemed to stagger forward. Bond wondered if she was drunk. Perhaps it was drugs. LSD, maybe; was she on a trip? She kicked off a pair of silver shoes and left them stuck in the sand. Slowly, she began to walk in a zigzag line towards

the waves, her hands by her sides, palms open, as if praying to the sun that stalked her as it slanted into the sky.

Bond put down the scope. As he continued to watch, the girl continued to walk. She was up to her knees now, wading through the surf. Bond looked at the rising currents. The waves were big here, six, seven, eight foot giants. It had blown a steady, harsh wind all night. The morning's often brought gale force winds into the English Channel. The girl was smacked by one of the big waves and almost fell. The waters receded fast, sucking her down the beach, dragging her forward.

He looked through the scope again. She was in trouble, stumbling, blindly it seemed. The current, the tidal sweep was too much for her. It was a riptide. Unless she was strong she'd be pulled out to sea, propelled under the waves, buffeted, spun over, knocked unconscious, drowned. Dead.

Bond shoved the scope carelessly back in the rifle case. He slammed the Aston Martin into first and shot off down the beach, sliding to a halt half way from the tidal edge, close to the fishing equipment. He leapt out, stripped off his dinner jacket and bowtie and ran down the soft shore towards her. The water was freezing. The first wave hit him full on the chest and he grappled with his balance. The girl was about twenty feet on, up to her waist, still wading out. Bond half ran, half swam to her. When his feet touched the sea bed he had leverage to run, when they didn't he used front crawl to power through the surf.

When he reached her, he didn't know what to say. Instead he simply grabbed her arms. She struggled against him. Bond thought she shouted "No!" but the sound of the crashing water drowned her thin voice. He took hold of her, roughly and swung her back to the shore. She broke free. Bond snatched at a wrist, hauling her towards him. A seven foot wave pummelled their bodies and for seconds they vanished under the water. Bond saw green sea and thousands of tiny white bubbles. Sea weed tugged at his ankles. His eyes stung with the shock of salt water. Then the moment passed, and the girl was on her knees, almost in a faint.

Bond reached down, hooking one arm under her legs and the other beneath her shoulders. The girl seemed to pass out, her head lolled useless as he staggered up the beach. Bond placed her down on the first dry patch of sand. Gently, he slapped her cheeks. The girl stirred.

Bond studied her. He saw deep violet eyes, high cheek bones, a chiselled chin with a tiny dimple at its very tip, high arching eye brows, long natural lashes, a proud face, one that probably didn't smile much. There was something about the face, something indescribable, a latent desperation, a weary haunted shallow look, which told Bond that this girl did not have much in her life to smile about.

Finally the girl's eyes focussed. Warily she studied him.

"Good morning," his greeting felt slightly inadequate, under the circumstances, "My name's Bond, James Bond."

Too late, Bond realised the girl wasn't looking at him but past him, to something or someone over his shoulder.

The cold snub of metal pressed against his neck. It was a gun, a Luger, he thought. Another hand and arm appeared. The long finger of a switchblade snapped open at the girl's throat. Tough, harsh

sounds barked behind his ear. French words. With the guttural street tones of Marseilles or Nice. Corsica, perhaps.

*"Don't move, you bastard."*

Bond and the girl stayed motionless.

*"Get up!"*

Bond got to his feet. Now he saw the second man, the knife man, hauling the girl to her feet. He was a scrawny looking fellow. Unshaven, youthful, dark, dressed in a turtleneck sweater. He didn't speak, but from his looks he too came from the south. Both men were a long way from home.

*"Get moving!"*

A big hand shoved Bond in the back and directed him towards the fisherman's nets and boats. Bond placed his hands gently on his scalp, trying to assess what was happening. Who the hell were these men? Had they been following the girl or waiting for her? So who was she – a gangster's moll maybe or an enemy agent? Someone from SPECTRE sent to trap him? Bond couldn't tell. His immediate problem was the big man who shadowed him with the revolver.

The man stopped him by one of the old wooden dinghies.

*"Get in."*

Bond turned around, taking in the size of the thug. He was a shade over six feet tall, broad, dumb. Bond carefully stepped into the little boat, feeling the keel tilt with his weight.

*"Lie down!"*

Bond did as he was told. As he reclined the final few inches, he began to shift his hands away from the top of his head. Behind him, loose in the foot well, he felt the anchor, secured to the hull by a twisted, gnarled rope. He grasped it, loosening the knot. The thug hadn't noticed. He was glancing across at his accomplice, whose progress was being hindered by the struggling girl.

Instinctively, Bond lashed out with his right foot. It collided with the thug's gun hand. The revolver went spinning through the air. Also spiralling through the air was the anchor, which Bond had thrown over his head at the chest of the big man.

It hit him square on with a loud thud. The man was knocked backwards. He fell in a heap several feet away and immediately started scrabbling for his fallen weapon. Bond leapt out of the dingy and was on him in a flash, his foot kicking out as the thug's hand closed on the Luger. The gun sailed away, landing with a plop in the sea. Bond launched a vicious uppercut at the thug's chin. The man rolled the blow like a boxer.

Both men fell onto each other, crashing into the salty water. A wave broke over them. Bond got up first, uncertain where his opponent was. A fist hammered into his shoulder. Another into his jaw. Stunned he fell back, tripping the thug as he did. The splash of their combined impact matched the

waves which kept rolling in. Bond grasped for the thug's neck. He was thrown up and over, landing with a watery thump. Twisting he felt the thug encircling his shoulders. Bond dug in with his elbow, gouging at the stomach. As the man bent double, Bond heaved him over his own head, bringing him crashing into the sea. Off balance, struck by another wave, Bond also collapsed.

Staggering upright the two men exchanged several blows, big crunching left and right hooks that sucked the breath from the body and jarred the skull. Bond thrust low. His extended middle knuckle thudded into the man's solar plexus. A follow up left cross catapulted the thug backwards and he fell awkwardly. Bond pounced, his whole weight pushing down onto the man's neck, shoving the face, the open rasping mouth into the wet clammy sand. Hands were not enough and Bond trod with his knee on the exposed spinal column, forcing the head down.

Bond felt the body jerk once, twice, then it was still. Breathing heavily, Bond headed up the beach. He couldn't see the girl or the other thug. He made it to the fisherman's nets when the dark, sinewy figure leapt at him, hurdling one of the boats. Bond saw the silver tongue of steel glint orange in the rising sun.

He ducked under the blade and caught the young man's arms, offering his shoulder and executing a perfect judo throw. The man recovered quickly, got to his feet and came again, the knife still swishing. Bond slashed down at the knife hand with his open palm, grabbed the other wrist and twisted the boy around. The boy jack-knifed, thrown head-over-heels. He clattered into the side of another dingy. As he started to rise, Bond stamped on the knife. The fingers spread in agony. A final kick sunk into the dirty face and the man was out. Determined to finish him, Bond overturned the shallow boat. The planks splintered over the prone body.

Bond saw movement. He was looking for the girl, but this motion came from the wrong side. He turned in time to see the big man prowling up the beach. The bastard had guts; he'd give him that. The thug had picked up the anchor and was preparing to launch a blow across Bond's head. Bond grabbed an abandoned oar and spun. The oar and anchor cracked together. The two men raised their weapons again, like two gladiators, testing each other's sword and shield. Bond blocked two blows. The weapons locked, the two men gritted teeth, pushed, a battle of will as much as strength.

Bond won. He yanked the oar loose and the anchor was ripped from a pair of tired hands. Bond wheeled the six foot long pole. The splayed blade smacked into the man's face with a sickening crunch. The man swallow dived backwards and collapsed into the first tent of fishing nets. As the thug struggled to escape the netting, Bond hit him again with the oar, a hard swinging uppercut blow to the head. The man emitted a groan and slumped back into his new bed, bringing down the whole row of netting and stakes. The heap of man and net lay still like a badly rolled bundle of string.

Panting, heaving, aching, Bond straightened up. He could hear the sound of a starter motor firing.

The girl was behind the wheel of his car. She slung it into gear and skidded left then right on the sand, the back wheels kicking up fountains of sand as they tried to get purchase. The DBS slid and skewed its way up the beachhead and back onto the road.

Bond watched the beautiful girl jump out of the Aston Martin and sprint to her own car. The Cougar burst into life and as swiftly as she had first arrived, the girl was gone.

Walking gingerly up the beach, Bond found the pair of low heeled slippers, Rappello's by the look of it. Picking them up, he thought about that beautiful, desperate girl. How could he find her? How could he help her? He didn't know anything about her. Only that she was beautiful, drove a crimson Cougar like a man and wore expensive dresses and shoes. Yet surely the girl was in some sort of trouble. Whatever it was Bond wanted to help, even after such a fleeting and unsatisfactory encounter. Something in that lonely, exhausted face had touched him. And there was another feeling also, one of calm reassurance. Because although Bond didn't believe in fairy stories, he like everyone knew how the Prince searched for Cinderella.

This time the Prince wouldn't need to fit the shoes. Deep down, for no sensible reason, Bond knew he would lock eyes with the girl again.

**Two:  
Try**

The Rappello shoes were a limited edition. Bond made some discreet enquiries the next day on their Paris telephone number, but they refused, very politely, to disclose the names of any clientele. No, Sir, not under any circumstances.

Bond had replaced the receiver and exchanged a single glance with Monsieur Versoix, who sat stroking his beard with his one hand while his coffee went cold. The old man did get very nosy. Bond wondered how many lovers' quarrels he had eavesdropped over or how many husbands had telephoned their wives and lied while the old man listened in at the other end of the bar.

Royale was finished. But James Bond wasn't. Bond had promised himself a weekend of frivolity before he returned to London. That was before he lost mightily on Sunday night. Bond rested for the day, enjoying the Versoix's hospitality. After another wonderful evening meal, this one a tender boar cutlet with salad, he sat back and contemplated his umpteenth Morlands. Bond called the old man over to his table.

"Monsieur, I have lost heavily this last weekend," he explained, "and the casinos are closed in Royale. I must be leaving you tomorrow. I will need to borrow your telephone again."

"Are you pursuing your heart, Monsieur? A lady, perhaps?"

"No, I am going to make a reservation at Le Hermitage. I understand from the gossip at the casino most of the rich set is travelling to La Baule for next weekend."

"Yes, Monsieur, La Baule is excellent all year. But I am disappointed you cannot stay longer."

"I will be back, Monsieur, have no doubt."

The old man's eyes lit up with pleasure.

Late the following morning, Bond thanked him for the wonderful reception, the gorgeous gourmet standard food and the pre-war labelled liqueur. He paid in cash, the Versoix did not understand new inventions like credit cards and traveller's cheques, and was on the road by midday.

By four o'clock the Aston Martin was cutting a swathe through the traffic heading along the promenade at La Baule.

Bond had experienced a twinge of guilt during the journey south into the Loire, but by the time he'd navigated Le Mans and joined the A11 for Nantes, he had, selfishly, decided the Service could hang for another day or two. Bond had wanted fun and he knew the fresh lively resort of La Baule Escoublac could provide exactly that.

La Baule featured Europe's longest unbroken sandy beach, ten miles of it, peppered with white umbrellas, red parasols, green striped sunshades and more, every colour representing a competing

hotel, jealously guarding their stretch of the glorious shore. It was still warm, even in September, though not, Bond considered, warm enough for bathing in the sea. Even so a few strong willed ladies were reclined in their bikinis catching the last rays of the warm autumn sun as it sank towards the horizon. Francois Andre had opened Le Hermitage in 1926 and it oozed elegance and class. Now, administered by those by-words in French excellence, Groupe Lucien Barriere, it was still a cut far above most luxury hotels. Bond had stayed here twice and was on personal terms with the concierge. It would be no problem getting a room; they always left two rooms unoccupied in case a politician, a businessman, a great, beautiful or notorious movie star or even a writer, philosopher or photographer suddenly called. It would never do for Le Hermitage to turn away the rich and famous and influential. They'd even been known, in the past, to give rooms to criminals, purely so they could gloat over an entry in the registration book. It was possibly more snobbish than Royale Les Eaux. The difference was Le Hermitage, indeed the whole of the town, had moved with the times and reinvented itself as a chic, slightly bohemian destination. Gainsbourg and Vadim held parties there; the Rolling Stones checked in; even Frank Sinatra and his young bride Mia Farrow. It had an air of grace, but was instilled with the new freedoms of the sixties. The whole town had followed Le Hermitage's example. You didn't need to dress formally in all the casinos, cheap hotels crowded next to posh expensive five star spas, rock and soul clubs sat shoulder to shoulder with basement jazz bars and cocktail lounges, there were even cinemas and the once exclusive dinner clubs now hid upmarket burlesque shows. Rumour had it the dancers were always available at a good price. The restaurants of course still provided the greatest cuisine in Pays de la Loire.

Le Hermitage wasn't a big hotel, but it was big in character. Overlooking the wide expanse of the bay, framed with timber beams and spotlessly white washed, the hotel sat resplendent, daring any other to challenge its position as the best on the ten mile sands. Each window was dotted with a wrought iron balconette and the best suites were gifted a full external balcony, still coloured in that deep ruby crimson.

Bond parked in one of only three empty bays outside.

He tossed his keys to the valet, asking for his luggage to be taken to his suite and the car to be washed and polished. Bond strode across the car park towards the pillared entrance lobby. He noted the red convertible Cougar parked a little further down the row to his Aston Martin.

"Well, well."

The foyer was bustling. Bond admired a troupe of five bright young things saunter through the lobby, their hips wiggling, their make-up and sun glasses displaying the fashions of 'flower power.'

A tall cream suited man, with a close clipped beard looked up from his desk and smiled warmly. He approached Bond, with his hand outstretched. Bond shook it.

"Commander Bond!" The man's greeting was genuine. "How are you?"

"Fine. It's good to see you again, Manuel." Bond's eyes followed the girls as they passed him. "Everything seems up to the usual high standards."

"Yes," chuckled the Concierge. "It's been a very good season."

He gestured towards the reception desk, where he collected a key, but didn't ask Bond to sign the register.

"By the way, Manuel," started Bond casually, "there's a red Cougar parked outside. Does it belong to a lady?"

Manuel offered no shock at the question. He was familiar with Bond's dalliances. "Ah, si. La Comtesse Teresa di Vincenzo. Tres beau magnifique!"

Manuel Alphonse had been the Concierge at Le Hermitage for close on ten years. He had started life as a bell-boy and gradually worked his way to possibly the most sought after position in the hotel. He guarded his role jealously. It was in his nature, for Manuel was a proud Basque French, a very cultured man, but still a vain one. Manuel wasn't actually his real name, but he'd used it so long the staff at Le Hermitage didn't know him by any other moniker. Manuel was fluent in almost a dozen languages. It always amused Bond to tempt this brilliant concierge into using more than four in any one sentence. Three was still the record.

The suite was on the sixth floor, one down from the top, and backed onto the heated outdoor pool rather than the chilly outdoor sea. The suites in Le Hermitage all had a Moroccan theme. Arched doorways gave way to subdued interiors, silk drapes hung across the windows, huge cushions littered the low chairs and settees and the original paintings showed Saharan pastoral scenes. The brass fittings were shaped like crescent moons. Long stemmed fresh roses sat in big bronze urns in each corner. They would be changed every day. The king size bed looked comfortable but slightly intimidated by the carved head board, a relief depicting the temples of Marrakesh.

"Our best," declared Manuel.

Bond knew it wasn't. It didn't matter. He allowed the Concierge to show him through the huge room and to the wide balcony, where another king size bed occupied most of the space.

"This'll do me nicely, Manuel, thank you."

"I'm sure we can look after all your special needs," replied the Concierge.

Bond took out a wedge of notes from his wallet and palmed a few into the Basque's hand. "A Martini to start, Manuel, made just the way I like it."

The drink arrived promptly. Three measures of Gordon's, one of Smirnoff, half a measure of Kina Lillet, shaken over ice, strained and decorated with a large thin swirl of lemon peel. It arrived on a silver salver with a compliment slip. Manuel knew Bond would be occupying a seat in the casino tonight, as he always did when he stayed at Le Hermitage, and for that, drinks always came free.

Bond hated to drink too much before gambling. It might have been his failing at Royale, where he'd sunk a bottle of succulent Lynch-Bages '61 with foie gras, before heading to the casino. Today would be different and not only because Bond wanted to turn the tables on the bank. Comtesse Teresa di Vincenzo was here.

He rolled the name around in his head, testing how it might sound if he said it. So, she was an Italian

girl. That he hadn't expected. Could it be too much to hope, he wondered, to see her again in such close succession? What were the odds? And yet her car was parked directly outside, only a few spaces away from his. He unpacked calmly, found the girl's shoes and placed them out of sight under the bed. It was always best to make things look a co-incidence, even if they were not, or you didn't want them to be. Bond thought back to the other night, the mad drive, the walk in the water and the two thugs. Was she trying to kill herself? Or trying to escape those brutes? Whatever had happened, she was still free, still available, at least it appeared so. Bond remembered her fingers. Not a single band. Either the Comtesse was a single woman or she was a liar. He put his money on the former. If he had to start betting, he may as well start with odds of fifty-fifty.

Bond took his time over the Martini, sipping it as he unpacked. Then he ordered a second along with an omelette of three eggs, ham and cheese. He ate on the balcony, warmed by the overhead gas burner, and watched as the last of the day turned to night and the sunlit pool turned to shade and then to dusk. The lights switched on and the reflection of the word 'casino,' hung in luminous fiery red, wallowed on top of the cool blue water.

Bond dressed for the evening, his suit cleaned lovingly by Madame Versoix. It fitted him like a second skin. The casino was in an adjacent building and Bond accessed it through a corridor on the first floor. The sweeping staircase curved gently to the ground level. They'd decorated the interior since he'd last visited. The walls were upholstered in a nasty violaceous shade, but Bond hardly noticed. Gilded fittings lined every wall. Huge chandeliers hung like glowing stalactites from the ceiling. People mingled; people with money.

Bond had reserved a seat at the baccarat table. As usual it was opposite the banker, but off centre, slightly to his left. It was an old piece of psychomancy that Bond played on himself. When he'd framed Vlacek, using a version of the Romanian's own infamous 'Luminous Reader' sunglasses, Bond had sat in that exact position. He did so again now, as he did every time he sat down to chance his luck at baccarat.

Monsieur Pol, the Chef du Jeu at the High Table, pulled back the chair. Bond asked for a double shot of Frapin XO, he knew they had it, and offered an initial stake of five thousand Francs, new ones this time. Monsieur Pol indicated to the Changeur, who handled Bond's crisp notes as if they were a priceless treasure. Within a minute he was given ten blue chips of five hundred a piece.

Bond formed them into two piles, accepted his refreshment and struck the first cigarette of the evening.

The players were an international mixture. Immediately to Bond's right sat a bulging, sweaty Greek, whose expression suggested a keen eye for a win. He had the largest pile of chips. Bond didn't expect him to say very much, he would concentrate on the cards and the increasing size of his winnings. The next seat was empty. After it sat a demure, quite young Parisian brunette, who did not appear particularly interested in the game. She was sitting with her equally young partner, who was also exchanging more money for counters. This man, Bond judged was reckless and would lose as much as he won, none of it through skill. There was another spare seat before the final player, an Egyptian, with the prerequisite clipped beard, fez and cigar. A canny one, Bond thought.

To his left was an old American couple. The man, Bond later discovered, was an international businessman by the name of Du Pont, not the chemical Du Pont's but an importer and exporter of

sugar, cocoa and molasses from the Caribbean and West Africa. He wore a busy moustache and an up-to-date wide lapelled suit that was clearly Yves Saint Laurent. He and his wife, a plump lady who sat next to him, all twinkling diamonds and overlaid pink chiffon, were on a European vacation, catching the sights and the sounds of the old countries. Next sat two slightly drunk textile merchants from Lille then a small Agatha-Christie-type English woman who seemed to be playing successfully, with small careful bids, he surmised. Lastly a big Italian, who claimed to be a film director, but no-one had heard of his films, and his blonde starlet companion, who did not play but sat dutifully at his shoulder and cast occasional, furtive glances at Bond, the only really attractive male at the table. Watchers and casual punters stood two deep around the half-moon of intrigue.

Bond assessed only the Greek and the Italian would pose any real problems tonight. It wasn't the high rolling crowd he had expected. Even though the opening gambit was high, at five hundred francs, too much easy money was being thrown away. The casino would be winning tonight. Bond waited for the hand to play out, watched as the Croupier scooped in the losing pieces, and then put his half smoked cigarette on the side of the tiny glass ashtray, heavy bottomed like the glasses to prevent most accidental spillages.

The game was stone cold. The shoe, full of six shuffled packs, passed slowly around the table. Each banker in turn hit the wall at the third coup and surrendered the shoe, unable to command the victory which usually signalled the start of a run. Bond told himself the pattern would change, that the shoe didn't hold any secrets, didn't conform to any system and that soon the table would become hot. After nearly two hours and three brandies, Bond was considering calling a halt.

Then the shoe came to him for the ninth time. After playing carefully he'd won two hands, both on sevens. Bond doubled the stake to two thousand. There was nothing to lose, he believed, and no shame in it if he did. The cards would either love him or hate him.

He won on a natural nine and was off and running, upping the stake, playing safe and winning a fourth on a slim five. He raised the stake again, took one of the tycoons to the cleaners and now had a fat cushion of fifty thousand. The sixth coup was completed and the atmosphere at the table changed. People were wary of the dark, slightly cruel Englishman, who played with equal certitude and caution. It became difficult to make up his stake. A buzz of speculation ran around the assorted hangers on. Bond noticed Monsieur Pol appear at the croupier's shoulder, in case history was in the making. But it wasn't. On the tenth turn, Bond lost to the quiet, unassuming old lady and a sigh of relief passed around the table. It was a sigh of sorrow which echoed from the watchers, an opportunity to witness a grand coup snatched from them by an ignominious score of one. The only person on the table to congratulate him was Du Pont.

"That was a great run you had, son. You've got nerves of steel, but there's iron in her veins!"

The game became hot. It was barely midnight and he'd made a tidy fortune, enough to wave under the noses of the S.I.S. and say 'Be off with you then!' At least it would do for a year while he got himself sorted. But sorted with what? He mused on the plan, barely paying attention as the shoe travelled around the table. A cottage in Kent, perhaps; a small arms business; maybe he'd see Blacking down at Royal St Marks and take him up on that coaching position; there was always the roulette wheel. He lit his twenty-sixth Morlands and sank the cognac. The glass was instantly removed and refilled.

There were other runs now and the Greek was in charge of the shoe. Bond left him alone as was his plan; he was a dangerous, professional gambler, and Bond didn't want to lose all his winnings against the turn of his cards.

The Greek reached a sixth coup and the bank sat at twenty thousand francs. But the Greek had taken a lot of cash on the last two hands and the table had suddenly got very cold. The young Parisian couple had just left to refresh themselves. They had lost badly twice to the Greek and the young man's finances seemed to be stretched. Everyone else was sitting on their money.

The Croupier made his call: "Un banco de vingt mille!" And again: "Vingt mille, Messieurs et Mesdames."

Somebody uttered the immortal line "Too rich for my blood" and it seemed the shoe had to pass. It had been kind, but this was an experienced group of gamblers, and after witnessing Bond's change of fate, losing big after nine straight coups, there was some reluctance to take on another huge ante.

"Banco."

Beside the Croupier a figure appeared. At first Bond didn't really take it in. The figure was female and she was dressed in a sleeveless white gown, figure hugging at the top and tail, loose along the legs, and with a low cut extravagant collar. The strip light and its shade hid her face, but Bond could make out toned skin and an athletic body. Bond inclined his head slightly. He'd heard the voice before, hadn't he? Where..?

The cards flipped across the baize from the gruff Greek. He was disinterested in who the woman was. He was a man who lived only for victory. Over who or how was irrelevant to him. His fat finger stroked the corners of his own two cards. Now he waited for the woman's decision.

One delicate uncluttered hand stretched out and looked at the two cards.

Initially all Bond noticed was the discreet view of honey hued cleavage. Above it he saw the face of Comtesse Teresa di Vincenzo. The eyes were as dark as he recalled, the manner as aloof, but she wasn't drunk or high or whatever had happened two days before. Now she was sober, careful almost, in her actions. Except she uttered: "Carte."

The Greek looked mildly surprised. Reluctantly he faced his own cards. Two knaves. Zero. No score. But the girl had said carte. She probably had a five, a winning five, but why had she asked for another? The Greek's fingers scabbled out her extra card.

The Croupier guided it across the table with his spatula and the girl picked it up. Without an ounce of care she discarded it back onto the table. The five of diamonds. Coupled to her Queen and Hearts-Five, she had balked.

There was a groan of disappointment around the table. Then, as Bond watched, he witnessed an amazing scene. The girl was talking to the Chef de Jeu. There seemed to be a problem. Bond distinctly heard the girl say: "I don't have the money."

Christ, the girl was bankrupt. No money, no credit facility, it was the worst of dishonour in gambling

circles, banned from all French casinos overnight, a social pariah, a name spoken in hushed tones in polite society. For her, the girl with the Rapello shoes, that was not how it should be. She was a countess for God's sake! The countess of where? He'd momentarily forgotten. Did it matter? Tomorrow the telegrams would haunt the wires and her name and picture would be circulated, black balled, ostracised. She didn't deserve it. Her dark almost sad eyes told tales of distress and pain, of secrets, of intense wilful urges. And yet she was as vulnerable as a new born. Dear God, he thought, who was this girl, this Comtesse? Why was she bewitching him? Before he knew it Bond was talking.

"Forgive me, my mind was elsewhere, I forgot. The Comtesse and I agreed to be partners this evening."

Bond took the two pearl white chips from his own stack and offered them in payment.

There was an audible gasp around the table. Nobody believed it for a moment. There had been no signs of complicity, no greeting, no exchange of words, between the young lady and the dark Englishman. Now she looked at him, once, stern, direct.

The Chef de Jeu looked relieved. Scandal had been avoided. He was about to remind the Comtesse of the casino's house rules, when the girl slapped her clutch bag against his chest, ushering him aside. She bristled past him towards the cocktail lounge.

Bond watched the stubborn white figure leave. He indicated to the Chef de Jeu that he would be absent for a few hands, thus reserving his place and making safe his chips. Bond stood up and followed her.

She had already taken a seat and called the waiter.

"Dom Perignon '57," ordered Bond without consulting anything.

The girl sat forward, her chin resting on her upturned palm. She gazed at Bond, a long unflinching stare as if this was the first time she had ever taken him in. Bond felt her deep violet eyes seeking his face, his thoughts, his soul for an answer; the answer to a question not yet spoken.

"Why do you persist in rescuing me, Mister Bond?"

"It's becoming a habit, isn't it, Teresa?"

"Teresa was a saint. I'm known as Tracy."

It was said blankly, without sentiment, even harshly, as though her name was an encumbrance, something to be broken free of.

"By your friends or your enemies?"

"Both."

"Am I one of your friends, Tracy?"

“Why would you want to be?”

“Perhaps I could offer you some advice.”

“Such as?”

“Well, for instance, the next time you’re at the baccarat table,” opened Bond, “why don’t you play it safe and stand on five?”

“People who want to stay alive play it safe.”

So that was it. Yes, he’d known it. Walking into the riptide, a gaol sentence for unpaid gambling debts, these might be the start or they could be the culmination. The girl was sick, of life and, perhaps, herself. Poor damaged Tracy. Whatever was wrong was eating away at her so bad she simply didn’t have anything left to fight for. Try as she might, the future, her future was bleak and forbidding and it was easier to be rid of it now. Bond couldn’t let that happen. There was always a solution, even if it took two people to find it.

“Please stay alive,” he countered, “at least for tonight.”

Immediately Bond hated himself. He couldn’t have been more obvious and offensive. The proposition was inappropriate, cruel, and yet she didn’t seem to mind.

The girl still watched him, the face inscrutable, unshockable. Slowly the chin lifted off the palm and the girl stood up. She fished in her purse and dropped a key fob on the table. Her eyes never left Bond’s face for a moment.

“Come in an hour,” she stated. “Tonight, Mister Bond, you can make the most expensive love of your life. I hope it will be worth it.”

There was no smile, no parting kiss or handshake. The girl simply spun on one heel and walked away, heading for the elegant curved stairway. Bond watched her go, expecting her to look over her shoulder, acknowledge his presence, but there was nothing. The white taffeta gowned figure disappeared at the top of the stairs.

The waiter returned with the champagne.

Bond picked up the fob, “Send it to room 423 with caviar for two.”

Bond fondled the key, turning it over in his hand, pondering on her disappearance the other night and the abandoned Rapello shoes. Was he about to be stood up again? She was certainly a strange and troubled girl, but that didn’t mean he liked her any less. In fact her problems appealed to him, the mystery that surrounded her intrigued him. There was no argument. He had to see this through. He had to help this girl, this enigma that was Tracy, help her to unravel the conundrum that controlled her life. The very least he could do was try.

### **Three: Unexpected Guests**

Bond returned to the baccarat table without much success. His evening wasn't wasted, but his mind was no longer on the cards. The Greek took a chunk of Bond's winnings at a stroke and he decided it was time to call the night to a close.

Bond exchanged his remaining chips for cash and deposited the money in one of the hotel's safe deposit boxes. His Rolex told him he was running a few minutes late for his rendezvous. Unexpectedly, the pit of his stomach turned somersaults. He was nervous. This was a feeling he hadn't experienced for a very long time; the apprehension of a first date. What to say, what to do and how to act; this time all three were unanswerable questions. As an experienced bachelor, the methods of seduction, the unspoken battle of wills that ensued when two like-minded people met, had become second nature. But tonight Bond was cautious. The Comtesse needed gentle, persuasive handling. Most of his companions, his conquests, had been easily won. Tracy, despite what she had intoned, did not suggest equanimity. He wasn't sure his technique was up to the task.

Bond reassured himself in the elevator, stroking the key fob between his fingers, remembering she had offered herself to him: "The most expensive love of your life."

Bond thought of those two ten thousand franc plaques. No, whatever she had said, this wouldn't solely be about tonight. It wasn't the enormous price that convinced him. It was something else, something he couldn't describe. It was desire, yes, but also intrigue and mystery, and longing. The soulless expression on her face in the cocktail lounge matched his recent disposition: one of need.

There was a small ante room to suite 423. One door, which Bond assumed was the bathroom, faced him and was ajar. To the left, the lounge beckoned. Bond noted the small trolley, delivered by room service and slid discreetly to one side, containing a rack of crustless toast and a dish of shiny black fish eggs. Royal Beluga, probably north of the Caspian, there would be nothing less expensive at Le Hermitage. The Dom Perignon stood in an ice bucket, wrapped in a muslin napkin, coated in condensation. Idly Bond stroked his fingers across the neck of the bottle. Chilling temperature was about perfect.

He stepped under the carved Moroccan arch into the room. While large, it wasn't one of the hotel's better suites, being located on a corner without any noticeable view. It was in semi darkness, the light coming from one of two lamps either side of the low, Ottoman sofa. A similarly themed African coffee table and chairs were positioned in front of it. An ornate cedar wood partition, carved with cut-out roses, screened the bedroom area, but behind it Bond could make out the large double bed, immaculately made up, spotless. On a futon sat an open Louis Vuitton case. There was no balcony, only a pair of French windows which were propped open, the net drapes billowing inside from the breeze, revealing the balconette and the sloe aired night beyond.

"Tracy?"

No answer. Curious, thought Bond, sniffing the air, he hadn't seen Tracy smoke, yet he could detect the unmistakable pang of Gauloises. And very close too.

The shadow on the floor alerted him.

Bond spun around. Facing him was a thick set, tall, athletic looking, coloured man, whose bug red eyes seemed to be almost popping out of their sockets. It was his denim suit that stank of Gallic cigarettes.

Bond was already lashing out. The punch wasn't accurate or firm, an instinctive reaction shot. It caught the man on the side of the jaw but he merely grunted and took one step back. From the feel of it, Bond had the vague impression the man's jaw had already been broken, several years ago, and mended badly. Perhaps that was why he didn't shout when Bond struck him.

Bond launched a left cross. Blocked by a swift upraised arm. A right cross. Blocked again. The man's big fist shot out and caught Bond hard on jaw line, missing the point of his chin by an inch. His teeth rattled under the assault. He didn't see the follow up left hook. The blow sent him staggering. A knee came up and thudded into Bond's midriff.

Winded, Bond bent double. The big man leapt on him, the mammoth hands making for his throat. Bond twisted aside. Fingers scratched at his neck. He managed to grasp one of the thick wrists. Turning his back on the man, an elbow slamming down, Bond tried to break the forearm. The heavy scent of garlic and cigarettes caught in Bond's throat, making him exhale, his breath hissing as it shot through his teeth. This bastard was strong. Not for the first time, Bond questioned the wisdom of socialising unarmed. His gun would be entirely appropriate apparel right now.

The two bodies stumbled across the floor, crashing into the cedar wood screen. One of the stanchions popped loose, smacking into the man's face. The big brute grunted his annoyance. A fist thudded into Bond's back, low on his spine. It was well directed. Probably bruised a kidney. Stung, Bond relaxed his hold and the man clawed free. Bond shoved him off. The man was off balance and Bond moved in for a swift knock out conclusion.

The brute had other ideas. He rolled the incoming punch and launched a counter attack, swiping at Bond's stomach then reaching once more for the throat. This time the hands found their target. Bond felt the fingers curl into his wind pipe. The man was bleeding at the mouth and nose, the result of Bond's punches. Together the two combatants wrestled, Bond trying to prise the fat fingers loose, the big man squeezing ever tighter.

Bond punched again for the body. Two, three times. At last the man's grip weakened; the assaults too harsh, too direct. Bond brought both fists up under the bastard's arms, hard. The hands sprung away. A kick to the knee made the big man squeal. He bent over. Bond connected with an uppercut.

The brute almost came off his feet. He landed in a cacophony of breaking glass. The coffee table shattered underneath his weight. Unbelievably the man started to struggle upright. Bond, who had expected the fight to end, grabbed the nearest table lamp, a thick, heavy ornament made of solid wood and topped with a frilly, spherical shade. He swung it at the man's head. The blow was halted mid-swing. Still on his knees, the man thrust upward, one fist striking home, the other knocking the lamp aside.

He pounced, like a cat, using all four limbs. Bond rocked back with the charge, slamming the lamp

down onto the big man's neck. It broke in the middle, the cord keeping the two halves together. Bond tossed it aside, rode another punch, ducked and hit out once, twice, three times, getting under the man's attack, aiming low, turning him. When he straightened, Bond could see the brute was finished. It must have been the impact of the lamp.

Bond delivered one final punch, a perfect right hook, and the big man collapsed against the partition. The screen splintered and cracked and the heavy body brought the wooden curtain crashing to the floor. The man's head raised an inch, as if he had more fight in him, then it dropped back. His breathing made a loud rasping sound.

Bond tapped the prone body with his toe. Out for the duration.

Before he left, Bond made a call to reception. A lively female voice answered him, belying the two a.m. time.

*"Good evening, Comtesse."*

"No, this is Mister Bond; I'm a friend of La Comtesse."

He used English and received a polite, unchallenging "yes, sir" in reply.

"I'm afraid there's been a nasty incident," continued Bond. "We need someone to tidy up. Could you send the House Security and perhaps the Concierge, Monsieur Alphonse?"

"Of course, Monsieur," chirped the voice, as if this matter was of no concern at all.

Bond recalled the story that a famous schoolgirl model had eloped here with her dancer lover, but had not been discovered for several weeks. Discretion was more than a word at Le Hermitage.

"Thank you."

"Is it anything serious, Monsieur?" continued the voice.

"No, just a gate crasher."

Bond left the debris of Room 423, closing the door carefully behind him.

When he reached his own suite, Bond was aching from the fight. The initial adrenaline had cooled and now his knuckles and face hurt. There might be more bruises in the morning if he didn't tend to them soon. His head ached too, spinning with this latest unexpected development. Another thug, another ambush and for apparently no reason. La Comtesse was definitely hiding from her past or was in hiding from her present, but which one? And how to find out? How in fact, to find her?

Still puzzling over the conundrum, Bond stripped off his dinner jacket and threw it over one of the chairs. His tie followed it.

Facing the vanity mirror, Bond undid the top button on the dress shirt. There was a streak of blood on the white cotton. His face didn't look too bad, but a nasty graze had materialized on his left

eyebrow, edged with rapidly congealed goo. He saw the early signs of a half-black eye sprouting. Cold water and ice was what he needed.

He took out a tissue and dabbed it on his brow. When he pulled his hands down and moved back from the mirror, there was another face reflected next to his, distinct and firm, but also slightly luminous as the echo of light that swam into the room bathed her with an incandescent angelic glow.

Slowly Bond turned around. The answers and questions were coming thick and fast tonight.

La Comtesse Teresa di Vincenzo stood very still. She wore nothing but Bond's pyjama coat and was pointing his Walther PPK directly at his heart.

**Four:  
Paid in Full**

“Full of surprises aren’t we, Comtesse?” said Bond blithely.

“So are you, Mister Bond,” the girl waved the gun an inch. “Do you always arm yourself for a romantic rendezvous?”

“Occasionally; I do seem to have a lot of unexpected rivals.”

Bond stepped forward and held out his hand. His eyes flicked down. The girl held the gun steady, expertly. She even had the safety catch off. This wasn’t a girl to be trifled with.

“I’ll take that, if you don’t mind.”

“You’re very sure of yourself, aren’t you?” countered the girl, her delivery as smooth as the skin on her graceful high cheekbones. “Suppose I were to kill you for a thrill?”

“I can think of something more sociable to do.”

The girl did not surrender the weapon. Bond looked at her deep blue eyes. They flushed momentarily under the attention. He saw the lids half close, uncertain.

Bond’s left hand snapped out fast, grabbing the girl’s wrist tight. She let out one single gasp of surprise. His fingers encircled the slim arm, bending it until her fingers opened and the Walther dropped to the floor.

“Let’s stop playing games, Comtesse,” he said harshly, not relinquishing his grasp. “Who was that man in your room?”

“You’re hurting me.”

“I’ll stop if you answer my question.” Bond’s right hand took hold of the girl’s other arm, forcing her to step away, her back arching under the pressure. “Now, who was he?”

The girl looked as though she was going to cry. But the tears wouldn’t come. Instead she flinched under the pain of his grip.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Despite the grimace, the girl’s answer was clipped, straight forward, assured. A little too convincing, too obvious; he didn’t like it.

“Yes you do. In the same way you knew those men on the beach. What’s going on? Why are these men after me?”

The girl almost spat the reply. "Don't be ridiculous!"

Perhaps it was the memory of the fight, the two fights, or perhaps the fear of being made a fool, or maybe it was the pain of being so close to this creature, this stubborn girl who was as maddeningly frustrating as she was desirable. Whatever it was, Bond's patience was worn thin. He slapped the girl once, firmly, across the cheek.

"I can be a lot more persuasive, Comtesse."

"I'm sure you can."

There was resignation in the voice, but it was tinged with fear. And hate. Bond relaxed his hold. The girl straightened and her expression changed from stress and strain to one of teasing approbatory. Her posture altered, her knee touching his, the head tilted, the beautiful, pouting lips inclining towards him.

"Whatever else I may be," she said steadily, "I am not a liar."

For a moment Bond wanted to kiss her, to find out if what she said was really true. He stopped himself. Roughly he pushed her aside.

"Get dressed," he ordered bitterly and wheeled away.

Bond returned to his wounds. He entered the bathroom and ran the cold tap until the water was at its coolest. He soaked his hands under the freezing spray and then bathed his face with a cold damp cloth.

When he re-entered the suite, the girl's dress was still lying on the bed, her shoes and underwear discarded on the floor. Bond picked up the Walther PPK and placed it in the bedside drawer.

The girl was outside on the balcony. She lay on the bed, her hands clasped together on her belly, waiting.

Bond studied her from the frame of the door. What did he know about this girl? Nothing. Almost nothing. Everything he knew was tiny, insignificant detail. She wasn't Italian; her English was much too Home Counties for that. She was beautiful, impulsive, strong willed, lonely.

He saw it now in her manner. Cast aside by someone or something, she preferred the ostracism, enjoyed the barren, hollow life it had led her to. No, not enjoyed, tolerated. A means to a probable cruel end. Bond felt it too, the loneliness, the struggle of the ordinary, unfulfilling present set against the day dreams of an altogether more promising future. Except this girl seemed not to desire her fate.

Bond sat on the edge of the bed, casting one glance along her elegant long legs, up her fine slender body and to that chiselled porcelain face. The pyjama coat hung temptingly, but modestly, open.

"You know, Tracy, you're probably the most extraordinary girl I've ever met."

"I'm not interested in your opinion of me, Mister Bond," she replied. "I'm here for a business transaction. I intend to full fill it."

Bond picked up her hand. She let him take it and he lifted the unadorned fingers to his lips and kissed them. Her hands bore the fragrance of nutmeg and pink grapefruits. Chanel. He offered the twitch of a smile.

"Isn't Le Bleu a bit heady for that?"

It didn't get the reaction he wanted. She was almost dismissive. "So, you're a man who knows his perfumes."

"I know a little. I'd like to know more about you."

"Think of me a woman you have just bought."

"Who needs to buy?"

Bond leant towards the beautiful, emotionless face, but she turned her head and avoided the kiss.

Bond waited for the moment to pass. It was warm on the balcony. The overhead gas heater offered a flickering blue pulse. Occasionally the night breeze tickled the skin, forming goose bumps, and rustled the leaves of the late autumn clematis that climbed along the wall. He hardly noticed, all his attention was on the lonely girl.

"Twenty thousand francs is a lot of money," he said. "Tracy, listen, you don't owe me anything. I'm sorry about what I said earlier. I'm not used to men creeping up on me like that, not socially anyway."

He paused. The girl's face had turned back to him. He couldn't tell if she understood or was even listening. Her eyes had that glassy far away expression that he remembered from the beach head. He pressed on:

"I can take care of myself, yes, but I think you're in some kind of trouble. If I can I'd like to help. You seem like a girl who needs taking care of."

"No, Mister Bond," said the girl firmly.

Her hand reached out for him, circling his shoulders and pulling him gently and slowly towards her. It was as if she'd finally drawn a conclusion and now she'd made the decision for both of them. There was intent in her eyes, a violent glowing passion. Her mouth opened, closing all his questions before they arose.

"The only thing you need to know about me," she whispered fiercely, "is that I pay my debts."

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When Bond awoke the gas heater was still casting its warmth and the clematis still ruffled behind him. The sun was up and the first early morning bathers were splashing in the swimming pool six floors beneath him.

The girl had vanished.

Beside him lay his pyjama coat, neatly folded with one bright blood red bloom tucked between the sleeves. Bond slipped on the robe. His clothes from last night were still in a crumpled heap on the floor where she'd discarded them.

The making love had been furious, desperate, with a hungry, almost bestial craving. He took everything he wanted from her and she responded with equal passion and fury. There were no endearments, no murmurs of sweetness. It was pure instinctive temptation. The wicked sin of lust. And then, after they rested, she came to him again and Bond sensed a change in her kisses, the passion had receded and there was tenderness and affection, her hands had been cold and she trembled as he took her again and watched her sad but radiant face accept the moment of untethered sweeping bliss.

Bond crossed to the telephone. The cheerful voice sounded exactly like the woman he'd spoken to last night.

"Coffee for two please, with fresh orange juice and croissants," he ordered. "Can you connect me with suite 423, please."

"I'm sorry, Monsieur, La Comtesse has left the hotel."

"Checked out?"

"A few minutes ago, Monsieur."

It was the standard hotel reply. He'd follow up with Manuel later. Bond replaced the receiver. More intrigue, he considered. He'd better go armed today.

Bond pulled open the bedside drawer. His Walther was missing. In its place were two white plaques from the casino, each one stamped 10,000 F.

"Paid in full," he muttered.

Bond showered, hot followed by searing cold. His thoughts were all about Tracy. Where had she gone? How had she got the money? He didn't have the answers, but he wanted to find them. Indeed, he wanted to find her, to make sure she was all right, that he was forgiven and that they could talk, spend time together, like proper romantic lovers, not as persons to be bought and sold and traded. He had a need, an almost parental urge to protect the girl, to stop the hurt, or whatever it was that ate away at her. He'd tried to be harsh. He'd tried to be kind. Kindness was of no

consequence to her. She washed in it and it ran away in the waste of her life. Harshness would do no good with this girl either. She'd had it already, lots of it, somewhere, sometime and too much.

Bond inspected his image in the mirror. Not too bad, all things considered, hardly beaten up at all and the merest hint of bruising around his left eye.

Bond spoke with Manuel, briefly explaining last night's incident.

No, Manuel hadn't seen La Comtesse leave this morning. She'd checked out at five a.m. He could check with the night duty manager. Bond declined the offer, asking instead for the registration of her Ford sports car.

"That's really most impossible, Commander Bond."

"No, it isn't, Manuel," soothed Bond. "You know I wouldn't ask unless it was a matter of strictly personal importance."

"Ah, but these romantic affairs are never personal to me," sighed the Concierge and reluctantly gave Bond the information.

Bond skipped lunch. He wanted to send a telegram, addressed for the attention of Rene Mathis at the Deuxieme Bureau in Paris, asking if he could run a trace on the girl's car.

It was almost one o'clock when Bond, dressed in a straight cut tan suit and a crew-neck cotton jersey, strode through the lobby, dodging the rush of people who always seemed to be heading in or out or around Le Hermitage.

As he passed the reception desk a tall, curly haired man, fell into step beside him. Bond sensed danger. There was that unmissable whiff of cigarettes again. This time, through no fault of his own, Bond was still unarmed.

"Mister Bond."

It wasn't a question.

"Yes?"

"You've lost something," continued the man.

His English had a thick accent, unmasking his true origins. Bond smiled at the recollection. He noticed a second, younger man was now stood to his other side, crowding him in. There was no chance of escape, not without causing a public stir.

Bond didn't mind. Whoever the two men were, he knew it was only going to end one way and it was this way he'd learn more about Tracy. Bond decided to be genial.

"Have I really?" he enquired.

“We’ll give it to you outside.”

The tall man lightly took hold of Bond’s elbow. The porter was already holding the door open and Bond felt himself guided through the large glass entrance.

There was an ivory white Rolls Royce Silver Shadow standing in the drop off bay. The driver looked as swarthy as the other two men, but was dressed in a chauffeur’s uniform, including a peaked cap.

Bond was ushered into the back. Sat in the far corner was the big brute from last night, still in the same clothes and bearing the scars of battle.

“You’ve thought of everything,” said Bond to his captor. “What a lovely surprise, meeting an old friend.”

The big man grunted and took out a long double bladed knife, the kind that fishermen use and hoodlums misuse. Its point dug none too cheerfully at Bond’s stomach.

“I think I’d enjoy the journey much more without that,” suggested Bond.

The brute grunted again but did not remove the blade

The young man sat in the front and turned around. From his pocket he pulled Bond’s Walther PPK. He twirled it extravagantly on his finger, his face splitting into a grin.

Ignoring all the histrionics, Bond chirped, to no one in particular: “Circus tricks, eh? So where’s the party this time?”

With all passengers aboard, the first man signalled to the chauffeur.

“You have an appointment,” was all he said.

The Rolls glided away, hardly making a sound.

It was warm crushed between the two tall, big men. The journey was not a short one. First the chauffeur headed through the town. When he hit the major roads he turned south, taking the route to Poitiers. Four hours later, the Rolls was cutting through the low lands and valleys of the Dordogne, past Brive and Cahors and on towards the Pyrennes. They stopped once for petrol. Bond was not allowed to get out of the car. Nobody took a nature break. The men didn’t smoke, drink or talk, despite the smell of food and tobacco which hung on their crumpled suits. They clearly enjoyed life, when able, but today was not about pleasure, it was business. The chauffeur skirted Toulouse and headed for the Mediterranean. Bond thought their destination might be Perpignan, that great old industrial city of the south, but they didn’t stop there, heading out to the deepest shores of the Gulf de Lion.

Evening had crept on. By the time they traversed to the other side of Port Vendres, it was pitch black outside. It was only the height of the warehouses and the tall see-through towers of steel cranes which told Bond they were entering an industrial dockyard. There was one ship, a small cargo

freighter, and the Rolls slowed to a stop next to it.

The gangway was extended and a rectangle of gloomy yellow light half way up the hull welcomed them aboard. The tall, talking man led the way, Bond next and the brute behind him. The young thug, who now sported Bond's gun in his hand, brought up the rear.

Inside it was dull and not especially clean. Bond was led down a long passage, which must have run half the length of the vessel. He couldn't hear engines running. The ship wasn't leaving anywhere in a hurry. The only sound was four pairs of shoes banging on metal and reverberating around the enclosed space. As he walked, Bond flexed his muscles, removing cramp from his veins. His vision roamed across the walls and floor, searching for any possibility of escape. Occasionally there was a door, otherwise the passage was bare.

The claustrophobic corridor turned a corner and entered a small wood panelled office, equipped with several desks, littered with charts, telephones, typewriters and the debris of business. The desk lamps were still on, emitting their ghostly half-light throughout the room. The far side was occupied with a series of filing cabinets. Lodged in their centre was a broad hatchway, sealed with a traditional wheel lock. The big brute moved forward to turn the lock, a process which took several seconds. To do it the brute had slipped his knife into his back pocket. The other two men were now standing one each side of Bond and slightly behind him. Bond sensed, rather than saw, their wariness ebb away as the hatch was hauled open. Indistinctly, Bond thought the gun was pointing away from him, to the ground.

Beyond the hatch was an ordinary door, stained, varnished and polished. It was half way open. Bright light filtered into the dank office. Bond tensed. The big man still had both hands on the wheel lock. The leather hilt of the knife still stuck out of his trouser pocket.

Suddenly Bond slashed downwards with his right arm, catching the gun hand of the young thug. The Walther dropped and the gunman foolishly reached down for it. Instantaneously, Bond jammed his elbow sharply into the jaw of the tall man. Shocked, he fell away. Bond chopped at the neck of the gunman, who was still scrabbling for the automatic. Bond jumped forward, snatching for the knife in the big man's pocket.

Fingers curling around the handle, Bond pulled it free, kneeing the brute in the side, elbowing his spine as he double over. Bond shoved him away and the brute careered into his stricken fallen colleague. The tall man was moving forward. Bond delivered a desperate straight legged kick into the man's stomach, turned and hurtled for the bright light.

## Five: The Capu

Bond slammed the door shut behind him. He was surprised to see a skeleton key in the lock and turned it. Crouching, the knife raised, ready for an overhead throw, Bond twisted around to see what danger waited.

He was inside a Louis XV salon, or a space that had been made up to be one. There was a plush greengage coloured carpet under his feet. The stucco walls and cornices were painted glossy white, inlaid with cherry coloured lining. There were no windows. The furniture was all period, the upholstery spotless. To the left hand side was a large open fireplace with a broad metal canopy, the only concession to the modern day. The ceiling was decorated with an elaborate series of frescos illustrating pastoral and mountain life. From its centre hung one huge twenty lamp chandelier, the only illumination in the room. The far side of the salon was taken up with a long book case packed with leather bound volumes. The centre piece of the case was a shelf on which sat an antique carriage clock and a plain month-to-view calendar.

In front of the case was a teak writing desk, topped with red leather. The desk was bare except for a chess board. A game was in progress. Whites were losing. The two players were a man and a woman and they both sat staring at their new guest.

Bond put the woman at no more than twenty. She was very attractive, with that dusky, dark beauty the women of the Pyrenees' inherit for generations. She was dressed in a shiny damson coloured cocktail dress. Her companion was a much older man. He was greying, wore black rimmed spectacles and was holding the tip of a finely carved cigarette filter. The point of the cheroot burnt orange and a single swirl of smoke rose into the air.

The door rattled urgently behind Bond.

"Silence!"

Having given the order to desist, the man removed his glasses, folded them and slipped them into the breast pocket of his jacket. He didn't appear remotely concerned by the sudden appearance of this interloper. Instead he offered a wickedly conniving smile, an expression that spoke thousands of words in one movement.

"Do not kill me, Mister Bond. At least not until we've had a drink. Then if you wish, I'll give you a second chance."

Bond stood up slowly, but did not lower the knife.

The man rose from his chair. He was taller than Bond expected, not especially bulky, but had a panther's grace. He wore an immaculate three piece suit, Italian-made in dark blue and with a matching, lighter shaded collar and tie. A vivid red carnation was tucked into his button hole. The man dressed like a tycoon, but his stance suggested toughness; his jaw was set firm and his gaze hardly shifted. He watched Bond with piercing, straight eyes. The skin was hardly weathered by age

or the sun and although Bond estimated he was over sixty, he could have passed for much younger. There wasn't a hair out of place, the grey flecks at his temples blended seamlessly with the lacquered crest, so oiled it glistened blue like his suit. He maintained a neat trimmed moustache, one modelled on Clark Gable's. The man continued talking.

"I am Marc Ange Draco and I am the Capu of the Union Corse."

Bond strode forward. The Union Corse! Now the mystery was unravelling. More dangerous, some said, and even older than the Unione Siciliano, the Mafia. Born out of the mountains of Corsica, the Union controlled most of the organised crime in France and her colonies. Protection rackets, prostitution, smuggling, murder, corruption on a grand scale – nothing was beyond the reach of the Union. Hadn't Rossi, the disgraced politician, been 'outed' by the Union? Hadn't Negulesco been liquidated outside a bar in Nice on the orders of this innocent looking man? Now Bond saw things anew. Those coarse, rough tones the thugs spoke had been his first clue, but Bond had missed it. And the girl; it would be no surprise for the Union to solicit women for their dirty tasks.

The shrewd eyes watched him as he approached. So, the Capu wanted to speak with James Bond. Let him talk then.

Bond sharply took aim and threw the knife. The blade scythed through the air over the Capu's shoulder and buried itself in the calendar behind him.

Marc Ange Draco didn't even blink. Carefully he inspected the damage. The knife was plunged into the box for the Fourteenth of September.

"But today is the thirteen, Mister Bond."

"I'm superstitious," Bond wasn't; his aim had been fractionally off. He stopped short of the desk. "How about that drink?"

"Of course. What will you have?"

"A martini; shaken, not stirred."

Draco came around from behind the desk. He addressed the girl, but didn't look at her. "Olympe, a martini for our guest and a Campari for myself."

The girl obediently stood up. "A pleasure."

She said it like it really was. Bond was reminded of the gentle reassuring tones of the telephonist at Le Hermitage. The girl walked to the left hand book case and pushed it. The case swung on an axle and Bond could see another room beyond.

Draco halted a foot or so from his guest, sizing him up. He was slightly shorter than Bond, but it hardly mattered for his countenance hinted at power and stealth and nerve. Bond immediately respected him, even if his methods might leave something to be desired.

"My apologies for the way in which you were brought here today." Draco sounded very sincere, as if

the knowledge of Bond's uncomfortable trip upset him. "I was not sure you would accept a formal invitation."

"There's always something formal about the point of a pistol."

Draco made a low, disinterested grumble. The girl returned with their drinks. Bond tasted his and thanked her. It was an exceedingly well mixed cocktail.

"Thank you, Olympe," said Draco. "We will finish our struggle later."

As the Capu lifted his glass from the girl's tiny hand, Bond noticed his fingertips seemed to caress the instep of her palm.

"As you wish." The dusky young beauty smiled discreetly at the hidden message and with a swish of her skirt she returned to the second room, closing the secret door behind her.

Draco noticed Bond following her swaying hips. He smiled. "She also plays a very good game of chess."

Draco raised his glass. "Salut!"

"Cheers."

"Please sit down." Draco indicated the long sedan sofa and Bond sat, legs crossed one knee over the other. The Capu reached for a small cinder box on the mantel piece and flipped it open, revealing a stack of crisp freshly rolled cheroots.

"No, thank you, I prefer my own."

Draco replaced the box and sat opposite Bond on a single arm chair. He took a long pull on his filter and the two men shared a few moments, studying each other.

It was Bond who broke the frosty silence.

"Don't you usually drink Corsican brandy?"

The Capu chuckled. "What else do you know about me?"

"Marc Ange Draco, sixty six years old, born Porto Vecchio, once gaoled for murder, Free French Resistance fighter subsequently dishonoured, now head of the Union Corse, possibly one of Europe's biggest crime syndicates. However you do have many substantial legitimate business fronts, such as Draco Construction, C.E.S. Electrical Supplies, numerous agricultural holdings and metropolitan rental properties."

"Yes, good, good." Draco nodded. "But your dossier on me is not entirely complete. I am also Teresa's father."

"Tracy?"

“Yes, Tracy.” He said the name twice, the second time with what sounded like wistfulness and regret. “My only child.”

Draco stood up and walked back to the mantle. He took down a framed black and white photograph and showed it to Bond. It was of a pretty dark haired woman, dressed in smart slacks and a jumper. She was reclining against a large boulder and the mountain winds had caught her hair. There was laughter all across her face and the smile brought colour to the monochrome image.

“Her mother was an English woman,” explained Draco. “A romantic, a nursery teacher who had come to Corsica to look for bandits, rather like those foolish women went into the desert to look for sheikhs. Well, she found a bandit; she found me. I was hiding from the police at the time, I have been most of life, and she saved me. She found me in my cave, but I was weak, starving from lack of food. It would have been easy to turn me in, but instead she brought me bread and meat and wine for many days and weeks, until I was fit and well. By then the dogs had called off the hunt, someone else had committed a worse atrocity I expect. She came to adore my little wilderness and I made love to her there, just as she wished it. I tried to leave her, to forget her, but as she had grown to love me, so I had fallen deeply for her. I returned to the village and stole her from her bed. We roamed Corsica for a few months, until I asserted my authority. Then, during the war, I saw an opportunity to expand the base of my operations. I brought her with me to Marseilles and married her. The result: Teresa.”

Bond lit one of his own Morlands. It was no surprise he’d failed to pick her nationality. Corsican wildness and English reserve and two helpings of stubbornness. What a delicious combination. It was no wonder, considered Bond, that the girl was so wilful, so intense.

“Twelve years later my wife died.” Draco had been pacing the room. Now he returned and sat next to Bond, leaning back, offering hand gestures and little smiles, talking as if they were brothers in arms.

“I was rich. I had just been elected the Capu. My fortune was assured for my life. But I could not raise a child. I am a business man whose business, as you may imagine, often involves the unseemly. I couldn’t allow her to see this. When her mother was alive, she was sheltered from it, but now I wanted to protect her from the worst of the Union. So I sent Teresa to Switzerland to finish her education. But in doing that, I failed to give her a proper home. She was without any supervision and I foolishly gave her everything she wanted. When she left school, she fell in with the fast international set, the playboys and millionaires. She was a wild one, a wild bird, with nowhere to settle. She roamed Europe, lurching from one scandal to another. When I disapproved, remonstrated with her, cut off her allowance, she would go on and commit some greater folly – to spite me, I suppose.”

Draco lit another cheroot. He scowled at the filter, his thoughts a long way off. Bond thought he’d never seen a man look so broken. A terrible misery had settled across his face.

“Yet behind her bravado,” Draco said, “something was eating away at her soul, something in her blood, perhaps the mix of her blood, was making her hate herself, despise herself, and torture herself. This can happen, my friend, to men and women. They burn the heart out of themselves by living too greedily. Suddenly they examine themselves and see they are worthless. But it is too late.

The worm of self-destruction has been born, they've eaten everything in life, all the sweet meats at the banquet and now it is finished."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Teresa made one final effort to control her life, my friend. Without telling me she married an Italian Count, a reckless distasteful youth who drank too much and killed himself in a Maserati with one of his mistresses. But worse was to follow. The bastard was bankrupt. He left my Teresa nothing, not a franc, not a diamond. She sold everything, houses, pictures, businesses, even the title, which she now uses only by proxy. It was just enough, but it ruined Teresa, it pulled her back into the very life she tried to escape. I tried, my friend, with money and reassurance, but I failed. I gave her everything and brought her nothing."

Draco got to his feet, drawing himself to his full height, lifting his chest, proudly, imitating the prance of a peacock. He had something very important to say.

"Why do I tell you this?" he repeated. "Let me tell you, my friend, I do not intend to surrender Teresa to the ill-fates of this world. I have been informed of everything you have done for my daughter."

Bond uncomfortably hid his embarrassment. He tried to remember the last time he'd discussed his sexual relations with the father of a girlfriend and decided he never had. "Everything?"

Draco dismissed Bond's timidity. "Don't worry, don't worry about that, you are a man, she is a woman. There is no shame in the act, my friend. What you did for her, the way you behaved, it might be the beginning of something good, some kind of therapy. She needs help – your help."

"I find her fascinating," answered Bond, a little uncertain of this turn in the conversation. "But she needs a psychiatrist, not me."

"What she needs is a man! A man to dominate her; to make love to her enough to make her love him; a man like you!"

"That's a slightly old fashioned way of looking at it, Draco," said Bond, hiding his amusement at the outburst. "I think that's your Corsican bandit talking."

Draco didn't smile. For a brief moment Bond thought he was going to react. He saw those sharp eyes flare. Then that delightful smirk crossed his face, the one he'd had when Bond first entered the room.

"Of course you are right. You spare the rod and you spoil the child. It is too late for Teresa to be taught how to behave, but she might do it for love. No-one, Mister Bond, has ever really loved my Teresa."

The Capu had walked back to the fire place. There was a moment of quiet. Bond rose, placing his empty glass on the mantle.

"You over estimate me, Draco," he began. "She's very attractive, but I can't do what you ask."

“Listen to me,” replied the Capu, suddenly very earnest, yet also, Bond sensed a little desperate. Again the eyes told it, burning grey like embers and ashes. “On the day you marry her, I will give you a personal dowry of one million pounds, in gold, or stocks, or a Swiss account, however you want it.”

One million pounds, thought Bond. And only a few hours ago he was wondering what to do with a year’s earnings. The temptations swam into view. But it wasn’t enough. Tracy didn’t need wealth. Draco had said it himself, she needed love, and he couldn’t enter into a relationship with such a price. Reluctantly he turned down the offer, but put the blame squarely on his side.

“I don’t need a million pounds, Draco. I’m very happy as I am; I’ve a bachelor’s tastes, a single life style, besides marriage isn’t suitable for a man in my profession.”

Draco angrily stalked away.

“I know all about your profession, Mister Bond.” He said it with scorn and barely controlled rage. “The world of spies, of espionage, of coercion, the cold war – and killing. Yes I know of that. Your world is not so different from mine, eh?”

Bond felt chastised. He could have argued the point, but there was ring of truth to Draco’s words. Sometimes it was hard to tell where good stopped and evil took over.

Draco turned back. He looked to be on the point of tears. This time the words were conciliatory, almost affectionate.

“Just see her some more,” he argued. “Who knows what will come of it.”

“I’m sorry, Draco, it’s my work, you know it’s impossible to...”

The sentence stayed unfinished.

Bond hesitated. The idea started to form. It was something Draco had said, something about two worlds colliding, the same, apart but not so different.

Draco sensed his hesitation. He stepped up to Bond, the cheroot extended half way to his mouth, anticipating a change of mind. His face split into a broad grin. “Yes? What?”

“You have connections not open to me,” hinted Bond, then without hesitation, he boldly asked: “Where is Ernst Stavro Blofeld?”

“Aha! Le Blofeld!” Draco almost shouted the words in triumph. “You seek that black hearted bastard.”

“Yes.”

“He ordered the death of one of my best lieutenants. Recently some of my men have defected to his organisation, but I don’t know where he is.”

“Can you find out?”

“If I could, I wouldn’t tell a member of the British Secret Service.” Draco said the words with care.  
“But I might tell my future son-in-law.”

“Go on.”

The shrewd, clever eyes glittered in victory. Draco grinned and waved a hand at the calendar. “Next week is my birthday. For that Teresa always comes back to me. You understand?”

“Let’s say the invitation is accepted.”

“Good, good.”

Smiling, the Capu tipped his Campari to Bond and downed it with one swift gulp. He looked down at the chess board, raised the black Queen and replaced it carefully on the board.

“Checkmate,” he said.

## **Six: Request Granted**

The brass plate to the left of the portico simply read 'Universal Exports Ltd.' The anonymous building it related to was situated on the far side of Regent's Park, well away from the children's playground which used to be called the London Zoological Society. That the building had nothing to do with import and export, would only have been known to those who worked there and the assorted few government ministers and secretaries that frequented its halls. As a matter of course, there might also be foreign diplomats who were aware of its secrets and inevitably they in turn might relate the goings on in that dull grey building to other less circumspect ears.

Universal Exports was the undercover consortium created by the Secret Intelligence Service, one that allowed its agents to move around the globe relatively untroubled. It wasn't fool proof: the Russian's had discovered the ruse within a year of the company's formation. However one accepted aspect of the complicated game called 'Espionage' was that you didn't attack your enemy's headquarters; you could try to infiltrate it, certainly, but no one was ever assassinated on 'home turf,' to retain the sporting vernacular. When people died that was a different story, a different game altogether.

The sky was as grey as the building when James Bond walked up the five steps and through the revolving door that welcomed all visitors. He flashed his pass and received a curt nod from the security guard, Storey, a man who in years gone by Bond had shared Christmas drinks and swapped naval tales. That was odd; no greeting. It was Bond's second indication that something was wrong at headquarters today.

The first had occurred several hours earlier as Bond drove through France and caught a night ferry from Calais to Dover, for this time, he didn't want to go back.

Normally, headquarters was the place where Bond spent most of his working life, shuffling papers, reading reports and conducting idle flirtations with the girls in the typing pool. The excitement of an assignment, however trivial or grotesque, was rare. It was unusual for an agent to spend as long in the field as Bond had done in his pursuit of Ernst Stavro Blofeld. Operation Bedlam was a unique assignment. The ministry had granted Bond almost carte blanche control in an effort to track down the author of SPECTRE. He'd been given an exclusive expense account and unlimited access to embassies and consulates; he'd been empowered to make strategic decisions, conduct interrogations, demand reports, authorise surveillance activities, coerce, blackmail, bribe and entrap; most satisfying for Bond, he even had authority to command Station Heads if requested. Although he respected the Foreign Stations, they did tend to be wary of any one stepping into their territory. Bond knew it was a defence mechanism; many Stations had spent years building uneasy alliances and boundaries with their local rivals and the visit of a Double 'O' Operative was a cause for considerable alarm. Not every local agent was as resourceful as the late Kerim Bey, a man who Bond had reason to thank for his life, but whose sacrifice cost him his own. All these responsibilities, added to the roving nature of Operation Bedlam, meant Bond had only needed to attend Head Quarters nine times in the past two years.

There had been no official holidays either. Bond recognised he'd over worked himself. The occasional weekend of gambling or scuba diving was no substitute for a proper extended break. That was why he'd experienced such a malaise in Royale Les Eaux, why the distraction of Tracy had become so overpoweringly alluring and why he'd considered resignation. The trail had gone cold so

many times, he'd genuinely wanted out. The licence to kill was useless without a target. And Bond didn't have one; at least he didn't until two days ago. Now, with the information Marc Ange Draco could procure for him, Bond had a chance, the first clear opportunity in two years. Draco's web of informants spread as wide as the S.I.S. yet they crept out from under the stones and out of the hovels the Service wouldn't or couldn't consider turning or entering. Bond ruefully wondered how many Station Heads had chosen to investigate where the Union Corse would pre-emptively make enquires. Not many. Bring back poor, dear Kerim Bey.

And then there was the other half of the bargain, for Draco's proposal didn't only have consequences for Bond's working life: Tracy. Draco knew where she had fled after she'd left Le Hermitage. His men kept watch over her, usually discreetly; Draco apologised for their heavy handed and over eager displays. The Capu was certain his daughter would return to his estate in Herault that weekend; so certain he guaranteed it. But could Draco guarantee Bond's information?

"Let me worry about that, James," said the Capu, already comfortable enough to use Bond's first name. "You worry about Tracy."

And Bond was worried. He saw the signs in himself. Normally breakfast was an important part of Bond's day. But he'd rushed it out of choice the morning after meeting Draco. He barely noticed what he ate. His thoughts were fractured. The turmoil spun like a cyclone. One second, one moment, Blofeld was at the forefront with those piercing black eyes, the next he saw Tracy, her beautiful melancholy face broaching one solitary smile, the one she'd given him at the climax of their love. Draco was right. Tracy was possessed by a spiritual burden, guilt, a calm neurosis that made her life not worth living. She had none of the outward signs of hysteria; in fact the atmosphere Tracy inhabited was an almost ice-cold serenity. Yet her life as it stood was a whirl of chaos. Whatever was keeping her upright was about to crack. Bond recognised it in her desperate driving, her recklessness, her abandon, even in her frantic licentious sex. And he had to stop it cracking.

The challenge excited Bond. He put his reservations aside, not for Queen and Country, but for himself. He wanted to help Tracy. It wasn't the ridiculous dowry. It wasn't Draco's long sad story. It was because they'd locked eyes, perhaps only once or twice and in those fleeting moments, Bond knew that they shared more than brief encounters. The single life, the rigours of sustaining its expectations, was drowning them both. His work, her lifestyle, had become empty and shallow. For Bond the hunt for an elusive spectre; for Tracy seeking that elusive ghost called happiness. Luck had brought them together twice. Now their shared loneliness might make them both whole.

Bond had never given much thought to his emotions. Now he knew the heart didn't lie. Whenever Bond thought of her, he felt his pulse quicken. The weekend couldn't come fast enough.

Bond silently opened the door to Miss Money Penny's office. He hadn't worn a hat for a year or so, but he'd brought one with him today. Bond executed the perfect toss and the trilby landed on the centre prong of the hat stand, spinning.

"James!" cried the auburn haired secretary, who some unfairly dubbed Britain's Last Line of Defence, for it was considered near impossible to get past Miss Money Penny unless you had an appointment.

"Where have you been?" she asked, quickly flapping a hand across her fringe, ensuring it was in place.

"Much too far from you, Money Penny."

“You’re a heartless brute, James, letting me pine away without even a postcard.”

“Pine no more,” teased Bond. “Cocktails at my place, eight o’clock, just the two of us.”

“Oh, I’d adore that.” It was Moneypenny’s turn to jest. “If only I could trust myself.”

She pointed with one long painted finger to the green light above the familiar oak panelled door. “You’d better go in. He’s running a very tight ship today.”

Bond’s insides squirmed. That didn’t sound promising. He opened the door and entered M’s office. It had hardly changed since his last visit. Oak panels, fading carpets, pictures of naval victories loaned from the National Gallery, a scale model of *H.M.S. Repulse*, the Admiral’s last command, and the scent of pipe tobacco. The large warm room was deathly quiet. The only sound was the scratching of a pen on paper.

M was sitting behind his desk, hunched over a report. The reading light was on. Bond walked forward, certain his superior had heard the door open and close. M waited almost a full half minute before inclining his head. There was no greeting. He returned to the report, closed a page and ticked it.

M pushed the document aside. Bond felt those old eyes inspecting him, assessing him, in the same manner they’d just assessed, reviewed and consigned that document. For a moment Bond was reminded of those aristocratic gamblers at Royale. The elite, hunched over their money, waiting to pounce, to maim where it hurt, the wallet and the reputation. It was his third bad portent. They always come in threes.

“I’m relieving you from Operation Bedlam, 007.”

The words cut to the core. Bond was stunned. He was, for once, lost for words. He stumbled over the reply.

“But, Sir, Blofeld’s become something of a must with me...”

“You’ve had two years to run him down.”

Bond knew it was an invitation to vindicate his actions. Bond was about to explain, to tell M something of Draco and his lead, something tangible. But the mood in the office was malignant. If he mentioned the Union Corse, M was likely to explode. And yet, what else had he been doing for the last two years? What other evidence did he have? He couldn’t answer the question adequately. It wasn’t that he didn’t have an answer; he simply couldn’t justify it. Instead he waffled a reply.

“Does this mean you’ve lost confidence in me?”

“I’m well aware of your talents, 007,” was the acerbic response, “but a licence to kill is useless unless one can set up the target.”

Bond gulped. His very own thoughts come back to haunt him.

“I’m calling you in. Operation Bedlam’s finished. I’ll find you a more suitable assignment.”

“But, Sir, under the circumstances...”

“That’s all, that’s all.” M waved a dismissive hand and returned to his pile of communications.

Bond stared. After what seemed like minutes, he turned slowly around and walked back to the door. As he closed it he took one long look at the iron grey statue, turning pages, unconcerned, alone.

Was this what his life had come to? Bond asked himself. Accepting edicts from the same elite he’d been so desperate to escape a few days ago, accepting failure, accepting his place in the scheme of the world. If he stayed he would become as bitter and inflexible as that monument to the coldness of war. Didn’t he have a future? Sod it, thought Bond, it wasn’t about the money and it wasn’t about Blofeld. It was all about him. It was all about Tracy.

“That was a quick conference,” chimed Money Penny.

She was about to continue with some abstract banter, when Bond cut her short. “Take a memo, please, Money Penny.”

She detected his manner. Her face became serious and she picked up her pad and pen with suitable efficiency. The nib was poised.

“Yes, James?”

Now, Bond considered; how did it go exactly?

“Sir,” he began, recalling his thoughts during that fateful drive along the French coastline. “I have the honour to request that you will accept my resignation effective immediate.”

“Resignation from what?” enquired Money Penny haltingly.

“From the bloody Secret Service!”

Bond almost shouted the words. He stormed out of Money Penny’s domain and took the elevator two floors down. Here he had his own spartan office. It hadn’t seen much life recently, except for the cleaning staff that still hovered and dusted every day despite his long absence.

Bond stripped off his jacket. He was wearing his shoulder holster and the Walther PPK, which Draco had returned to him. He wondered how long he’d need that for. Bond unhooked it and tossed the offensive weapon on the desk. Not very long.

He obtained a fold up cardboard box from one of the secretaries and started to clear his desk. There wasn’t very much. A few meaningless letters of correspondence, assorted mugs and glasses, one of which he’d stolen from the staff canteen, postcards from the edge, things like that. The bottom drawer however contained a host of assorted knick-knacks and as he sorted through them a sea of memories came flooding back.

Bond found the special glasses Vlacek had used to deceive the casinos. He had his old .25 Beretta, a weapon the Armourer had called ‘a ladies gun.’ Bond had secretly obtained his decommissioned one and kept it for sentimental reasons. There was a long letter written in big child-like handwriting. It was from an address in Miami. Honey Rider had wanted to tell him she’d met a doctor and was getting married. Dear, lovely, Honey, the Girl Friday who’d shared his adventures on Crab Key. And then he found another keepsake. A black velvet ribbon, the one the beautiful Russian Tatiana had

worn when they first met; the only thing she had worn. Bond smiled at the indecent memory. Finally he found the pocket sized Rebreather, one of Q's inventions, one that had saved his life in the Bahamas when all this Blofeld business had started. He placed the mouth piece to his lips and was surprised to find it still worked. He shook his head in mock admiration.

There was something else at the very back and Bond got on his knees to retrieve it. It was a hip flask, containing Hennessy Richard, that fabulous blend of over 100 vintages. There wasn't much left. He'd almost forgotten he had it. He'd definitely forgotten who bought it for him; some rich married woman he expected.

Bond unscrewed the cap. Before he took a sip, he raised the flask to the portrait of the Queen which hung on the wall, a print of the famous painting by Annigoni.

"Sorry, Ma'am."

Bond spent the rest of the morning drinking coffee, smoking and finishing the cognac. He was contemplating his future, not the immediate few weeks; that was settled. No; the life ahead, with Tracy and without M and the Service. He had tempted himself again with the idea of coaching golf. Relaxing in the open air with an interest he genuinely enjoyed. It had many attractions. But wasn't it just a little staid?

It was almost noon when the loud buzz of the telephone made him sit up straight. He grasped the receiver urgently.

"OO7... no, James Bond here."

It was Moneypenny with a summons.

Bond made his reluctant way back up to the office, said nothing to the secretary and went straight in.

M was still scribbling on documents. He didn't even look up. A hand stretched out containing a folded letter.

"Request granted," said M.

Bond didn't take the letter for a moment. When he did the paper felt clammy, as if it had been held in M's hands for a long time. It had been a difficult decision for the Admiral. Bond felt a twinge of guilt. The grey head didn't raise an inch. Hang him; thought Bond, he's got full use out of me over the years. This wasn't the moment for sentimental rubbish.

Bond turned around and left the office for the final time.

"Request granted," he exclaimed outside, "and not even with regret!"

"What did you expect, a knighthood?" Moneypenny was calmness itself. War could break out and she'd still be as assured. "Why don't you read it?"

Bond unfolded the letter. It started with the words "*Sir, I...*" but the rest of the content was completely different to his dictation. At the end, scrawled in M's ubiquitous green ink, was the instruction: "*Two weeks official leave, M.*"

“Well,” Moneypenny clucked, “you didn’t really want to resign did you?”

Bond smiled. No, he didn’t. Not really. Not yet. There was still important work to be done. Resignation could come later, if it had to.

“Moneypenny, what would I do without you?”

“My problem is that you never do anything with me.”

## **Seven: Daddy's Girl**

The open top Mercury Cougar XR7 purred along the seven mile avenue which led through L'Etate Calvi. The little red sports car zipped through the vineyards, whose black grapes were bursting with ripeness, waiting to release the gorgeous cherry flavours of Grenache, and on past the limestone chateau with its immaculately tended gardens.

Comtesse Teresa di Vincenzo wasn't concentrating on her driving. It came so natural to her, that unlike many drivers, she drove instinctively, fluently. She was thinking instead of the face she had to wear for Papa. The smiles and the laughter she had to offer him. The moments of unconditional love only a daughter can offer.

She knew exactly what to expect today, for it had been the same every year she could remember since Mama had died. There was a feast, for all the estate, for the lieutenants of the Union and for the many guests, the politicians, the policemen and authority figures who were in Papa's pocket, the occasional singer or artist. The heads of rival institutions were also invited and they kept a watchful distance. Lastly, most importantly for Papa, who liked to maintain his peasant routes, the local people could come and enjoy the fete. While the enormous buffet was devoured, there would be a Course Landaise to entertain the crowd. And afterwards, she and Papa would go riding on the estate together and talk. He always rode that grumpy dark stallion Corsair, an animal which resembled him in manner, and she chose Rafaela, the slender palomino mare. In the evening there was dancing and more food, a pig would have been spit roasted and huge bowls of salad prepared. Everyone would retire late, full, contented and perhaps a little drunk. It was always a good day, Papa's birthday.

But this year Teresa was cheerless. While she practised her smiles, her thoughts were sober, saturnine and disheartening. She couldn't hide from Papa. He had been interfering again. His men followed her everywhere. And whatever she did to break free, he kept hauling her back. Paying her debts was one thing, and she would tell him how grateful she was for his kindness, but why did he want to help her? Couldn't he see she didn't want help? She wanted to be left alone, to crawl away and forget about life and responsibilities. She didn't want to be touched or loved not any more. Not by any one. Or any man.

Except there had been one moment: very recently, very clearly, unmistakably, undeniably, Teresa had allowed herself to be touched and to be loved by one man. He'd been a reluctant lover. He hadn't lacked passion, but he'd shown caution and concern, as well as a ruthless, strong nature. He loved and he fought. He didn't intellectualise his problems. He opened them out, dealt with them swiftly, firmly, head on. There was something hard about him, something cruel. And yet she recalled the softness in James Bond's eyes as the lids closed, dreamy after love.

No, it was no good, Teresa told herself; he too had ventured where he wasn't required. He'd protected her, saved her, from certain shame, but that was then. It was his one night. Teresa had nothing to offer James Bond. Now, still, she was exactly as he had found her, tired, alone, afraid, desperate and almost destitute. The vapours of life were running out for her. He had come too late. She'd given herself to him and he'd accepted the gift. The debt was paid.

But what if she hadn't abandoned him that morning? Teresa wondered for the thousandth time, would he have told her to stay? And if he had, what would her answer be? No. He would not have asked. There would have been no bargains, she was convinced of that. They had both taken what they wanted and now they had no use for each other. But, again she thought, if he had asked, what was her answer? Teresa shook her head. It was still no. It had to be no. Didn't it?

Teresa wore her Spanish riding apparel, a close fitting white lace blouse, black cropped jacket and an ankle length riding skirt, pulled tight at the waist to emphasise her figure. It wouldn't do for Papa to think she was ill. She completed the outfit with a broad brimmed hat, a blush red ribbon tied to it. She'd made sure the clothes were clean and pressed and avoided wearing them for a month, to ensure it was so.

She slowed the car as she approached the stables. Here there was a high sided circular exercise yard which doubled as a bull ring specifically for these occasions. Three quarters of the corrida was surrounded with tiered stone seating, shaded by a wide multicoloured canvas awning. Teresa could already hear the shouts of excitement as the ecarteurs performed their tricks. She pulled in next to the stable block. As Teresa stepped out of the Cougar, she noticed the silver grey Aston Martin parked opposite. It was the new marque, the DBS. She'd seen it before. Teresa frowned. What was James Bond doing here? It must be a co-incidence and yet, there was an inkling of another story. Perhaps Mister Bond was pursuing her.

Teresa's heart fluttered. She would need to find out. And she knew exactly how to do it.

There were several cheery hellos as she approached the corrida. It was good to see some of the old friendly faces again. They didn't judge her. Teresa offered the smile she'd practiced.

The Landaise had already started. Two wild cows, the Vaches breed, were in the ring, being taunted by the mischievous clowns. An ecarteur was waiting to perform his tricks. Teresa saw one bull charged in, its vicious horns flashing in the sun, dipping for the killing thrust, only for the ecarteur to swerve to the left. The bull twisted, clearly annoyed as his quarry escaped. It stopped dead, scraping a hoof, sizing up the task, then charged again. This time the ecarteur swerved to the right and gave out a cry of "Allez!"

Teresa's father spotted her when she was still ascending the stone steps to the gallery. Papa walked purposefully through the mêlée. On his arm hung the young girl, Olympe, a nice girl, but too young, dressed too fashionably.

"Teresa! Teresa!"

When he reached her, Papa clasped her shoulder's tight, as he used to when she was a child and he was instructing her, teaching her about society, about responsibility, about history, about family. All the things she'd chosen to forget.

Teresa offered her cheek.

"Happy birthday, Papa." Teresa could be nothing but cool. The sight of the Aston Martin had frozen her. She scanned the crowd, looking for the familiar face, the one with the slightly cruel smile.

“You make it so by being here,” said Papa. “You look marvellous.”

“Bonjour, Olympe, how are you?” asked Teresa as the two girls exchanged kisses.

“It’s so good to see you again, Tracy,” replied the young girl. “You look wonderful.”

It was easy to see what Papa saw in her. Innocent, accommodating, polite, Olympe probably refused him nothing.

Papa was already leading them away. “Come, come with me, I have some guests I want you to meet.”

There were many greetings as the trio moved back along the gallery towards the Draco family’s enclosure, a flat stage cut out of the seats, where a quartet of tables were arranged, bedecked with flowers and champagne bottles resting in buckets over flowing with ice.

Papa introduced Teresa to the priest, Monsignor Albaroni, and to a man who claimed to be in the diamond business, though she didn’t believe it, and to the mayor, who had changed again – she wondered by whose guidance. Lastly Papa touched another stranger on the arm and the man turned around.

“Mister Bond, may I introduce my daughter, Teresa.”

He was dressed in riding jodhpurs, boots and a Prince of Wales check jacket. He was as handsome as she remembered, six feet tall, athletic, dark and comfortably at ease, both with himself and his surroundings. There was a light tan to his skin that gave him the air of the exotic. The smile had the sign of the devil written all over it, but the eyes kissed away the fear, they were steel blue, tranquil and inquisitive. There was even some amusement in them. What game was Mister Bond playing today? Clearly not baccarat.

“Mister Bond and I have already met.”

“And each time is a renewed pleasure, Comtesse,” remarked James Bond

Teresa cut him a single glance. It almost stopped him short, but she’d miscalculated. James Bond had the temerity to persist in being jovial.

“You always make one feel so welcome.”

It was too much. Teresa caught his eye twinkling. The impertinence of the man was unbelievable. God, why did she have to meet him here? There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to escape, nowhere to argue, nowhere private, to hold each other, to kiss. Teresa realised she’d been staring straight back at him and with an effort, she dragged her eyes away.

Seeking an escape from his roguish gaze, Teresa seized Olympe by the hand and pulled her aside. “Come on, Olympe, let’s watch the Landaise.”

They walked a little way, accepting fresh champagne from one of the stewards. A sauteur was

performing in the bull ring and as Olympe gossiped about the latest fashions, Tracy watched the lithe young man, who she thought was called Miguel and had once been a local stable boy, show off his skills.

The bull charged at great speed, but Miguel stood fast, bending his knees and opening his shoulders, his concentration never wavering from the oncoming animal. Suddenly, as the bull's head drove down, Miguel leapt up and forward, hands outstretched. The palms landed on the bulls neck, pushed off and Miguel somersaulted the bull, landing feet together at its rear. The bull snorted in annoyance, spun and charged. There was some laughter as the brave Miguel was forced to sprint away from the onrushing horns, before the clowns distracted the bull with their bright capes.

Eventually Teresa tired of the aimless chat and Le Course.

"I didn't know Mister Bond knew Papa," ventured Teresa.

"I think there are many things about Mister Bond one does not know," answered the young woman.

Olympe cast a long look back at the family enclosure, where James Bond was deep in conversation with Papa. "It would be interesting to find out, wouldn't it? He is very attractive. And then perhaps I could tell the girls at night school."

Naive but not innocent, considered Teresa, unconvinced. "Papa is up to something. I'm sure of it."

"Your father loves you very much, Tracy. Whatever he may arrange, I know it is for your happiness."

Teresa wrinkled her nose. Olympe was often present when Papa conducted business. She could be a distraction, a temptation, a waitress, hostess or simply a pretty silent picture. She shared many of Papa's secrets as well as his bed.

Teresa took hold of Olympe's hand once more and pulled her further away, where there was at least the semblance of quietude.

"Exactly what has Papa arranged?"

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Bond had arrived the night before. He'd left the Regent's Park building immediately after kissing an astonished Miss Money Penny full on the lips, returned to his flat and phoned Draco with the good news.

Bond was planning to stay in Montpellier, but Draco wouldn't hear of it and offered to put him up, at least for the weekend. The beautiful chateau was no more than forty miles from the coast and rested close to an unmarked village. The gardens gazed out over the plentiful Herault plains, rich with sun baked agricultural earth. Bond was in a small room, apparently. It was big enough to hold at least three rooms. He soaked in a huge bath and suppered with Draco, consuming the best part of a

bottle and a half of an excellent Grenache from his host's own vineyards. Being the Head of the Union Corse seemed to have distinct advantages.

The next day, at the corrida, Bond had been reintroduced to Tousaint and Che-Che, Draco's two best lieutenants. Tousaint was the curly haired talkative man, while Bond knew Che-Che from the fight at Le Hermitage. The latter really did have difficulty speaking. Bond was surprised to see both men had large families. They were wary of the agile, tough Englishman, but Draco assured Bond they wouldn't cause any bother. Bond had the Capu's respect and that meant he also had the Capu's lieutenants' approval.

Tracy's approval however was another matter. Bond had been too flippant. The initial exchange was frosty from her and crass from him.

Draco meanwhile couldn't have been more confident. That slippery grin passed across his lips as the two women took their leave of the main party.

"She likes you, I can see it."

"You must give me the name of your oculist," suggested Bond, unconvinced.

They watched Le Course for a time. Draco explained the refinements of the game. It was not bull fighting, but a display of gusto and machismo. The vaches were wild bulls, a specific breed, originating from Spain and cross bred in the Landaise region of southern France. They were much smaller than their Spanish cousins, the toros, and weighed only as much as 360lbs or as little as 250. They were nimble animals who could turn quickly. Once on the move however they were as unstoppable as the toro. The object of Le Course was for men to display one of three disciplines: escart, feinte or saut.

The escart was the swerve, where the ecarteur would bend his body away from the charging bull, arching his back as the muzzle and horns pass behind him. The dummy, or feinte, involved an ecarteur standing still, with arms folded, and indicating at the last seconds of a charge the direction he will run. He did this with a nod of the head or a tiny movement of the shoulder. The bull followed his sign, allowing the ecarteur to move in the opposite direction. The skill was in the timing and the ecarteur who could leave his feinte until the last possible moment was much admired. Finally the spectacular saut, or jump, was the most dangerous test. Here the sauteur runs at the charging bull and somersaults the animal, sometimes cleanly, sometimes by using the head or horns as a springboard. He must land behind the bull and on his feet, anything less was considered a failure.

Bond found the displays remarkable. The ecarteurs were agile and strong, like gymnasts, and showed incredible nerve to face down a charging bull, before committing to one of the three skills and avoiding a certain injurious collision. Bond noted the bulls didn't always obey the rules of the game and several times an ecarteur had to be rescued by colleagues waving large red cloaks. The vaches, explained Draco, was an intelligent breed of bull that remembers its time in the ring. The animals are not killed so in due course they become more dangerous and cunning. It was a supreme test of human vigour against animal instinct.

A shrill bell rang out, indicating the lunch buffet was open. The two women returned to the enclosure, still deep in conversation. Bond detected the signs of conspiracy. He pulled out a chair

and offered it to Tracy.

She sat down without offering a thank you.

“What are you doing here, Mister Bond? When did you become part of the family?”

“I had an invite. It was very kind of your father to ask me.”

Draco was pouring champagne, Bollinger, the very rare and exceptional '37. “Mister Bond and I are discussing a business deal.”

“Really?” intoned the girl, her gaze shifting from her father to Bond and then across the table to Olympe, who sat obediently silent. “No woman would waste such excellent champagne on a business deal, unless of course, she happened to be part of the arrangement.”

There was a momentary silence around the table, broken by the shouts of “Allez!” from the bull ring.

Olympe shifted uncomfortably and dropped her eyes.

Draco detected her lapse. “Olympe, what have you said?”

“Don’t blame Olympe, Papa. I’m not your daughter for nothing.”

The girl took a sip of the wine and looked Bond straight in the face. He saw that same sad, desperate, lonely look in her eyes, but now it was also matched with anger.

“I suggest you revise the terms of your contract, Mister Bond,” said the girl. “You’ll find your liability far too expensive.”

“Now, there you’re mistaken...”

“Papa,” interrupted the girl, “Mister Bond wants his information.”

“What are you talking about?” Draco bluffed, badly.

“You always taught me that a good host supplies all his guest’s needs – and without obligation.”

Bond switched back and forth between father and daughter. It was like being caught between hissing cobras. Cold eyes and sharp tongues. He felt he ought to explain the situation: “I’m not sure obligation is quite the right word.”

The girl ignored him. “Tell him, Papa. Tell him what he wants to know now.”

“Please, Teresa, it is nothing...”

“Tell him, Papa or you will never see me again.”

Bond sat through a longer silence. Draco wanted to resist. He was being embarrassed in front of his

guest. He sat unmoved, watching his daughter, whose strong face stayed fixed on his, holding the champagne flute half way to her lips, about to drink or ready to toss it aside, like her life, on the strength of a threat.

Draco sighed.

“All right, all right, there may be a connection between this man Blofeld and a lawyer with offices in Berne, Switzerland, a man by the name of Gumbold.”

“Gumbold,” repeated Bond.

Automatically he asked a follow up question, seeking confirmation of a detail. There was a loud scrape of a chair being pushed back. The girl was standing up, agitated, her fists bunched, the knuckles showing white. She was biting her lip.

“So, now, Mister Bond need have no further interest in me.”

“Tracy, another mistake...” pleaded Bond, beginning to rise.

Draco shook his head and spread his hands in admission of defeat. “She always was a headstrong girl. I’m sorry, she takes after her father, you know...”

But Bond had already disappeared.

Teresa had known it was true. Used by her father, bait for another man, for what, for her happiness? The words almost made her choke. She might have been happy, or something that passed for it. James Bond might have made her happy. Yes, he might. But how could she forgive him now? She was a pawn in another man’s hands. Hurt again. Used again. One last time.

Teresa reached her car and stopped. She couldn’t drive, her eyes were wet, she couldn’t see properly. She took a deep breath. Control yourself, Teresa.

“Tracy!”

Oh God, it was him. What the hell did he want? And then Teresa felt his warm strong hands on her shoulders and he stayed like that for a moment, just touching her.

“Tracy, I was taught that mistakes should be remedied, especially between friends – or lovers.”

Bond turned the girl around. The lip she had bitten into was trembling. The tears were streaming down her cheeks from the eyes he thought could never cry again. Gently he brushed them away with his finger.

James Bond pulled Teresa close and she cried in his arms. No man had ever seen her cry before and she didn’t mind that it was James Bond who saw it.

## **Eight: Gumbold's Safe**

Bond spent almost the whole two weeks at L'Etate Calvi. Straight away he took Tracy from the hubbub of the party by suggesting they went riding along the banks of the Herault. Bond wasn't an expert horseman and so it was more of a gentle trot. Bond was glad of the slow pace for it allowed him an opportunity to explain how he really felt about the girl. The words did not come easily. Normally he would shower a woman with compliments and kisses, insincerity one and all. Tracy deserved more honesty. So he told her, leaving nothing out, only the pieces of the story he couldn't tell, the full official secrets. Later that evening as they walked through the estate's beautifully sculptured gardens, the girl spoke to him about her world and Bond found he wanted her even more. Here was a bird with a wing not only down, but torn away, by the jackals of life. Bond assured Tracy he would always be there when she needed him.

They made love that night and the following days burst autumn into spring. The flowers seemed to bloom again and the sun shone every day, whether they swam in the sea, walked through the low mountains, ate picnics on the beach or went on expensive shopping trips to the Cote d'Azur. The girl clung to him, not now out of desperation, but from desire and harmless infatuation. When their eyes locked, in the car, over the dinner table, at night as they lay in bed, he saw that the loneliness in her gaze had gone. Instead there was light and hope. They sparkled like sunbeams painting the ocean.

Despite their closeness, and that several times Draco tactfully left them alone, attending to unexplained 'business,' Tracy insisted on some propriety. Hadn't she been sent to a Swiss finishing school, after all? Not all Papas' money had to be wasted. So, they didn't share the same bedroom all night. Tracy insisted on sneaking back to her own room before dawn, to at least preserve a semblance of decency.

"Not for Papa," she claimed. "Heaven knows what that old devil thinks, but for the servants. Goodness, James, it simply wouldn't do!"

That was how he overheard a conversation when arriving late for breakfast one morning. Draco was back from one of his outings and as Bond descended the stairs alone, he could hear those rounded Corsican tones.

"Such things should be left to a girl's father, who knows what is best for her."

"But what can be better than being in love?"

The girl's voice was the lightest, happiest Bond had ever heard it. He stopped short of the door, not wanting to intrude on this moment of close family unity.

"James is in love with you?"

"That may come too someday."

"Life's too short for 'someday,' Teresa," replied Draco. Bond could picture the sharp, intelligent eyes,

the lids half closing as he considered the situation. "Tomorrow I will speak to him alone, man to man."

"No, Papa."

"Why not?"

"No talk," the girl was very firm. "Whatever happens, happens. And this time there will be no regrets. Please."

Bond heard the 'tchk' of a kiss and the gay lilt of her laughter. Smiling, he thought it was time to enter the breakfast salon. He decided not to ever mention the conversation. When the day came, if indeed it ever did, he would have a talk with Draco, man to man, whether Tracy wanted them to or not.

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Bond took his leave on the second Wednesday, promising he would return the next day. He had some business of his own to attend to. Bond kissed the girl outside the departures terminal at Montpellier airport.

"I'll only be one night," he told her for the umpteenth time.

"Is this going to be the story of our life, James?"

"Just keep my martini cool."

He gave her a reassuring squeeze and was off without looking back. Bond had made his plans to visit Switzerland the day after Draco's birthday. He made an excuse to spend an hour buried in Draco's office making illicit phone calls to Station Z – Zurich. Shaun Campbell wasn't someone Bond had worked with, but their paths had crossed a couple of times, usually when Bond sought refuge from a crisis along the Iron Curtain. Zurich Station provided a very safe haven. Bond took Campbell into his confidence, didn't pull rank but did insist he keep the engagement between only them.

There had been a very long pause while Campbell mulled over the request. "What's to keep quiet, James?"

"Officially, Operation Bedlam's dead and buried."

"I know that, came in on dispatches, is that what all this is about?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. I've recently come by some interesting information about our lawyer friend Gumbold. It could be the breakthrough I've been waiting for."

"Come a bit bloody late, hasn't it?"

“Doesn’t it always?” Bond cradled the receiver under his chin and lit a cigarette. “So, are you in or out, Shaun?”

“In,” came the steady reply. “Bugger all to do around here anyway.”

Bond flew into Berne with only hand luggage containing his overnight things. Campbell met him in the arrivals foyer. He was a squat man, ruby cheeked from the mountain air, and with a distinctive curly mop of sandy hair. He wasn’t your normal Station Head, choosing to dress in jeans and a hefty woollen sweater. Bond liked him all the more for it.

They took a light evening meal in a nondescript smoky cafe, chosen especially for the purpose, and Bond quizzed Campbell carefully about the next day’s arrangements.

“How did you get on, Shaun?”

“Well, I got into the office okay. It’s quite a new building, backs onto the railway lines,” explained Campbell. “Just phoned up and made an appointment; simple as that. I told him I had some inheritance problems, called myself Signor Fangio and put on my Italian accent.”

For Bond’s benefit Campbell gave him a demonstration. It was rather convincing.

“You know, the man didn’t bat an eyelid? He’s an expensive old sort. Cost me an arm and a bloody leg for fifteen minutes. Anyway, his office is on the sixth floor, second from the top, at the back. He must be a bit of a loner this Gumbold because he’s the only one in situ. He’s got an outer office with three desks and typewriters and all set up, but no body works there. It looks like a one man operation.”

“That would be just like SPECTRE,” suggested Bond. “Looking for the society’s outsiders; easier to manipulate.”

“Yes, I thought so too. Well, he’s a funny little man, pin stripes, glasses, upright, tetchy, hardly said a word. Kept fiddling, looking at his pocket watch. I thought, hello, this guy’s late for something. You know what it was? Lunch. I followed him down the street, carefully of course, though I don’t think he’d have noticed me if I’d been standing behind him, and I discovered he eats in this bistro down the road. Every day. And I mean every day and always between one and two. The routine never changes. I asked the waitress about him. She thinks he’s a bit weird, been going there for years apparently.”

“So that’s our window of opportunity.”

“Exactly. I got a good look at the place during Signor Fangio’s appointment. Fifteen minutes was way too long because there’s hardly a stitch in his office. He’s got a bank of filing cabinets, but they don’t have locks. I reckon if this Gumbold’s got anything on Blofeld it’s in his safe.”

“He has one?”

“Big one, bulky iron bottomed thing. Very old, pre-war I expect, with a turn dial lock, probably got a

six digit combination. You'd need an H-BUD to break into that."

Bond groaned. He knew the H-BUD safe cracker was an excellent piece of kit, but it was hardly the most discreet of equipment, being almost as big as a safe itself.

"Christ, how am I supposed to get one of those up there?"

"I've thought of that, James. Took a few days before it came to me, mind. When I was impersonating Signor Fangio, I kept being distracted by what was happening outside his window. Remember I said Gumbold's office backs onto the railway lines? Well, Swiss Federal Rail is constructing some new offices on a strip of vacant land. Gumbold's got a nice balcony out the back, got a pretty good view of the city, but it's a bit noisy. He won't have a view when that thing gets finished. Anyway as I sit there, this tower crane was hauling great big containers full of sand and cement to the top of this half constructed monstrosity. Well, I went and had a look. Made a few enquiries with the work force, slipped some notes to the foreman, and well, let's say at the appointed time, Gumbold's balcony will be receiving a large delivery by special courier."

"That's assuming I can get into his office."

Campbell fished in his pocket and produced a single key. "Hey presto; bribed the cleaner for a copy of the skeleton. He was an Italian man, an old war veteran, poor bugger. Signor Fangio's money can be very persuasive."

Bond took the key. "So we're all set?"

"One o'clock tomorrow. You go in the front. I'll be impersonating a hod-carrier for the duration."

Campbell raised his glass of glutinous Eichhof bier and Bond did the same.

"One o'clock it is then."

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It was four minutes to one when Bond entered the unimaginative square building on Laupenstrasse. Inside the lobby a long line of plaques indicated the name of each business in alphabetical order. Under 'G' was a plaque reading 'Gebruder Gumbold – Advocaten – 6.'

Bond lost himself amongst the crowd of people exiting the building and slipped into the empty lift.

"Six," he instructed the operator.

The old elevator creaked its way up the floors. Bond stepped into a marble lined corridor, moving smartly aside to let the next bundle of hungry stomachs get one step closer to lunch. He caught sight of a short, upright, bespectacled figure, clad in a blue-grey trench coat, buttoned to the collar. He was nervously tapping his left pocket, before realising he'd put his gloves in the right hand side.

Bond strode past the fidgety Herr Gumbold and turned the corner. The lawyer's office was directly in front of him at the end of the passage. The rooms were all created from wood and glass partitions and the lawyer's name was stamped on the glass in italicised letters. Bond waited while two chattering secretaries came out of another door and dawdled down the corridor. He'd seen a floor man, but the old fellow didn't look like the sort to take his work very seriously. He didn't even notice Bond leaving the elevator.

The key was a perfect fit. The door opened soundlessly. Bond locked it behind him and left the key in the slot. If Gumbold returned early, he'd be alerted by the key dropping to the floor. Campbell had been very accurate with his description of Gumbold's miserable existence. Lunch and the waitresses at his favourite bistro was probably the best thing that ever happened to him.

The inner office door was open. The safe stood against the partition. Campbell was right. It was a big old Swiss Bauer, 1920s probably, about five feet tall by two and half square. Bond needed space to set up the H-BUD. Carefully he moved the two telephones which sat on one side of Gumbold's largely empty desk. That would just about do it.

The balcony door had a simple latch at the top. Bond flicked it down and pressed the handle. Immediately the rattle of an inter-city train echoed up to him. The sound reminded Bond of London, only not so loud. Like London in autumn, it had just started to shower. In a month or so the rain would become snow and the pace of life in Switzerland would slow down for the winter. That would probably upset the punctilious Gumbold. Bond imagined him fiddling to put up his umbrella as he walked down the street.

Opposite, on the edge of the building site, the hook of a tower crane was winching upwards, a big steel bucket swaying beneath it. The jib turned on its axis and swung towards the balcony. Bond could see Campbell, muck covered green boots, bright yellow safety helmet and all, acting as the rigger, directing operations. The bucket contained what looked like a modern version of a cabin trunk. The jib came nearer, slowing in its approach, until the lip of the bucket brushed the parapet. The case was on the wrong side. Bond stretched out and spun the load. It scraped a few inches of brickwork. Bond was just able to grab the handle of the case. It was heavy. He hauled it out and had to virtually drag it inside. He was thankful the office was not carpeted. The scuff marks blended with those created by Gumbold's chair. Bond left the balcony door ajar, in case he needed to get away quickly. The colder air and scent and sound of diesel engines would have to accompany him for the next hour.

Bond lifted the trunk onto the desk, where it overhung at both ends. He flipped the catches and pulled open the top, revealing the piece of equipment Q Branch called the H-BUD, the Hair's-Breadth Unlocking Device. Bond pulled the cables loose. Attached to the end of these was a magnetic pincer which stuck over the dial on the safe. Once activated, the magnet would rotate, moving only a hair's breadth at a time, but extremely quickly. As soon as the magnets detected the tiny vibration which indicated a locked cog, it automatically moved to the next available number, opening the appropriate bolt. The process would then be repeated until all the cogs were open. The machine had to be such a size to accommodate all the complicated diodes and sensors. It also ran off a very large and weighty battery. The H-BUD worked very fast. Campbell estimated it would have the safe open in twenty minutes. What worried Bond was how many documents might be inside the safe.

He clipped the pincer in place and the H-BUD whirred into life. Bond checked his watch. It was already 1.12. Well, there was nothing for it. Bond took a seat and waited. After a few minutes, he picked up one of the newspapers that were tucked into a magazine rack. It was the international copy of the *Tribune*. It felt almost three times as thick as normal. Bond opened the paper and was surprised to find a recent edition of *Playboy* lurking inside. Well, that would certainly take his mind off the waiting. Curiosity made him wonder if all Swiss lawyers read *Playboy*.

Bond had only reached the first article, about deep sea fishing, when the H-BUD beeped and the first number illuminated on the processing screen. 8.

Bond returned to the magazine. It took a long time before the next bleep. The dial had to be taken through almost a full turn. 9. By the time Bond had met the Girl of the Month a six had flashed up. The next digits came fast. Bond tensed. He checked his watch. It was well after half past one. The device wasn't anywhere near fast enough. Suddenly another 8 flashed up on the screen and the indicator read 'unlocked.'

Bond jumped up and tore the pincer away from the dial. He pulled open the door and was confronted with exactly what he feared. A safe crammed full of documents. Bond checked his watch again. 1.39. Gumbold was probably dabbing the bristles on his moustache and ordering coffee. Bond tried not to think of the time. He had to concentrate on the task before him. When searching for a needle in a haystack you had to be methodical. There was no point in diving straight in, it only made an obscene mess and made the job even harder.

Bond started at the top, pulling out each file in turn and taking a quick look at the heading. If it was unsuitable he returned it exactly where he found it. Quickly Bond realised the safe was arranged in an alphanumerical order, so on a hunch, he skipped to the end of 'A' in the hope he may find details listed under 'B.' The first few files were unimportant. 'Bh' was full of correspondence regarding a land deal near Lucerne and 'Bi' featured one document dated 1959, which Bond ignored as it predated SPECTRE. 'Bl', surely it had to be under 'Bl' for Blofeld. It wasn't.

Bond cursed and pressed on. 'Bo.' Nothing. 'Br' – Brahms, Brakhmann, Bray. Nothing. No, wait. Bond looked closer at the last file. It only contained six pages, a series of letters exchanged between Gumbold and a man called Sir Hilary Bray who worked at the College of Arms in London. The crest of the college was visible at the head of his letters. What attracted Bond's attention was the opening line on the top letter dated 17th June.

*"Herr Gumbold,*

*"Thank you for your letter dated 6th May regarding the hereditary title to the estate of the Count de Bleuchamp..."*

Bond didn't need to read anymore. Bleuchamp! The French form of Blofeld. It was ingrained in his memory like those simian black eyes. This was it!

Bond pulled from his pocket a microfilm camera, not much bigger than a cigarette case, another of Q Branches wonderful inventions. In turn, Bond arranged each letter and took three photos, one of the complete page and, in close up, the top and bottom halves. His eye caught sight of a nearby baroque bell tower. The clock face of Heiliggeistkirche, the Church of the Holy Spirit, showed 1.57. When the new Swiss Rail building was finished it would no longer be visible from the balcony. For now, Bond

was glad to see it.

Gumbold would be waiting in the downstairs lobby, removing his gloves one finger by one finger. Swiftly Bond replaced the letters and slid the file back into place. He swung the safe door shut and rolled the dial. Now for the H-BUD. Bond packed it away, locked only one catch, and hefted it into his arms. He nudged the balcony door with his foot.

The jib was already swinging towards him. It was still spitting with fine rain. From the corner of his eye, he saw Campbell watching the crane, his wrist bent up, the dial of his watch counting down the seconds.

Bond hurled the machine into the bucket, went inside and shut the balcony door. 1.59. Christ, Gumbold would be heading this way. Bond replaced the two telephones, took a final glance around the office and headed for the door.

He heard voices in the corridor outside. There was no time to worry about that. It wouldn't be Gumbold, he didn't talk to anybody. It sounded more like those two secretaries, wittering ceaselessly on.

Bond turned the key, opened the door and stepped out. Yes, it was the two secretaries and another older woman. He closed the door and locked it. The clock at the far end of the corridor said 2.02.

When Bond rounded the corner, Gumbold was fidgeting again. The strap on his umbrella had snapped and he was damned if he'd walk around with the contraption half open.

## Nine: The College of Arms

Bond took the turn off the A308 which headed into the little village tucked on the edge of Windsor Great Forest. There wasn't a car to be seen on the one straight street where the terraced tithe cottages sat opposite each other and competed to see who had the prettiest window box. There was an obsolete, but well maintained village pump at one end of the street next to the tiny public house, the Squirrel. Opposite the inn was the broad gateway into Quarterdeck, M's small Regency manor house.

Bond parked next to the antique Rolls Royce which drove M along the A4 every day and into London. The naval flavour of the manor caught the eye straight away. A replica cannon sat on a plinth on the front lawn and three pennants were flying, the Queen's, the Navy's and the one from *H.M.S. Repulse*. M held that battle cruiser in high regard, having commanded it throughout the Battle of the Atlantic. So attached was he to the ship and its crew that following his retirement from the navy, his own Chief Petty Officer had accompanied him and now, with his wife, worked as butler, housekeeper and cook.

It was Hammond who greeted Bond at the door.

"Oh, good afternoon, Commander Bond." The Petty Officer was surprised to see him. In fact he was surprised to see anyone, for the Admiral rarely had visitors and never at the weekend.

"Afternoon, Hammond, is the Admiral in?"

Bond asked only out of politeness; he knew darn well M was at home. M didn't drive and didn't go to the pub. If the Rolls was there, so was M.

Bond was announced into the front lounge. This was a long room which took up all three of the bay windows on the right wing of the manor. The half nearest the door was occupied with more naval memorabilia, including Jellicoe's spyglass, and the walls carried portraits of famous Admirals. The second half however was covered in slim glass display cases, mounted all over the walls and containing a stunning array of beautiful butterflies. Bond had no idea M's hobbies included lepidoptery. The Admiral was bent over a particularly large nymphalia, pinning the delicate wings into place. Bond bided time until M had finished mounting the exquisite example of a copper coloured Blackleg Tortoiseshell. The Admiral grunted a greeting while he waited.

When he turned around, Bond was surprised to see that under his prerequisite blazer, M was wearing a soft collared, open necked shirt. Wisps of thick grey hair sprouted below his throat.

"What are you doing here?" M bristled, not liking any disturbance at his home. "I thought you were on leave."

"I'd like to talk to you about genealogy, Sir," replied Bond cheerfully. "Fascinating subject."

Bond saw M roll his eyes, as if this was possibly the daftest thing he'd ever heard. Bond pressed on:

"I've come across a letter from Herr Gebruder Gumbold, a solicitor based in Switzerland, to a certain Count Balthazar de Bleuchamp."

"De Bleuchamp?"

Bond could see M was immediately intrigued.

"The French form of Blofeld," he verified.

M gave a tiny shake of the head.

"You've been relieved from Operation Bedlam, OO7; remember."

"I assumed you'd reassign me, Sir."

M scowled at his errant and irritant agent. He looked at the big brass clock that hung over the door and used to hang in his Captain's cabin. Dinner wasn't for another three hours.

"All right, you'd better tell me about it."

Bond rather hoped he would. He kept to the facts, kept them concise and tried not to include too much of the 'mushy stuff' which he knew M would find distasteful. Otherwise, he left nothing out, including how the Unione Corse had affected to aid him. Wisely, Bond glossed over the incident of his resignation, for which he was certain the Admiral was entirely aware.

M sat listening, fiddling with his pipe and matches, and didn't interrupt once. When Bond finished, he was unprepared for his superior's first question.

"What about the girl, OO7? Do you intend to keep up the friendship?"

Friendship: a typically understated word. "I intend to try, Sir, although I expect I might only get to see her on the odd weekend. I'm going to be quite busy."

"Really; what have you got in mind?"

Bond handed over a slim document wallet.

"Well, Sir, these are copies of the letters addressed to the College of Arms in the City of London. They request the College undertake to establish de Bleuchamp's claim to the title. The puissant concerned is Sir Hilary Bray, he's the Sable Basilisk of the College, and as you can see he's recently replied to Gumbold. I've already taken the liberty of contacting Sir Hilary Bray myself and arranged an interview with him, under the pretext of examining my own family tree. What I'd like to do is enrol his help so I can read up on the technical side of heraldry."

"Why do you want to do that?"

"I want him to suggest he meets de Bleuchamp in person. Should he consent to a meet, I can act as the representative of the College."

M sucked on his pipe and gave a thoughtful "Ah."

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The College of Arms wasn't an ostentatious building. What the dusty red brick Queen Anne exterior hid was one of the most pretentious establishments Bond had ever encountered. It was early December and Bond made the next of his twice weekly pilgrimages across the cobbled courtyard tucked into the fringe of the City. The horseshoe shaped steps led up to a splendid colonnade, the entablature displaying the College's own Coat of Arms.

Bond was greeted by a porter, dressed in a cherry red long-coat, buttons polished. He recognised Bond immediately, but said nothing more than "Good morning, Commander Bond" and led him from the atrium into the main hall, dominated by the banners of the Commonwealth which hung from the cornice. The oiled faces of proud-looking gentlemen, portraits of past Heralds of the College, stared disapprovingly as Bond walked past.

The porter took Bond upstairs, to the fourth door and rapped the large brass knocker. He entered on instruction.

Bond was familiar with the room behind it. It was wood panelled and quite large. While there was a big oak desk, it also contained several worn armchairs and settees. Bond thought it resembled a university common room. A rapier thin middle aged man, decked in tweeds, was bent over the desk, deep in conversation with a scrivener, a young man Bond had seen on several of his visits. It was like watching a lecturer with an under graduate.

"Good afternoon, Commander," said the thin man pleasantly, looking over the rim of his spectacles at the sound of the knock.

"Good afternoon, Sir Hilary."

Sir Hilary Bray beckoned Bond over to the desk.

"Have a look at this: the arms of Sir Thomas Bond, Baronet of Peckham, died 1734."

Bond looked at the illustration, a white shield bedecked with a black inverted V. The stripe was stamped with three golden orbs. Underneath the shield was a ribbon declaring in Latin 'Orbis Non Sufficit.'

Sir Hilary continued, pointing to each article in turn. "Argent on a chevron sable, three bezants, good motto, eh? 'The World Is Not Enough.'"

He handed the illustration back to the young illustrator. "You're doing a splendid job."

"Thank you, Mister Sable Basilisk."

While the scrivener packed up his things and departed, Bond wondered if he'd ever get used to the antiquated forms of address used at the College. Thankfully, Sir Hilary Bray wasn't as pretentious as some of his colleagues and was quite happy for Bond to address him informally.

"We've traced your line back to Sir Otto Le Bon," explained Sir Hilary. "He held the Manor of Wickhambreaux by a knight's fee from the Earl of Thanet."

As soon as the door closed and they were alone, Sir Hilary stopped rambling and offered a conspiratorial smile.

"We're in luck," he said and sat down behind the desk.

Bond sat opposite while Sir Hilary hunted for a sheaf of papers among the muddle of documents that littered the desk top.

"Gumbold telephoned from Berne and then sent a confirmation letter to say his client has consented to see me."

"You mean me," said Bond abruptly. Although he liked Sir Hilary, the man did have a tendency to get over excited. He often spoke as if this whole caper was his idea.

"Yes, you," corrected Sir Hilary. He found the letter and handed it across to Bond, continuing with more caution. "Commander, this is a most extraordinary precedent we're setting. Although I appreciate your position, it is a delicate situation for the College too. We wouldn't want our reputation damaged."

There was a lull between the last two words. Bond ignored the emphasis, briefly glanced at the letter and handed it back. He said nothing. Sir Hilary, who had become receptive to Bond's moods, sensed it was best to carry on speaking. He removed his glasses and held them extended in his hand.

"I am only able to countenance this deception on your assurance the matter is of national importance."

"I haven't exaggerated, Sir Hilary," replied Bond. "My department appreciates your help very much. If it was a trivial matter we wouldn't have invited you to sign the Official Secrets Act."

This had been performed at M's insistence. He wasn't comfortable with the College being aware of the subterfuge, so the Herald's themselves had not been informed of Bond's real intent. As far as they were concerned, the de Bleuchamp hereditary tree was Sir Hilary's labour. If and when any meeting took place it had appear to the College as if he was actually attending in person.

"All right then," nodded Sir Hilary. "For the duration I've arranged to lose myself among the churches of Brittany. I want to do some brass rubbings there anyway. Bit of a sore point, mind. They haven't written with the full details, but de Bleuchamp is very keen to arrange the meet over Christmas."

Bond sighed. Tracy wouldn't like it either. Despite his best intentions and the daily phone calls, he

hadn't managed to return to L'Etate Calvi. Tentatively, he'd discussed staying with Tracy for Christmas. Now that too might have to go on hold. Bond switched his mind back to the present. Sir Hilary was still talking.

"Apparently he's too busy with his own research at any other time."

"What kind of research?"

"No idea," Sir Hilary ran his finger down the letter. "Here it is. Gumbold says: 'The Count is most concerned that his valuable medical research is not interrupted by your visit.'"

Bond nodded; there now seemed to be another avenue to explore. "Where do I go for this meeting?"

"They're being a bit canny about that too. They'll send the details no more than a week in advance, including a time and place where I'm to be 'collected' as they put it. They also want me to provide a description of myself."

"Tactfully adjusted to favour me."

"Yes. It's not the sort of thing we go in for, but under the circumstances quite understandable."

"Sounds like they're suspicious," indicated Bond.

Sir Hilary sounded shocked at the suggestion. The smell of a treasure hunt, of uncovering a lost lineage, had raised his enthusiasm. Bond wondered if he'd temporarily forgotten who de Bleuchamp might really be.

"No, not suspicious, just discreet," reassured Sir Hilary. "There was after all no objection to my fee of a thousand guineas."

Bond nodded. Money, he considered, hid a multitude of evils. "How's the research going?" he asked, thinking it prudent to change the subject to something related to the College. "Could his claim be genuine?"

"A bit hard to say at this point," replied Sir Hilary. "Our methods are very exacting. We never like to speak until we're absolutely certain there can be no possibility of error on our side or forgery on anybody else's."

"Well, I hope I live up to your high standards."

"I shouldn't worry too much about that," said Sir Hilary, giving a satisfied smile. He'd been tutoring Bond regularly on the finer points of heraldic tradition and custom. "The work you've done so far has been fairly impressive and I'll explain the de Bleuchamp lineage before you set off. There is one useful physical characteristic. The real de Bleuchamp's are without earlobes. It's not the sort of thing we rely on of course, but it could help."

"No earlobes," muttered Bond to himself. He cast in his mind the artist's impression, the one

interrogated out of the Frenchman informant. That Blofeld definitely had lobes. But they could have been from the artist's hand, not the Frenchman's words. Bond made a mental note to re-read the transcript of the questioning.

"You might try inviting him to Augsburg, in Bavaria," suggested Sir Hilary. "The de Bleuchamp's have been coming from there for generations, something to do with Napoleon granting the family titles after the abolition of the Holy Roman Empire. We're still looking into that."

Augsburg, thought Bond; that could be perfect. Switzerland was a notoriously difficult country to penetrate. They guarded their independence jealously and did not look kindly on outside interference in their affairs. It was one of the main contentions of the famous Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal, who struggled to obtain information from the Swiss authorities regarding German escapees following the war. And there was a suspicion, in spite of numerous denials, that Swiss banks held millions of pounds worth of Nazi gold bullion. It was of course a notorious tax-haven for the rich. Subsequently many of the criminal fraternity used Swiss banks too, people like Draco, and undesirables often hid in the country undetected for years. Unfortunately, Britain still had no official extradition treaty with Switzerland. Sometimes Bond wondered if the Swiss even had a soul. Money was their only religion. It would take months or even years to have Blofeld legally removed. If he could be lured to Germany there might be an opportunity to seize him under other pan-European laws.

Bond mentioned this to M as they discussed the finer points of the deception.

"So Blofeld's taken the bait?" mused M, tapping out the remnants of a day's pipe tobacco before scrupulously refilling it only three quarters full.

"It looks like it, Sir, but my main concern is how to get him out of Switzerland."

"Indeed, I don't want it to look like some sort of commando job. Leave the finer points to me, OO7." He paused and for a moment Bond thought the Admiral looked troubled. Casually, M asked: "When you go, what are you going to take with you?"

"All the relevant correspondence and a heap of musty books about heraldry," answered Bond. "The sort that would impress an amateur. Sir Hilary's going to run through the de Bleuchamp history with me. As long as the visit doesn't drag on more than a couple of days, I think I'll be able to fool him."

"You'd better. I was talking about weaponry."

"I can't take that chance, Sir," said Bond flatly. "I've thought long and hard about it and I mustn't arouse any suspicion. Sir Hilary wouldn't turn up with anything more than the tools of his trade and neither can I."

M refilled the pipe and spent a long time lighting it before he replied.

"All right, I don't like the idea of you taking on this man without a gun, but so be it. I'm assuming communication will also be out of the question. It's a messy looking bird's nest of a plan, but I suppose it's the best thing we've got. You'd better get on with it, OO7."

**Ten:  
Piz Gloria**

The invitation arrived at the College of Arms eight days before Christmas with a cheque for one thousand guineas and transport instructions, including a series of tickets all dated from December 23rd: return flights to Zurich and train reservations from the airport to Murren via Interlaken. There was confirmation that a member of the Bleuchamp Institute would await him at Murren B.O.B. Station. Bond knew the town by name. It was a popular ski resort in the Lauterbrunnen Valley. Immediately Bond started researching the town's geography, familiarising himself with the Alpine location. He made a call to Station Z. He didn't explain why he needed the information, but Bond asked Campbell to see if there was anything that resembled a medical research facility in Murren. There was nothing and no mention of a Count de Bleuchamp taking up local residency. Bond shook his head ruefully.

Next Bond endured a torrid tearful telephone conversation with Tracy, during which she begged him not to leave her alone at Christmas. The invitation suggested Sir Hilary would have to return on the Christmas morning flight. Bond decided he could travel straight to L'Etate Calvi, stay at least two days and file his reports from there. M might get tetchy, but Bond knew even the world of spies rested at Christmas. There would have to be an almighty flap on to provoke any interest in SPECTRE on December 25th.

Bond had spent some time creating his own version of Sir Hilary Bray. During several of their conversations, he'd learnt Sir Hilary was a Scottish Baronet, although he was clearly a rather rough and ready version, what with the brass rubbings and the hiking. Bond also learned he smoked a pipe. Bond chose to deck himself in a Harris Tweed cape with a matching long coat. His suit was of scratchy wool and the shirt starched cotton. He'd even found plain thick taupe leather gloves and a Ghillie hat to accompany them. He ordered a tie to be stitched with the Bray family crest. The look was completed by a pair of glasses with clear lenses. He bought two battered suitcases from a church bazaar. No sense in appearing too organised. Bond decided to play it like a snobbish, distracted, bachelor, showing as little interest in the people he met and the surroundings he was in as possible. The bumbling, bookish exterior would hopefully allow him to covertly inspect this research centre, or whatever this 'institute' was, without arousing much suspicion.

The tickets were for first class and Bond's new identity, stated clearly on his false and freshly battered passport, opened doors he never expected, especially at London Airport where he was pandered to and treated like minor royalty. Bond tried his off-hand manner on the ground staff. He was treated with a mixture of sympathy and contempt. It wasn't the reaction he expected. Bond decided to cut out the condescending tone in his voice, but retained the exact same sentences, making him sound more like a pompous slightly eccentric academic. He found this was much more successful on the stewardesses.

The flight was a nice brandy enthused two and a half hours accompanied by *The Times*. The transfer to the train was as orderly as he expected from Swiss Federal Rail. The train journey took another two hours. The grey of Zurich was left behind and the white of winter and the silver of the mountains started to manifest, beckoning the train deeper into the valleys and forests of the Alps. He had a short wait for the connection at Interlaken, but once on board the yellow carriages of the

Bernese Oberland Bahn, Bond felt himself being whisked higher into the mountain ranges. The train travelled through spectacular passes covered in green pine, split by rivers and the white expanse of the low ski slopes. The winter sun sparkled off the frozen compacted ground. And then the train exited one last tunnel and was travelling up the Lauterbrunnen Valley, heading north towards the massive glaciers that hung between the Alps like monstrous white waves waiting to submerge the villages beneath them.

The train slowed to a rattling halt at Murren and Bond folded his newspaper under his arm and relit his new Savinelli pipe. He was using coarse cut Scotch-cake tobacco and it stunk of glue and burnt pork. Bond hated pipe smoking. Wishing he'd never decided to include it in his make-up, Bond stuck the tip in his mouth and moved to the door, following a trio of tourists all set for the skiing.

Bond dismounted cautiously from the carriage, deliberately struggling with his two cases. The air outside was cool and stuck in his throat. He took a single gasp to acclimatise. The platform was busy with day trippers, wrapped up against the cold, all woollen mittens, scarves and hats, padded coats and thermal trousers. The cafe was doing a roaring trade in hot chocolate and schnapps. A small news stand was selling postcards and magazines to nobody. The only thing most passengers were interested in was taking their skis to the nearest slope.

Bond had hardly searched the platform when a squat unpleasant looking woman paced towards him. Her full figure was crammed into a heavy green coat, pulled tight across her flabby belly, making it appear as if her torso came in two halves. There was a pair of dumpy legs beneath the coat, thick ankles encased in boots topped by turned down walking socks. Her hair was completely hidden under a cap that fitted over her skull, right down over her ears. Bond noticed she wore no make-up. Her rough lips appeared to be blistered, as if the mountain chill did not agree with her. The face was worse than plain, jowly, the skin hanging in bags under her cheeks.

The horrendous looking woman was accompanied by a big, beefy man, who looked like an extra from a bad horror film, brusque, intense, broad and silent. He was dressed in black ski pants and an orange jacket. The jacket was trimmed with black and bore the same crest Bond had witnessed at the College of Arms, the extinct de Bleuchamp coat of arms.

The stubby woman opened her slit of a mouth and the voice that came out of it was harsh, with sharp guttural tones.

“Sir Hilary Bray, Baronet?”

Bond raised his hat a few inches. “The same, dear lady.”

“I’m Fraulein Irma Bunt, personal secretary to the Count.”

“How do you do?”

The greeting was ignored. There had been no smile. The reception was colder than frosty. Bond disliked the woman intensely already. He sensed she shared the antipathy. Her next question was tinged with as much warmth as the frozen skies above.

“Have you had a good journey?”

"No, utterly intolerable, I'm afraid. I'm not a good traveller."

"I'm sorry."

No, you're not, you bitch. Bond wanted to tear his eyes away from Irma Bunt's ugly face and the jabber like mouth which offered these insincere pleasantries.

"Grunther will take your luggage," continued the woman.

"I can manage."

The big man reached forward. He said firmly, in very poor English, "I take them" and snatched the two cases from the ground. He set off along the platform. Irma Bunt turned on her heel and followed him. Bond quickly fell into step beside her.

"Do you know Switzerland, Sir Hilary?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not, Fraulein."

"But you like the mountains, yes?"

"Oh, indeed, reminds one of Scotland," Bond thought that showed just the right amount of pomposity. "I'm sorry, Fraulein... ah..."

"Bunt."

"Yes, Bunt, that was what I thought you said." Bond sucked on the pipe. "Interesting name for a genealogist. Are you from a naval family?"

"Naval?"

The woman sounded surprised. Bond wondered if she was mixing her belly buttons with her battleships.

"Yes, it's a nautical term, you see," explained Bond. Secretly he wanted to have a little fun at the woman's expense, enough to show Sir Hilary's scorn for everyone. "The 'bunt' means the baggy or swollen parts of a sail."

There was no reaction. Bond felt distinctly uneasy. A Baronet wouldn't want to cause offense, so he quickly covered himself.

"Nothing personal of course," he lied.

"Interesting," said Irma Bunt. The thick skin around the face creased as she forced a death mask of a smile. "Do you speak German?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Bond.

“French, perhaps?”

“A little, enough for my work.”

The woman made a throaty noise which might have been a sigh but came out more of a grunt. Bond followed her out of the station.

The Bunt Woman wasn't as daft as she appeared. Bond's use of an English sailing term to explain her German name was a mistake. Had she picked up on his error or was her enquiry merely one of politeness? Careful, Bond warned himself, don't get too cocksure. If these people are SPECTRE they'll be as tough and intelligent as any of his recent adversaries. Bond reminded himself about the cultured, intelligent men like Largo and Doctor No.

There was a horse drawn troika waiting for them, manned by a man dressed identically to Grunther.

“I say,” Bond faked largess, “where are we off to?”

“You will not be disappointed,” replied Irma Bunt, gesturing for him to sit first.

Bond settled in the back and the Count's secretary joined him, pulling a huge fox fur blanket over their knees.

“Like the bugs in the rug, yes?” she gabbled without any cheerfulness. “You are comfortable?”

“Yes indeed, Fraulein, your kindness is quite overwhelming.”

“Good.”

Grunther loaded the cases and sat next to the carriage man, who only had to jingle the reins for the two horses to trot forward across the outside concourse towards the main road. The troika ride was occasionally bumpy, but quite pleasant. Bond made a few remarks about the town and how busy it was in the run up to Christmas. People milled about, criss-crossing the streets with scant regard for cars or sleighs. Occasionally a vehicle would overtake them. Gradually the hum of the town dispersed and the little sleigh made its way past the chalets which sat outside Murren, their footpaths marked by a single file trail dug in the knee deep snow and littered with boot prints frozen in the sludge.

About a mile from Murren the driver headed away from the road onto a winding track, one which was regularly trodden down by cars. At its end was a large log cabin, guarding a flat tract of land marked by four flag poles. The bulk of a bright orange Bell 47J Ranger waited patiently for them. This was the same four seater helicopter used by Rega, the Swiss Air Rescue Service. Another identikit man was standing patiently beside it. The land was scrupulously bordered with a series of signs reading ‘Privat – Eintritt Verboten.’

The troika slid to a gentle stop.

“So, we are half way,” crowed Irma Bunt. “Now we will have a little flight.”

“Gosh, this is quite a journey,” said Bond. “Is this really necessary? I’ve never been in one of these things before.”

There was no direct answer.

“You must knock off your pipe.”

“Knock out, you mean,” corrected Bond. At least I hope you do, he thought. As he rapped the pipe against the fuselage of the Ranger, Bond stared back down the track. The helipad wasn’t remote, but not many people would have reason to visit here. So he was surprised to see a white Volkswagen Beetle following the troika up the trail.

Bond turned back to Irma Bunt who ushered him inside the passenger bay. Twin red leather seats faced forward. Bond could feel the warmth of an under chair heater as he sat down. Irma Bunt squeezed herself alongside him with another smile-less face.

“Fasten your safety belt.”

Bond strapped himself in. Once his luggage was on board and Grunther was ensconced in the front with the pilot, Irma Bunt declared with some relish: “Now, up into the Alps.”

The rotor blades began to spin and a cloud of snow started to whirl around them as the big metal shafts picked up speed, revolving faster and faster until, with a jolt, the helicopter was climbing almost straight up and at great speed.

Bond took a look out of the Perspex window as the troika and the hut receded from them. The Volkswagen had pulled right up to the sleigh and its driver was stepping out of the car, engaging the reluctant carriage man in conversation. Bond squinted. Even at that distance, he recognised the chunky, patterned jumper and the mop of curly, sandy hair. Christ! It was Shaun Campbell! What the hell was going on now? Bond cursed making that telephone call. Had Campbell put two and two together and come to do a little investigation of his own at Murren? Well, it was the sort of thing he’d do. Yet, how had he found the helicopter station? Had he followed the troika? No, it was too much of a co-incidence and a stroke of bloody ill fortune. Campbell must have read Sir Hilary Bray’s name on the list of flight arrivals at Zurich. Given the events in Berne, it must have sparked his interest. Damn! Two mistakes already and he hadn’t even reached his destination. Bond’s stomach cramped. He’d insisted on there being no outside communication. He was supposed to be alone, cut off, virtually abandoned. It had not been popular with M, but the old man had accepted the plan. Two days was only two days, what could possibly go wrong? Bond had argued. Now he saw all the possibilities.

The helicopter ascended rapidly gently executing a right hand turn as it did so, heading south back over the town and along the valley towards Stechelberg. The view was spectacular. The floor of the trough shaped valley sunk away from them, its steep craggy sides rising almost a thousand feet, the silver waterfalls spiralling down the crevasses. They would be ten times as bountiful in the summer, when the snows and ice melted, now they were a comparative trickle among the sheer rocky inclines formed millions of years ago by massive glaciers. Clumps of pine forest ran the length of the valley floor, marking the route of the road from town to town. The trees crept up the sides of the gorge

and peppered the dazzling landscape with bottle green stalks.

Irma Bunt leant across Bond and pointed to an area of land lower down the escarpment. The trees were bent over, the trunks exposed, lying in a tangle of branches and soil. The snow around them peaked and furrowed.

“Avalanche damage,” she explained.

The helicopter swept higher, turning back along the valley so it almost seemed to scrape the sides of the shining white peaks. Now even the trees dissipated and all that remained was the stark bleached ground and the shadowy grey tors. The Alps rose all around him and Bond picked out of the distance the distinct cut-away face of the Jungfrau, framed in the deep gold of a low afternoon sun.

Below him aerial cable car lines stretched up a shallow piste, carrying skiers from the outskirts of Murren to a restaurant and funicular station built on a rocky berg. A single line extended further up the mountain, but the gondola was halted in the control station. Above it, the balcony was packed with thirsty tourists drinking mulled wine. The building was balanced among a series of wide steppes and in addition to the ski ramps, from which scores of winter sportsmen were descending the slopes, there was a bobsleigh run. Bond could make out one brave soul reclining on a luge and zipping around a hairpin corner. Not for the faint hearted. While Bond still skied he hadn't been down a bob-run since his teens. Now he considered it too dangerous; even for him, it was a real mad man's sport.

Irma Bunt saw him looking.

“You enjoy the skiing, or the bob sleigh perhaps?”

“I'm not a sporting man, Fraulein,” replied Bond, offering a nervous twitch. “Even when I'm at my best.”

“Do you feel the airsickness?”

“Yes.”

The woman showed no sympathy. She gestured at the restaurant.

“What you see is for the public. From here upwards it is strictly private. No one, no one at all may come through without permission from the Count. The institute was formally a sports club, the Piz Gloria, but now it belongs to the Count who has given it over to science.”

Irma Bunt gave a sharp point with her finger. “Look. There is The Bleuchamp Institute for Allergy Research.”

Bond stared between the shoulders of Grunther and the pilot. He had to stop himself from gasping. Ahead, perched on the roof of the world and bathed in shafts of spangling light, was a building which looked to have been cut out of the rock it stood on.

Piz Gloria rose from the mountain's summit. It wasn't a beautiful construction, being modern,

square, unilaterally functional, as would befit an Alpine sports resort, but the sheer scale of it, stretching almost one hundred yards along the summit and topped by a gently curved observation dome at one end took the breath away. The helicopter seemed to charge up the peak, following the golden cables that played out down the mountainside. The square mouth of the empty mooring station was tucked underneath the skirt of the dome. Bond could make out a series of windows set in the walls below the summit and running in two neat lines chequering the whole length of brickwork. The Ranger rose up over the mountain top, circling its landing approach. Below, the dome glistened pearly white as the sun bounced off the glass panels and its shiny aluminium skin. It was revolving very slowly on an axis.

Of course! Bond's mind made the connection. Piz Gloria sat atop the Schilthorn Mountain and had been open only a year or two. The guidebooks had been full of praise, but hadn't it recently suffered some terrible financial problem? Bond almost smiled. A problem of SPECTRE's making no doubt; but what interest did they have in medical research?

"Allergies?" he asked genially. "What kind?"

"All of them: like the hay fever or the sickness caused by the oysters or the inability to eat meat. The Count is a great specialist in this field. Maybe he can help with your sickness."

Bond wasn't sure if the woman was joking. "I'll certainly be glad to get my feet on the ground."

"Not ground," grunted Irma Bunt. "Ice."

The near side of the building's roof was occupied by a helipad, marked with a big red cross. The pilot manoeuvred the joystick and the Ranger pitched forward, making its descent in seconds. There was a slight bump as the helicopter touched down. They waited a few moments while the rotor blades subsided. Grunther got out first and opened the rear doors.

Bond felt the frozen air chaff at his throat. The atmosphere was thin, lacking oxygen. He'd not been prepared for altitude conditions. Over nine thousand feet up, more than two miles, in the Alps was not where you expected to find a medical research centre. As Bond dismounted, he saw three more orange clad men rolling out a plastic slip mat. They were armed with submachine guns, modern Heckler and Koch MP5s, by the look of it. Not what you'd expect to find at a legitimate enterprise either.

"Fraulein, I should you warn you guns make me very nervous."

Irma Bunt dismissed his comment with one gloved hand. "They are necessary to keep away the spies from the rival pharmaceutical companies. Many times they have tried to steal our discoveries."

"Oh, well, yes. I suppose we do live in a world of avarice and deceit."

"Here at least there is no avarice."

"Really?"

"The Bleuchamp Institute is a not for profit organisation, Sir Hilary. The Count does his work for the

sake of mankind.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

They had descended a flight of steps that ran from the helipad down the side of the building. There was a short jump off platform, from which the shelf of snow surrounding the structure was accessible. Beyond the platform was a rough sided tubular tunnel, cut through the rock. Two bulbs lit the interior and about thirty feet away, at the bottom, Bond could make out bright light. Tiny icicles clung to the ceiling and off the single rope hand rail. The steps had been scraped clear of ice. Irma Bunt ushered him down the tunnel.

“The Count wishes to leave his mark on the entire world,” she continued.

“A characteristic ambition,” remarked Bond and the woman’s ears seemed to prick up.

“Characteristic?”

“Of a true humanitarian.”

“Of course.”

They arrived at a pair of double doors. Irma Bunt pushed open the doors and Bond felt a raft of warm air greet him. The lenses on his spectacles immediately steamed up and Bond made a big show of taking off his gloves and fishing for a handkerchief to wipe them.

While he pretended to be temporarily without sight, Bond inspected the foyer. A waist-coated, tall man had stood to attention when they entered. He had been sitting behind a reception desk which itself was in front of a massive version of the de Bleuchamp coat of arms, two griffins supporting a white shield. Emblazoned across it was an azure fess, stitched with four lozenges, symbolising truth and constancy; a Lorraine Cross highlighted a great military background and the ribbon declared the motto ‘Arae Fi Foci’ – ‘Sanctuary for my Family.’ Rather presumptuous, thought Bond, but he didn’t comment. He also noted an exit which led to a second jump off stage for skiers. There was a door marked ‘Skiausrusting.’ Worth remembering if things got hairy.

Irma Bunt addressed the receptionist.

“Josef, Sir Hilary Bray will take number four,” she turned to Bond who was busily replacing his glasses. “I will show you there after Grunther has taken you for a medical examination.”

“Oh, I’m quite all right now,” stated Bond.

“Sir Hilary,” her tone was meant to be reassuring, “you are our honoured guest. After your experience in the helicopter we must make sure you are completely well.”

“In that case, well, thank you.” Bond stumbled over the words, remembering to try and stay in character.

Irma Bunt looked very pleased. It was the first indication of any emotion from the square face.

“Grunther,” she said to the thick set minder who’d accompanied them all the way from Murren in sullen silence, “take Sir Hilary to Doctor Van Sant,” and then she switched back to Bond, her plum coloured tongue licking luxuriously at the blistered lips, “I will inform the Count of your arrival.”

“Oh, thank you again,” replied Bond magnanimously.

The examination didn’t take very long. The doctor was a pinched faced man who didn’t speak English. Bond eavesdropped on the doctor and Grunther’s German conversation, but there was nothing untoward in it. Grunther merely explained that Sir Hilary was suffering from airsickness. The doctor checked his pulse and temperature, dallied a bit as he set up the blood pressure test. Once done he spoke a few words to Grunther, along the lines of “there’s nothing wrong with him.”

“You need rest,” stated the thick-set man from behind suspicious eyes. He took Bond back up the sleek corridor to the lobby.

Irma Bunt met them. She had removed her hat and coat. Her lumpen form was resplendent in a thick cashmere roll neck sweater. She appeared not to notice how unshapely she was. Or she didn’t care. The hair was set in a bun on the back of her head. It was dark red and clearly dyed, struck through with deeper shades where the colour had stuck.

After asking how he was, and receiving an affirmative reply, Irma Bunt took Bond to one of two elevators. The other lift was stamped ‘Personal Nur.’ They descended one floor. Bond noted there were only six levels. The doors were not automatic and the woman pushed them open. There was another desk with another man on guard. He had a vaguely Mediterranean look; one of Draco’s defectors, assumed Bond.

Without windows Bond lost some sense of direction inside the sleek passages carpeted in insipid green. None-the-less, he managed to gather the lay out resembled a long flat T, the very short tail back at the lobby. The brace of the T was double sided, offering every room some sort of external view. But the structure didn’t run exactly square, turning short corners as it followed the natural contours of the mountain. There appeared to be an empty space inside the centre of the building, but Bond assumed it too contained the bald buried head of the massif.

Room four was marked with a black plastic number. The door slid open at the press of a button. It was a modern room. The furnishings looked as if they’d been designed by the same people who constructed the Piz Gloria, square, big, unadorned and functional. Bond remembered the Piz Gloria had operated as a club-hotel. The Count must have retained the guest rooms for his own purposes.

The Bunt Woman crossed to the double bed and indicated a control panel of push buttons. She pressed the red one.

“If you wish anything for your comfort, you must ring this and the attendant will come.”

“Very considerate,” said Bond, beginning to restock the pipe with tobacco from his faded brown leather pouch. “Thank you.”

“You must also ring for him to open the door when you wish to leave.”

“Rather a complicated arrangement.”

“It is to stop patients leaving their rooms and disturbing each other when they should be resting. The Count believes very strongly in undisturbed rest.”

“Prudent fellow,” Bond stated and turned away from Irma Bunt. He couldn’t bear the sight of the woman any longer. “When can I see him? We have a good deal to discuss.”

“He will send for you, Sir Hilary, when he is ready. Meanwhile I should very much like you to join me and my girls in the Alpine Room for dinner. Grunther will come for you. Shall we say seven o’clock?”

Bond just about had time to say “Thank you” before the short, toad like figure had exited and the door panel had slid back into place.

“My girls” she’d said. Who they hell were they – some other gross monstrosity? Dear God! Bond stood staring at the blank door. How he wanted to kick the fat wobbly backside that retreated behind it. What a God awful woman! And what a bloody awful place! It might have the views of dreams but the reality was a nightmare of incarceration. Trapped in one’s room, on top of an Alpine peak and with machine gun toting guards every where. It was a mountain- bourn Alcatraz, not a medical institute. What in God’s name was Blofeld up to this time? And now Bond felt like the sucker for being drawn up to this desolate place.

Frustration lanced at his ego and he was about to kick out at a piece of furniture when he noticed the four prism lights fixed in the ceiling, level with the toe end of the bed. Bond paused. The lenses were quite small; closed circuit cameras perhaps? Hadn’t Q been wittering on about the refinements of miniaturisation for the last year? He sucked on the pipe to calm himself instead. Best not to take chances.

The steady mechanical whipping sound of rotor blades cut through the silence. Bond crossed to the window. The blinds were pulled. Bond saw a push button on the sill. Pressing it, the slats sprung apart and Bond saw the Bell helicopter making its descent through the last of the natural light. A deep pink sunset was spreading over the valley, turning white summits into pinnacles of deep golden brown. The beauty didn’t touch Bond, stuck in his four walled prison. Totally alone then, he thought; only a static cable car for comfort.

Bond discreetly started to inspect his room. There was a large gas fire, designed to resemble a log hearth, its fake flue making a decorative corner piece, surrounded by two backless banquettes and a very large square sofa. There was a wood and plastic desk, minus drawers, set close to the natural light and equipped with a powerful reading lamp. There were two paintings, both very poor examples of modern art, and Bond pretended to inspect them at close quarters. He was searching for aural detection devices. There didn’t appear to be anything hidden behind the frames. The gas fire looked similarly clean. Bond crossed to the large wet room, which was separated from the main suite by a glass screen. Two mirrors hung above the wash basin. Each one had a finger pull fixed on the side. The first mirror was an extendable shaving glass; the second merely hid a vanity cupboard. Bond took a quick look at the shower head. Water was the only currency it served.

Satisfied Bond returned to the main room and picked up the first of his cases, the one with his

clothes in it. Before travelling he'd inserted a few loose hairs into the breach of the lock. He was also more than familiar with how he'd arranged the clothes inside the case. As Bond flicked open the catches he saw immediately the hairs had fallen out. He smiled. The clothes, while ruffled, looked in good order, no worse than they would after any long continental journey. But his cases had defiantly been searched.

So, there had been a very specific reason for Irma Bunt insisting he was examined by the good Doctor Van Sant.

He imagined those fat hands picking up the telephone to the Count, to Blofeld, and the grim lips saying: "Sir Hilary has arrived, Graf."

"Provide him with the usual comforts."

It would be a little joke between the Count and his scamp.

"You have ten minutes," she'd have ordered the guards.

Bond was glad he'd made one decision right. No weapons. Not one thing to mark him out as an agent. Everything he carried on him was tailored to make him look like a peculiar Scottish bachelor Baronet. He chuckled at the odd looks the guards must have passed when they came across a copy of *Burke's Extinct and Dormant Baronetage*.

Bond looked at his very simple wrist watch, another bind to the real Sir Hilary. It was already five o'clock. Still not certain if he was being observed, Bond decided to unpack his books and writing equipment, including a five foot roll of parchment paper on which he was to map the de Bleuchamp lineage. Duty done, he took a long shower, shaved and, wrapped in a towel he picked out his dinner outfit. Taking up the Scottish theme, Bond had chosen to bring Highland dress, including a Forbes tartan kilt, garters and full accompaniments.

He'd only worn a kilt once before, at a wedding. The groom had been a Scot and he'd insisted on it. Bond had hated it then, but now, almost twenty years on, he rather enjoyed the feeling of wearing a 'skirt.' Must be age, or a sign of the blessed promiscuous times. Bond didn't feel this was a particularly good time to investigate his sexuality.

He rang the bell a little early and Grunther appeared at his door within a minute. Like the other guards he now wore the indoors outfit of waist coat and trousers. His big body seemed crammed into the tight orange uniform. Grunther walked Bond back to the lift, turning the opposite way to how he'd arrived. Was the man trying to confuse him? The elevator took him up one more floor.

Grunther gestured to the left. Bond briefly saw another outside entrance, leading onto a wide terrace. This door was unmanned, perhaps because it wasn't part of the institute's medicinal areas, like the recuperative bedroom suites. Bond followed Grunther's arm and slowly climbed the flight of steps which curved around a room sized central column. What had Irma Bunt said again? "I should very much like you to join me and my girls." He gave a huge sigh as he rounded the top corner. What brutish off spring were these? And then, for the second time that day, the sight that greeted him simply took his breath away.

**Eleven:  
Twelve Gorgeous Girls**

Compassed by windows on all sides, the Alpine Room seemed to be surrounded by the great sonorous pyramids which flickered eerily blue and silver in the deep stillness of the mountain night. Inside, the room was bathed in a golden glow. The central column was occupied by two back to back chimney breasts and a small cocktail bar, manned by a bored looking waiter. Scattered around these were a series of heavily upholstered armchairs and sofas. Slightly to one side a spruce pine was decorated in silver and green tinsel, ready for Christmas. The revolving section of the dome, next to the windows, was conspicuously bare. Bond saw only two tables laid for dinner in an area which would once have contained thirty.

However, it wasn't the interior decor or the external magnificence that startled him: lounging lazily across the furniture was a bevy of beautiful girls.

Bond's gaze swam across them in a matter of seconds. Without exception it was the most stunning collection of women Bond had ever set eyes on. They were all young. He put the eldest at no more than twenty five. Each girl was slender, elegantly attired, made up and coiffured. There was hardly a hair out of place or pimple in sight. These were not the sort of girls you expected to find who had allergies. They were a multicultural assortment too. Bond saw a statuesque Negress, dressed in a flowing African robe, a series of thin gold collars embracing her throat. Next to her sat a slim Indian girl, clasped in the tightest sari which seemed to display more than it hid. There was a petite Chinese too and from the look of one dusky skinned beauty, an Arabian or Egyptian girl. The others seemed very Western, but Bond could pick out accents from across the world. Despite the multitude of nationalities all the girls were speaking in English.

Gently, Bond coughed.

Twenty four eyes swung towards him.

There was a chorus of surprised single note reactions. Two girls were kneeling on the floor, their backs to him. The blonde one, whose hair flowed around her shoulder in a cascade of chartreuse tresses, turned around and fixed him with a big round stare. Her mouth automatically shaped a smile and her tongue licked its way across the unspoken greeting, telling Bond everything he needed to know about this particular young lady.

Irma Bunt, now dressed in a white smock and black trousers, waddled across the room, where she had been in conversation with the waiters.

"Sir Hilary, please, come to meet our patients."

The woman sounded more genial. Bond wondered if she'd been drinking. As she moved closer he even smelt perfume.

"Ladies, this is Sir Hilary Bray, Baronet. He is a fabulous genealogist."

There was an exchange of greetings, too many for Bond to accept personally.

“You will have a drink, yes?” continued Irma Bunt.

“A malt whisky, please.”

While she went to the cocktail bar, Bond tentatively moved forward. “How do you do?” he said as blandly as he could.

“Please, sit down,” offered one of the girls and Bond was ushered to a cushion on a plush sofa, squeezed between two pairs of fine bosoms and long, exposed legs. It was going to take all his mettle to stay in character.

The African girl was resting her arm on the back of her chair, her head raised, as if this intrusion was beneath her. Bond wondered if she had regal blood far back in her veins.

“What’s a baronet?” she asked in clear but slow words.

From behind, Bond heard a cheerful, Lancastrian voice, reply for him. The girl had a twinge of upper class in her accent, but stage school had not eradicated the Manchester twang. The result made her sound as if she was trying to be intelligent and posh, but not quite succeeding to do either. Sadly, Bond had to concur it was often all in the breeding.

“It’s a kind of inferior sort of Baron.”

Bond peered over his shoulder. She was a mousy haired girl, pretty in a puckish short of way. She sat curled up on an armchair and the curvy body was tucked into an emerald pantsuit. She was in the process of placing a large pair of pink tinted reading glasses on her nose. A cigarette went up to her lips and she inhaled. Not once did her eyes move away from him.

“How disappointing!” somebody said.

The girl in green unwrapped herself from the chair and came quickly over, perching on the back of the sofa.

“I don’t mean you’re inferior, of course. I mean the title is.”

Bond was about to reply when the blonde girl, who still knelt on the floor, but now craned forward, started to say something. The underside of her breasts rubbed across the glass table top and Bond received more than a glimpse of firm young cleavage. She made it look the most innocent thing in the world. Bond put her as still a teenager, by far the youngest of these beauties. The blue eyes widened again.

“But tell me, my English is not so good, what is a gynacolo... no, a genius... no, a...”

“Genealogist,” a chirping Home Counties voice rang out, someone from the horsey set, “Really Katarina!”

“Yes, but what is it?” continued the young girl, whose accent Bond picked as being Swedish.

“It’s a Pommie word for an old people’s doctor,” was the reply from a brisk Australian.

Bond’s eyes were sucked around the room from face to face, mouth to mouth and one pair of legs to another. The whole business was unsettling. He wanted to whisk each girl away and talk to them individually, find out why they were here and where they came from. No, not possible, James, he told himself. Stay in character, damn it!

The delicious Egyptian looking girl nudged Katarina on the arm. “So, he’s here to cure Fraulein Bunt.”

Most of the girls giggled. Katarina, hiding her grin behind a dainty hand, whispered to her conspirator: “Shh, careful, she’s got ears like an elephant.”

There was a stilted hush as the Bunt woman returned with a waiter. The look on her face suggested she’d caught every word. Bond took the tumbler which contained a double measure of whisky. So it wasn’t only he who disliked the lumpen Fraulein. Perhaps there might still be a chance to ask a few questions. If he could get everyone distracted by his confirmed bachelor act, the queries might be ignored as innocent bumbling.

Irma Bunt’s gaze cast over the girls, but rested on Bond. “You are not wearing the spectacles, Sir Hilary?”

“I only need them for distance and for reading,” Bond answered. “The small things, you know, from all those books.”

“Yes.”

It wasn’t a convinced reply. The short plump matron retreated to the edge of the circle of bodies, her watchful gaze scanning proceedings like a childminder at a nursery. Bond sipped his drink, sitting straight backed, stiff, trying to ignore the soft arms and legs that brushed him on both sides. He was about to make an opening gambit, when the Egyptian girl saved him the trouble.

“You must be introduced to us, Sir Hilary,” she chanted, seeming to take charge. “I am Danni and this is my friend Katarina...”

The list of names went on and Bond got confused after about five of them. The girl from the Home Counties was Joanna and the African was called Zara. There was Sylvania, from Israel, and a photogenic looking girl exotically named Anoushka. The Green Goddess was dealt the doleful title of Ruby.

“I say,” Ruby tapped Bond on the shoulder to get his attention away from the over indulgent others. Not only did the girls not like Irma Bunt, but there seemed to be some internal rivalry too.

“I’m sorry I was so rude about what a Baronet is.”

“You gave a very accurate description.”

“I must say, it’s a treat having a man here for once.”

“You mean there aren’t any others?”

“Only the staff and you can’t really count them.”

“Ruby,” chastised the harsh tones of Irma Bunt, “we will not discuss the affairs of the clinic; remember?”

Ruby seemed a little put out, but cheerfully sucked on her cigarette. It was young Katarina’s time to interrupt, her pleading eyes fixing on Bond’s as soon as he turned away from the Green Goddess.

“But please, what is a genealogist? Will nobody tell me?”

“It would be a great pleasure to tell you,” said Bond. This was more like it; a chance to show what a boring old sort Sir Hilary Bray really was. Silently, Bond apologised to the real Sir Hilary. If he had a reputation, this wasn’t going to do it any good what so ever.

“Genealogy is all about our ancestors and families. I mean it could easily be that any one of you here is related to a Royal family, if only we could go back far enough to find out.” This elicited a little ripple of interest. “Now, if you could tell me your full names...”

“We do not use surnames here,” stated Irma Bunt with finality. “It is a rule of the Count’s.”

There were a few disappointed groans. Bond apologised, claiming, with no fake honesty, that he hadn’t realised.

“To aid the treatment, the Count believes each patient must be temporarily estranged from their identity,” explained the matron rather grandly.

“I’m afraid that’s way out of my depth,” said Bond cheerfully.

“The Count has many great theories,” she said by way of closure. The shifty eyes caught sight of a signal. “Come, it is time for dinner. Our schedule is rather strict. So is our diet. The Count insists on it. Sir Hilary, this way, you will sit between Ruby and Helene.”

Bond followed the gaggle of bodies across to the gently rotating dinner area. “I’m afraid I’ve never had much to do with young ladies.”

“Don’t worry, Sir Hilary,” chuckled Ruby, guiding him forward with her arm. “We don’t bite you know.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Frankly, this is all a bit over whelming.”

Bond took his place next to Ruby. To his right was a quiet strawberry blonde, who might have been Danish. Opposite was the Chinese girl, the Egyptian Danni and Katarina. Irma Bunt sat down last at the head of the table.

“I feel like one of those comic actors whose been cast in a film set in a girl’s school. You know, like St Trinian’s or something or other.”

Ruby laughed. It was a low, almost dirty sound that came from deep in her throat. “Oh God no! Not nearly so naughty! Those awful girls! How can you say that?”

“Just a thought.”

There was a splendid array of cut glass, cutlery and candelabras on display. The napkins were all stitched with the emblem of the old Piz Gloria sports club. The wine, a Swiss Blauburgunder, was already open on the table. Bond did the noble thing and offered to pour.

“I have ordered you a Steak Piz Gloria,” stated Irma Bunt. “I hope you enjoy it.”

“I’m sure I will.”

The waiters moved forward with plates of food. Bond’s steak looked to be medium rare and came with a cracked pepper sauce. He accepted some potatoes and green salad to accompany it. Beside him he saw the Danish girl, Helene, with a plate almost over loaded with wafer thin cuts of cold pork. Ruby was presented with grilled chicken, two whole drumsticks and what looked like a whole breast. Although curious he didn’t make any comment.

Joanna, from the other table called over in her cut glass English accent. “Will you be staying for Christmas, Sir Hilary?”

“Well, I might be...” started Bond who was raising his eyebrows at the heap of potatoes on Katarina’s plate; and this before the vegetables had been served to her.

“Because we’re having a party on Christmas Eve; it’ll be our last day before we go.”

“That sort of thing’s not quite my line,” replied Bond hesitantly.

Ruby picked up a drumstick with her fingers and ravenously bit into it.

“Hmm, delicious,” she cooed through a full mouth. “I used to hate chicken. They used to make me break out. It was all over. You’d be surprised where.”

The girl gave that naughty chuckle, the same one as before, and nudged Bond with an elbow. She was tearing at the soft white flesh, her teeth breaking into a happy smile as she did so. For an instant he had memories of the scene in the movie *Tom Jones*, where Finney and Redman pornographically ate their food. Not so well brought up then, Ruby, darling, huffed Bond to himself.

Katarina leaned forward again, her expression intense with pleasure. “Potatoes did that to me too! Now I adore them!”

Irma Bunt raised a controlling hand. “No medical histories, girls, please.”

As the girl’s returned to their meals, Bond guessed where the Count’s research was focussed: food

allergies. The Chinese girl was tucking into a mountain of rice; Danni, the Egyptian, had not just one but three corn cobs. He wondered what the other girls were eating.

The gruff notes of the Fraulein jabbed at his thoughts. "Now, girls, I am sure Sir Hilary would like to tell us all about the famous College of Arms in London."

There was much agreement. Bond feigned reluctance. Eventually he relented, deciding it was exactly the opportunity he needed to lull the fat woman away from her suspicions. He remembered to make his explanations long winded and monotone. Irma Bunt's false probity concerned him. He knew the sly bitch was crafty, that she really did appear to hear and see everything. If he wanted to gain her confidence, he had, for the next half hour or so at least, to convince as Sir Hilary Bray, Baronet.

"Well, the Herald's College, or the College of Arms, isn't an educational establishment, of course. It comprises thirteen members of the Queen's or King's royal household, appointed by the sovereign to oversee armorial, genealogical and ceremonial matters. The thirteen members are divided into three categories: King's, Herald's and Pursuivants. Our titles and offices are of great antiquity, for instance the first Clarence King of Arms was created in 1334..."

Bond was paraphrasing from some of the books he'd read. The effect was almost soporific; as dessert and then coffee came and went and he kept up the dull rhetoric, some of the girls lapsed into a doze. Through the windows, the fluttering flotilla of lights which represented Murren far off in the depth of the valley, came around a second time and Bond realised he'd been talking for over an hour. He heard rustles of stretching limbs, yawns. The only people maintaining full interest were Ruby, Katarina and the invigilate Irma Bunt. The young blonde stopped him several times asking for explanations to some of the obscure heraldic terms. Bond liked that because it allowed him to ramble off on a tangent. It also meant he got to stare into her big, innocent looking eyes.

"When we authorise a Coat of Arms, it can include all sorts of wonderful images: crescent moons, portcullis, beasts couchant and rampant, bars, bezants..."

"Excuse me, please," interrupted Katarina again. "What are bezants?"

"Gold balls," emphasised Bond.

The girl enjoyed the answer. She grinned, picked a large grape from the fruit bowl and popped it seductively between her teeth.

"I brought an illustrated book on the subject," continued Bond affably. "There's a picture of my own Coat of Arms, which includes four of them, if you'd care to see them."

There were some girlish giggles. St. Trinian's indeed. That was a bit naughty, James.

"I'd love to," said Ruby, fixing him with a long stare, the chuckle rising. "I'm in room..."

"No!" ordered Irma Bunt. The word descended like an axe. "Sir Hilary will give the book to me and I will pass it to everyone in turn."

Recognising her manner had been unduly sharp, she was next more conciliatory. "It is fairer like that,

yes?"

Bond wasn't about to argue. "Of course, if you say so, Fraulein."

He was ready to carry on dictating when he felt Ruby quite deliberately brush against his side. She made out she was a little tipsy and for once, Irma Bunt seemed to miss the obvious. The girl's hand snaked under the table and took hold of the hem of the kilt. Someone asked him a question, but he didn't catch it, only his name.

"Sorry, I..."

He felt the kilt being drawn back. Involuntarily, his shoulders went rigid. Something cool grazed his skin, making the hair on his leg stand on end. His expression must have turned anxious. He thanked God for the heavy sporran over his lap. Whatever touched him was about the size of a bullet. Deftly, the girl moved it swiftly across the inside of his thigh, then removed her hand and repositioned his kilt. Finally Ruby straightened her own posture, receiving a glare from Katarina's innocent girlish eyes opposite.

"Is anything the matter, Sir Hilary?" asked Irma Bunt.

"Just a slight stiffness coming on."

At that moment Grunther appeared and whispered something to the matron.

"Sir Hilary, I have good news," she declared. "The Count wishes to see you now. Grunther will escort you."

"Oh, thank you," intoned Bond. "Please excuse me, ladies."

He stood up and cast a glance around the fresh pretty faces at his table. "It's been a pleasure."

Grunther carried with him a heavy overcoat and he insisted on helping Bond into it. There was a minor play of misunderstanding as Bond asked why it was necessary. Finally accepting the coat, he turned to face the twelve gorgeous girls and gave a little bow.

"May all your allergies be swiftly cured."

As he left he heard Joanna's clipped Home Counties voice say: "Of course, I know what he's allergic too."

Perfect, he thought. Bond was quite pleased with himself. Two or three of the girls had shown an almost obscene inclination to tease poor addled Sir Hilary Bray. If he could manage to get them alone, he might be able to quiz them closely. His boring speech over dinner had certainly convinced most of the girls he was as dull as ditch water. It also seemed to placate the Bunt woman, possibly lowering her line of defence.

They took the staff only elevator down to the sixth level. Bond noted this lift had doors on both sides. The drop from level five seemed almost twice as long as the others. There was no passage on

this floor. Instead Bond stepped onto a damp iron walkway. Now he knew why he needed the jacket. Unlike the top floors, which sat on or around the summit of the Schilthorn, the sixth level was hollowed out from the frozen mountain itself. Bond was standing in a cold, gloomy cave.

**Twelve:  
Count de Blofeld?**

The cave rang with their twin footsteps. It was fiendishly cold, there was even a slight mist swirling at Bond's ankles. The walkway stretched over a deep fissure in the rock and re-entered the mountain some twenty yards away. A steel panel automatically slid back as they approached.

The small white lobby was spotlessly clean. Ahead of them was a pair of double doors, made from thick glass, and beyond that Bond could see a short corridor, one as anodyne as the passages upstairs. As soon as the outside door closed a pulsating purple light switched on and a stream of vapour hissed from vents the ceiling. Bond told himself not to panic. Grunther was still with him. There would no purpose in SPECTRE killing one of its own.

"Antiseptics," the burly man said.

After the dowsing, Grunther led Bond down the corridor. There were two entrances set in the left hand wall, both closed, but Grunther ignored these, leading Bond to the very end, where another pair of glass doors led into a large dim office. The only light penetrated through a single pane of toughened glass that overlooked a brightly lit hall the function of which Bond could only describe as a laboratory.

Grunther helped Bond from his coat. The office was warm, almost unbearably so, as if the life was being sucked out of the air. A big desk was set to one side, facing the window, and behind it was a display cabinet, on which were arranged skiing trophies and books. Closer to the door was a small lounge area including the now almost obligatory leather couch. The far wall was taken up with three glass doors, only one of which was open. This room seemed to contain what looked like a recording studio, including a complicated mixing desk.

While Grunther hung his coat, Bond turned to the huge window. There were at least half a dozen scientists or technicians in the lab, each one clad in ankle length white coats, skull caps and skin tight plastic gloves. They even had face masks clasped over their noses and mouths. The men seemed to be preparing potions, boiling or heating natural products to form new compounds. There were test tubes full of clear liquids lined in holding trays. To one side Bond saw an array of exotic plants, orchids and fungi. There was also a large sealed cabinet containing over two dozen smaller plastic boxes, each one inhabited by what appeared to be insects.

There was a low hiss.

Behind the third glass door the purple haze had come on. A figure was silhouetted in violet. He was removing his safety clothes. The glass doors swung open and a bald headed man stepped into the room.

He was still wearing the protective gown and Grunther untied the laces.

"Good evening, Sir Hilary."

The voice was deep and friendly. It was cultured and calm and showed the tiny trace of an accent Bond couldn't place.

"Good evening."

Free of the gown, the man extended his hand.

"I am Count Balthazar de Bleuchamp."

Bond shook the hand. The grip was firm, squat and rough, without the sort of fingers used to delicate scientific work. The body behind it was equally powerful. The shoulders were straight, leading to muscular arms and an upper torso that was broad and defined. The Count looked after himself, perhaps with the skiing, which might explain the trophies. He was pale of complexion, as if he didn't see the sun much. The mouth was generous, the lips slightly large and cumbersome. Bond wondered if the accent wasn't actually caused by the Count attempting to stop a lisp. He had an air of grace and authority about him.

Bond had to remind himself not to think of the man as the Count. The evidence, while not conclusive, had been very strong. Bond had been certain of it. Yet this man looked nothing like the description offered by the French informant. Where was the man who weighed a massive twenty stones, was blessed with scraggy red hair and flat ear lobes? There were no lobes on this man. There wasn't even the flabby wasted skin you'd expect from sudden dieting. But there was something about the Count, something in his countenance which hinted at hidden behaviours. The strong face and hands suggested coiled anger and violence waiting to be unfurled.

"If you'll forgive me," started Bond, not wishing to begin the conversation on the back foot, "that's what I'm here to find out."

"To confirm, Sir Hilary," the Count insisted, although it was a good natured answer. "There can be no doubt about the truth."

Grunther helped the Count into a high collared tunic, one which matched his trousers. He buttoned it almost to the top. The Count motioned to the chair facing the desk and took his own seat. "Please sit down."

"If there were no doubts," offered Bond, "I'm sure the College of Arms would not have needed to send me."

"Well, since you are here," continued the Count, unphased, "I'll make everything very plain to you."

The Count pressed a switch on his desk and the office lights came on. The room was suddenly bright and airy. Bond could see that the furnishings, which he thought were dark, were all pine and brass and pale leather. However there was something dark in the room, something the Count had not been able to change. Bond stared at the firm, unwavering face. The lips had bent into what passed for a sublime smile. But above them the two black hearts danced. The dark raven eyes stared at Bond, attacking him, goading him to react. It was only a single congruence; for Bond it was evidence enough. He must be staring into the eyes of Ernst Stavro Blofeld.

The voice continued effortlessly on. "To begin with I was born without earlobes. That is, of course, a well-known congenital distinction of de Bleuchamp ancestry, like the Hapsburg lip or the hawk nose of the Medici."

"Granted, but the fact you are of de Bleuchamp ancestry doesn't necessarily make you the reigning Count."

Bond offered one of the arguments the real Sir Hilary had told him to use. It clearly riled the Count or Blofeld or whoever he was. The next sentence was sharp, a statement not of simple of fact, but of a man's destiny.

"I feel it in my blood. I feel it in my bones."

"I'm afraid the College will require more concrete proofs."

Bond stayed calm, refusing to react and it appeared to have the desired effect. The Count sat back in his seat and spread his arms in a gesture of conciliation.

"And it shall have them. I have assembled all the relevant documents, title deeds, certificates of birth and death. They go back over several centuries and I'm certain you will find them more than acceptable. They will all be sent to your room for authentication. If there is anything else you may require, anything at all, you need only ask. I am anxious to have my claim ratified..."

The Count paused. Bond thought the eyes glittered as they studied the College representative in front of them, as if he saw something in Bond's demeanour which could be easily employed, manipulated, exploited. The words, when they came, meant little on their own, yet were loaded with emphasis.

"... whatever the cost."

Bond nodded. Yes. There was a touch of conspiracy about the Count's manner. Whatever the cost, he'd said. How had he obtained these documents, Bond wondered, through fair means or foul? Did the Count, did Blofeld, want Sir Hilary Bray to commit some indiscretion? No objections to the excessive fee, an over bearing welcome to Piz Gloria, and what else? Money? Or one of the girls perhaps?

"Are you quite comfortable here?"

The affable question caught him off guard. "Yes, very much," Bond chortled while he recovered himself; perhaps it was time for a little probing of his own. "But I'm a little puzzled by your remarkable clinic."

"Well, the methods of the great pioneers have often puzzled conventional minds," said the Count, a hint of condescension to his voice.

He's being deliberately rude, thought Bond. He really thinks I'm beneath him. Surely a real Count de Bleuchamp would show better courtesy?

"I have devised a permanent cure for allergies which depends on creating and holding an unusual and rather delicate psychological balance in my patients. That is why Piz Gloria is such a perfect location for my institute; it allows me to impose certain special and necessary conditions on the sick."

"I see," Bond stood up and crossed to the window. "And your laboratories?" he ventured.

"The cure is not entirely psychological, Sir Hilary. There are vaccines to be prepared which I must modify to suit each individual case."

Suddenly, there was sharpness in the restive tones. "Why are you interested in my medical research, Sir Hilary? It is far outside of your field of expertise, is it not?"

"Oh, quite, quite, but one always likes to show an interest in one's subject."

The Count came out from behind the desk and seemed to stalk across the floor. He stood next to Bond, a few inches shorter, but more imposing for it. Bond could almost sense the breath wheezing out of him into the hot stuffy room.

"There are many people interested in this facility, Sir Hilary. Do you have any other reason to be here? Do you have affiliations with the chemical companies?"

"Goodness me, no. Why?"

"Because there was a man, an Englishman, who followed you from Murren today. My carriage driver was very specific. This man took the cable car to the station below us and asked to visit Piz Gloria. Despite being informed he was mistaken, that this is now a private establishment, he insisted he wanted to reach the restaurant and sports club. My guards at the berg are very efficient and escorted him away, but he was a most tiresome man."

The twin pools of jet black aimed at Bond like the muzzles of guns. They searched him, scoured him and seemed to tear at his soul.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," stated Bond and turned back to the window. "Perhaps the club's advertising is out of date."

The Count hit a switch and a pair of red velvet curtains was pulled mechanically across the window. Bond was left staring at the deep thick pile. Shaun Campbell! It was bloody Shaun Campbell! Bond wanted to offer an expletive, to shout his anger. What the bloody hell was the idiot doing? He could cause all sorts of trouble if he didn't back off. Once again, Bond cursed himself. He should never have contacted Station Z after the business in Berne. It was nothing to do with Campbell; this was his baby and right now it was being thrown out, the whole thing, bath water, toys and a pram.

"There is no advertising," rasped the voice, full of menace and ire. "These indiscretions keep my staff far too occupied."

The Count seemed to recognise his change of tone. He took a moment to compose himself, breathing slowly. The effort, Bond saw, was huge.

"I must, as I'm sure you understand, remain cautious. You can see, Sir Hilary, I am a very busy man." The voice stayed clipped, sharp. "I may not be able to spare you as much time as you might wish."

This show might have intimidated the real Sir Hilary, but Bond was determined not to be easily shaken, not now he knew exactly where he stood.

"If you wish to be confirmed as the Count, you must give me some of your time. I'll need details of living relatives, your parents and grandparents, to trace all possible avenues of inheritance when I return to London."

The Count turned back towards his desk. "You will have all the documents you need, Sir Hilary, and you will find they answer all the questions."

"They can answer many questions, but not all," countered Bond. "It's most imperative that you assist me. In fact, I was hoping you could accompany me on a visit to Augsburg."

He said it quickly and the broad figure halted equally fast and spun around. The black eyes glinted. A hand went up to his throat and flipped shut the last button on the tunic.

"Augsburg?"

"The ancestral home of the de Bleuchamp family," explained Bond. "There are notable de Bleuchamp tombs in the cathedral and some important records in the city archives. My German isn't the best, I'm afraid, but with your specialist and personal knowledge..."

"That may not be convenient for some time," the voice cut in, edgy, impatient, "but I am determined my title shall be recognised. In any event, you may proceed with your preliminary research."

The Count de Blofeld, or whatever this manifestation of a human was, returned to his chair. Sitting, he crooked a finger to the waiting Grunther.

The henchman sauntered over and once more offered the overcoat. While Bond struggled into it he tried to sound affable again, but the atmosphere, despite the warm, bloated air, had become as frozen as that on the mountains.

"I'll be happy to start straight away."

There was nothing pleasant in the final response.

"Good evening, Sir Hilary."

### **Thirteen: Sir Hilary's Night Out**

The first thing Bond did when he made it back to his room was lift the hem of his kilt.

Inscribed on the inside of his thigh in bright pink lipstick was a large figure of eight. Bond smiled and went to the wash basin to wipe it clean. Cheeky lass!

Bond checked his watch. It was almost ten o'clock. He called for assistance and requested that Fraulein Bunt bring him the evidential documents immediately as he was keen to make a start on the Count's lineage.

The ugly face almost creased into a smile as she deposited with him three large foolscap expanding files, each one neatly tied with a string ribbon. Bond accepted them with as much grace as he could muster and a comment along the lines of this becoming a very exhausting evening.

Bond didn't really need the documents to commence work. He already had a basic outline of the recent de Bleuchamp generations stored in his memory, commencing from around the Napoleonic era, when the family moved from France to Bavaria. Sir Hilary Bray had already schooled him in how to map a family tree. Bond unrolled a quarter of the parchment, used small weights to flatten it, and set to work at one end of the scroll. The College had already completed the known history of the de Bleuchamp's working from the Norman Age and covering almost eight hundred years. The scroll was a maze of names and dates all printed in tiny hand writing. Within an hour Bond had already placed a succession of names exactly as he'd been instructed at College of Arms. Satisfied he at least had something to present in the morning if requested, Bond started to dig down the archives.

The certificates all looked genuine. Sir Hilary's depth of knowledge and experience might have picked up traces of forgery, but to Bond's unpractised eye, everything looked very real. Indeed he supposed some of the recent articles could well be so. The question for Bond was finding where the real de Bleuchamp births and deaths might stop and the forged ones start. Interestingly, Balthazar de Bleuchamp's own birth was recorded in Poland, not Germany at all. His mother was Polish and his father, Stefan, was German. Balthazar was born in 1914 and his father passed away in 1916, on the Eastern Front. His mother had died of tuberculosis in the mid-twenties, leaving the young Balthazar in the hands of, apparently a spinster aunt, who was also called de Bleuchamp. Bond found birth certificates for her relating to an obscure village in the Black Forest. Bond noted the details of her parents as well as Balthazar's and continued to trawl through the pile of documents. He read Prussian military records from the 1860s, accounting for the death of another de Bleuchamp and then another possible claimant disappeared as the line came to nought. The more Bond searched through the scrupulously organised records, the more he doubted the likelihood of what he read. There were simply too many dead-ends. As each avenue opened up, offering the possibility of another lost link to the present, it was closed down by tragedy or void of off spring. The lack of extended families proved frustrating. It was as though the de Bleuchamp's stopped having children in the late 1800s, healthy ones at least. There was too much death in this family for it to be entirely true.

Death, thought Bond; the Count wasn't killing living people, he was eradicating dead ones, ensuring

his own succession. But why? If he really was Blofeld, the recognition of this title seemed a pompous, obsequious personal gamble. Here was a man who had systematically engaged in blackmail and extortion on three continents, possibly more, for over seven years. Those operations were all about greed and ambition. There may have been something of the flamboyant about them too. Often SPECTRE had been used by foreign, aggressive governments as a front. Invariably they succeeded where enemy agents would have failed. Those plots were not instigated for personal recognition; they were all about creating massive wealth for the benefactor. Gaining a title would open doors on a world previously unknown to Blofeld, allow him to wallow in sartorial splendour, sit on his riches and retire from crime. Yes, the antidote to his trespasses: become part of the establishment and wave away the black heart of the past.

Bond shook his head. Like the documents in front of him, it didn't ring true. What else was a lie? Bond wondered. Well, there was something intriguing about the laboratory. Blofeld had been very protective of it. Bond's fairly innocuous questions had been treated with suspicion. The tale about Shaun Campbell, itself worrying, only served to highlight his paranoia. Yet the Bleuchamp Institute was a closely guarded secret; Bond, and Campbell, had found no mention of it in the Swiss registers. If the Swiss didn't know, or keep a record, of its existence, how had the chemical companies become aware? Perhaps, he thought, they hadn't and Bond was being spun a lie.

Bond wanted to look at the lab again, but that might have to wait until he received a second summons. What he could do was ingratiate himself with some of those girls and find out what this allergy treatment was all about. Bond took a long hard look at the blank door to his room. He did, after all, have somebody's room number. What would he say to Ruby if he made it to her suite? He couldn't tell the truth about Sir Hilary; he had to stay in character, and that meant playing the dull academic. He needed a key to unlock the girl's secrets. Bond's hands drifted over the thick illustrated copy of *Boutell's Heraldry*. The book! He'd take her the book and be his most charming. He might enact a little game, make her think she was attractive to him, tease her like she teased him. Yes, that was it. Nothing to it. He'd seduced women before when duty had called; there was no reason not to again.

For a moment his thoughts turned to Tracy. Well, that was unfortunate, but this wouldn't change the way he felt about her. Bond paused, not sure how he did feel about her. The only emotion he was experiencing was one he rarely suffered: guilt. He wrestled the pangs aside. Betrayal it was not. Whatever he did tonight had no bearing on his life with Tracy. She was not part of the career that was tied to him by an oath, by a gun and by an unshakable sense of duty. When he ceased to be On Her Majesty's Secret Service, Tracy could have everything in his life, but until then he had work to do.

And to do his job, Bond first needed to escape the confines of his cell, which to all purposes room number four was. He was holding an architect's rule, using the straight edge for marking the tree diagrams. It was very slim. Most automatic sliding doors were held in check by a series of magnets. The trick when forcing them was to break the magnetic field. Somewhere around the frame of the door, there had to be a magnet. Thoughtfully, Bond looked at the prisms gazing down from the ceiling. They might be cameras, but there was nothing for it; if he really was being watched he'd find out soon enough, then it would be time to spin a lie and hope for the best.

Bond walked across the room and slid the rule in the crack between door and frame, about a third of way up the opening edge. It sunk about three inches deep. Slowly he ran the rule up the frame. No

catch there. Quickly, he moved it across the top edge.

The crackle of static startled him.

Bond dropped the metal rule, his fingers tingling from the electric shock. So the door was magnetised by an electronic charge. Pressing the button outside would temporarily cut off the electricity and the door would slide open. When reactivated, the current would drag the door closed. All Bond had to do now was avoid another shock.

Bond looked among the assorted materials on the desk. He needed something to insulate the rule, something non-conductive. Like rubber. Bond picked up the large eraser he'd been using. Folding it in half, he split it and inserted the rule between the two segments. To hold it in place he squeezed the eraser between the prongs of a stiff bulldog clip. He almost forgot to pick up the copy of *Boutell's*.

Returning to the door, Bond listened, ensuring he could hear nothing in the passage outside. It was almost midnight. Even the guards had to have some sleep, he reasoned. And so should Sir Hilary Bray. Thinking of the cameras again, he turned off the light. Satisfied Bond slid the rule around the frame, mentally preparing himself for another jolt of electricity. It didn't come. Instead there was a click and the door skated open.

Bond checked the corridor, still listening. Not a sound. He pressed the external button and the door slid shut. Quickly he walked down the passage, turned right and then left. The door with an 8 on it was tucked in a corner. He activated the switch and the door slid open. Bond stepped inside, reached for the switch and activated it, withdrawing his hand before the door hissed shut.

The room was almost in total darkness. The only light came from the fire that flickered energetically in one corner, throwing orange shadows across the walls. Ruby's room had virtually the same layout as his. The king size bed stretched into the middle of the floor. Bond could see the girl, laid on her front, dozing. A ruffled sheet was strewn haphazardly across her legs. The nude body looked full, fleshy, well fed. It's all the chicken, thought Bond.

Ruby's head turned towards him.

"Sir Hilary," she said. Surprise and pleasure echoed in her lilting, teasing voice.

"I've brought you the book," whispered Bond.

She sat up, one arm covering her swelling breasts, the other pulling the sheet around her waist to cover her intimate self.

"The illustrated book?" she asked, reaching for the bedside lamp.

Bond caught her hand. "No, don't turn it on."

"But I want to see the pictures."

Bond sat on the edge of the bed. He put down the heavy book. Gently he touched her shoulders,

stroking the warm skin with his fingertips. "But you're a picture yourself and twice as lovely in the firelight."

He bent his head and kissed her lightly on the lips. Ruby giggled.

"Do that again."

"Do you think I should? I'm really quite nervous. Doesn't the Count have cameras or something in these rooms? I don't want to upset Fraulein Bunt."

"Cameras?" Ruby sounded appalled. "No! Don't be silly. If they did us girls would be in terrible trouble already. We're always visiting each other's rooms. You know, like at St Trinian's. I'm sure Fraulein Bunt would have had a right word if they saw us."

She giggled again, the naughty, throaty laugh, and the arm dropped from across her chest. "Unless they like what they see."

"You're incorrigible!"

"And you're funny for pretending not to like girls."

"I don't usually, but you're not usual. That lipstick was an inspiration and so are you."

Bond kissed her again, properly this time and felt her swoon underneath him. He rested her back on the pillows and stood up, taking his time to undress. As the kilt dropped to the floor, exposing him, the girl whooped with joy and laughed: "So it's true!"

Almost an hour later Bond lay still, the girl snuggled in the crook of his arm. The book had been forgotten in the pleasure they took with each other's bodies. Bond found Ruby to be a more than willing partner, fun and uninhibited. She laughed a lot during the loving and seemed to find something humorous in every act, as if it was all one jolly affair.

"I've never made love to a Baronet before," she said, wriggling against him.

"Well, there aren't so many of us about," replied Bond. He'd been struggling for an opening into a more serious conversation, but Ruby kept distracting him. "Especially not in the Swiss Alps. Which reminds me, how exactly did you get here? Where are you from?"

"I'm from Lancashire, can't you tell? Morecambe Bay actually," she reached under the sheet and gave him a cheeky tug. "Ruby Bartlett's the name."

Bond removed her itchy hands. "And you're here, Ruby, because?"

"Well, I used to have this awful allergy about chickens. My family's got a chicken farm, you see, and every time I had to do something on it, I nearly died. I saw lots of specialists until finally, early this year I met one doctor who said he knew of this Swiss clinic where they cured you for free because they were researching at the same time. Well, this specialist had me meet Fraulein Bunt in London and she said I had a very interesting case."

The girl said the last three words with some pride.

“How right she was.” Bond tickled her belly and Ruby laughed, rolling onto him and kissing him.

“How long have you been here, Ruby?”

“Six weeks,” she mumbled, in between kisses.

Bond was starting to lose control when all at once the room filled with a low monotone sound. It seemed to generate from everywhere, out of the walls and the floor and the ceiling at the same time.

Ruby instantly shook herself free from Bond’s embrace.

“No,” she said firmly. “We have to stop. It’s all part of the cure. I need to concentrate.”

Bond was about to say something when the room was filled with an array of soft colours, swirling, shifting and vibrating around the room. Looking up, he saw the four prisms spinning, sending arcs of light around the walls. Underneath the drone, Bond detected new sounds, first only with a gentle ringing, but then a low thump, like the beat of a heart, a hypnotic pulse. Ruby had turned onto her back, oblivious to her nudity, and begun to breathe in long shallow breaths. Her eyes had closed. As Bond watched, her hands, which had been clasped over her stomach, relaxed and fell by her sides. It was some form of deep hypnosis. Ruby was being mesmerised.

The voice that broke into the room erupted from out of the air. It was calm and soothing, but unmistakably contained the deep, almost paralysing menace of the Count.

“Blofeld,” Bond hissed to himself.

“You are going to sleep. You are tired and your limbs feel like lead. Your breathing is soft and shallow. Your eyelids are heavy. Your whole body is heavy and tired. You are slipping away. You are slipping into the soft bed. The bed is as soft and downy as a nest. You are sleeping in a soft and downy nest for fluffy white hens.”

Bond shook Ruby by the shoulder, but she was gone, completely lost in a dreamy, trance like state.

“Do you remember when you first came here,” continued the voice. “How you hated chickens, how you were sick when you even saw one, how your childhood was ruined by chickens and hens. But I have taken you away from all that. I have shown you how foolish your fears are. I have shown you how to love chickens, how to care for them, how to tend to their fluffy white feathers. You don’t want any harm to come to the chickens. You want to make them happy. And you will make them happy. Many thousands and millions of chickens will be happy because of you and how much you love them. Your cure will soon be over.”

Bond shook the girl again while the voice droned on.

“Ruby – wake up!”

The girl moaned. Vaguely she reached out for him. "You do like me don't you?"

"Ruby," repeated Bond. He felt for her pulse. It was pumping steadily, matching the beat of the droning electronic chord. Her face was simpering, drifting into a land of dreams surrounded by a feather bed of chickens.

"You have learnt many things during the cure. There is one more thing I need you to learn. Many of your chickens will fall sick and I need you to learn of a very special cure. This cure will keep your chickens healthy and happy. It is a great secret and no one must know of it except you. I will tell you how to cure the chickens. I will tell you when to cure the chickens. And after you have cured them, you will forget I ever told you. It will be your secret alone. You must not tell anyone of the secret – ever."

Bond had heard enough. The long drooling voice was even making him drowsy. Leaving the stupefied girl, he dressed and headed for the door, using his escape tool once more. He was glad to leave the multicoloured dreamland behind. Dreamland or nightmare? Bond hurried down the corridor.

Deep hypnosis. Bond didn't know much about the subject. Didn't it rely on the subconscious asserting itself over the conscious, usually at the point of sleep, when the mind is at its least resistant? Those words, those instructions the voice offered would work their way deep into Ruby's mind, bury themselves, hide themselves, until they were awakened by a trigger mechanism, like a word, a sound or a date. Bond shuddered. What was the purpose? What was this secret cure for chickens?

He activated the switch on his own room and closed the door behind him. Crossing the floor he tossed his escape tool on the desk and entered the wet room, turning on the shaving lamp. There was a smudge of pink lipstick on his cheek, the same colour as had earlier been imprinted on his thigh.

"Hilary, you old devil," Bond chuckled as he wiped the rouge away. All in all, quite a worthwhile night.

He switched off the lamp.

There was a second click immediately afterwards.

Hesitantly, Bond stepped back into the main body of the suite.

Silhouetted in the amber haze of the fire light was Katarina. She stood, one foot daintily on the other, knee bent, coy. She wore only a tiny light blue negligee which was so sheer as to be see-through. The young slender body was hardly covered. It looked supple and inviting. Her small breasts were taut, upright, the little pink nipples stuck through the flimsy material. Lower down a tempting triangle of golden fleece peeked from under the hem of satin.

"It is me, yes," stated the girl nervously.

"Undeniably, yes," Bond said, his ardour rising. He tried to force his eyes away, tried to think of

something other than her flagrant nudity. "How did you get out of your room?"

The top teeth bit down on the bottom lip and shyly, Katarina waved a thin splinter of serrated wood.

"With a finger nail file; it's so easy."

"I wouldn't know."

"Oh, the girls do it all the time." She smiled at him, playful all of a sudden, her confidence returning. "I came to see the book; the pictures, yes."

"Yes," said Bond animatedly. "Now, where did I put it? I had it a few minutes ago."

Bond feigned a search. He already knew exactly where the hefty tome was. It was down the corridor in room number eight. He was trying to think of an excuse, perhaps to say he'd given it to Fraulein Bunt, when the girl's warm body brushed his sleeve.

"Perhaps if we turn on the light," said Katarina. She was stretching for the bedside lamp. He could smell Givenchy. It brought back memories of long summers, freshly cut hay and young lost love affairs.

Bond grasped her hand lightly and she gasped.

"No, don't turn it on, Katarina," he soothed. "Hasn't anyone told you, you're a picture yourself, and twice as lovely in the firelight."

If it works once, thought Bond, settling the slim body onto the edge of the bed. One of her legs swung loose tickling his ankle. Her hand clutched urgently at his arm, not believing what she had heard him say. Bond felt his body stirring, intoxicated by the scent of the girl's youth and beauty.

"But, Sir Hilary, I think, you do not like girls."

"Usually I don't, but you're not usual," whispered Bond, running his hand down her blushing cheek. "Coming into my room like that was an inspiration and so are you."

And you'll need to be, by God, thought Bond. Their lips met in a long, heated kiss. Bond released the bow on the back of her tiny gown and the flimsy material fell off her shoulders.

"I want to know everything about you," he murmured nuzzling at her ear.

Katarina's arm came behind his head and pulled him towards her naked vibrant body.

"We can talk about me," she breathed through another lingering kiss, "in the morning."

## **Fourteen: Nightmare Land**

Bond did manage a couple of hours sleep. He shuffled Katarina out of his room a little after four in the morning. His eyes were shut, but his mind, even in sleep, was suffering with the puzzles Piz Gloria was slowly revealing. Bond didn't like the look or the feel of the place one iota. The strange laboratory had alerted him first, but the even stranger scene he'd witnessed in room 8, the inducement of a trancelike sleep on a girl through deep hypnosis, worried him even more. Through some innocent questions about the Count's famous 'cure,' Katarina confirmed that what he'd seem Ruby submit to was not unique. Each of the girls had to undergo the mesmeric therapy three times a day. So much for undisturbed rest; an unhealthy nightmare was more like it.

Bond woke at six, showered and used the call buttons to order breakfast in his room. He said he wanted to continue his research, which was partly true, for he was keen to inspect the title deeds once more. He also didn't fancy bumping into Ruby and Katarina at close quarters, at least not together, and certainly not over the breakfast table.

He dressed in the tweeds he'd arrived in and, having consumed a plate of scrambled eggs and a rack of toast, he settled back at his desk to review the documents again and ponder his next course of action.

The morning wore on and Bond started to tire. It wasn't through lack of sleep. He was used to grabbing short invigorating naps when in the field. No, what wore him was the atmosphere in the room. Warm and cloying. He wondered if that too was set specifically to incur tiredness. He called to have the air conditioning adjusted and was informed, with many bowing apologies, that the Count insisted it was always left at a specific temperature. Bond huffed, as Sir Hilary Bray might, and silently ticked the box which said his judgement had been correct.

"Where is Fraulein Bunt? Perhaps she can influence the Count?"

The Fraulein was attending to daily business, but would be entertaining the patients with a little winter sport from ten o'clock. Bond thanked the guard, whose rough English was barely interpretable. It was Christmas Eve and Bond had about twenty four more hours on top of this mountain; twenty four hours to pretend the Count was a legitimate heir; twenty four hours to find the proof he was nothing of the sort. The key had to be with the hypnotised girls. Bond made up his mind. Sir Hilary would have to forge an even deeper alliance with either Ruby or Katarina. He needed the full names and home towns of the ten other girls. At the very least they could all be tracked down and, if needs be, isolated until the mesmeric imprint had been discovered and removed. It was too much, considered Bond, to believe this elaborate medical centre was all to serve the greater good of humanity.

The air outside was fresh and biting cold, contrasting with the bright warm sun, which glowed golden and radiant over the Alpine peaks. Bond sucked in the thin oxygen, relieved to escape the torpor inside. He'd pulled on his jacket, Ghillie hat and big overcoat and, comfortably warm, was watching the cable car gondola make its descent down the mountainside.

Bond noted with some interest that the gondola made a stop at a pinion tower half way between Piz Gloria and the berg. The steepness of the ascent suggested this was an important safety measure. After two or three minutes, the blue metal box started the second stage of its journey. He set the clear spectacles on his nose and pretended to admire the view. Bond had just observed the work of two staff at the cable station. They had been off loading wooden crates each one marked 'De Bleuchamp Institute – Piz Gloria' and featuring the universal symbol for glass. He wondered when the car would next be back. Perhaps tonight to collect the girls or maybe to bring up provisions; hadn't the posh girl, Joanna, mentioned something about a farewell party?

A guard, his HK-MP5 hooked over his shoulder, walked past and inspected him with a long laconic gaze. Bond made a fuss of lighting his pipe, pulled on his gloves and shoved his hands deep into his pockets.

Shrieks of girlish laughter touched his ears. Feigning surprise, and deciding now was an appropriate moment to escape the silence of the guard, Bond walked along the wide balcony to an iron staircase that ascended to the terrace above. There, etched into the rooftop that led towards the helipad, was marked a 150 foot curling sheet.

The huddle of youthful bodies surrounded the near end. Large flat granite discs, called stones, each about a foot in diameter, were spread out at their feet. A girl, Bond couldn't see which, hefted a stone in her hand and, crouching over, launched it gently down the ice. Irma Bunt was marshalling two of the others, the red head Helene and the Chinese, and they enthusiastically swept the ice with their curling brooms easing the stone towards its target, a single red skittle set in the centre of the helipad.

Next to the girls a trestle table had been erected, covered with a cloth and was laden with a silver urn smelling of cinnamon, lots of hefty tumblers and plates stacked with doughnuts. Bond walked gingerly over to the table fearing his shoes would slip on the glassy frozen rooftop. He poured himself a ladle of gluhwein. It was hot and very sweet.

Bond watched the excitable girls, all pretty colours and mufflers. Under the laughter he thought he heard shouting from the far extreme of the summit. He trudged to the railing and peered over. Two guards were stepping across the plateau, ankle deep in snow, guns at the ready. They were gesturing and hailing at somebody. Bond caught the words "Private – Stop!" in several languages, until they were answered in English.

Bond's interest was disturbed by Irma Bunt, who waddled towards him.

"Sir Hilary."

"Good morning."

"This morning we are entertaining the girls." The rough voice barked with no hint it was truly entertaining. "It is their last day with us, Sir Hilary. Dinner will be early tonight, for the girls must leave on time."

"Oh, of course."

"Perhaps later you will join us in a little party?" The harridan's mouth twitched. "You can bring your picture book."

"Perhaps." Bond almost choked. Did she know? Was there a tiny glint of recognition in those old hag's eyes? He gave a contemplative smile. Some of the girls had made their way across to him. He caught Ruby's eye. "I am really rather busy."

The girl winked at him. "Oh do come, Sir Hilary. We'll make it fun."

"I'll do my best."

"Good," continued Irma Bunt, seemingly oblivious to the flirtation. "Your stiffness of last night, it is all gone, yes?"

Ruby gave him a cheeky smile. Behind her shoulder, Bond saw the round eyes of Katarina lighting up as she saw him.

"For the time being, I think," he replied.

"Then come and do curling with us, Sir Hilary," suggested Irma Bunt.

"Won't that be frightfully energetic?"

Katarina slid towards him, skating on the soles of her feet, and clasped hold of his arm. "Oh, no, not at all," she cooed. "Come on, let me teach you."

Bond allowed himself to be dragged towards the curling sheet. Bond recollected that someone had titled curling 'chess on ice.' But for once the strategy and skill involved in a past time didn't concern him. Bond wanted only to ensure he still appeared a social novice.

While two or three other girls continued to play, Katarina gave him a quick account of how to launch a stone, how to turn the handle so the granite disc spun on its running surface. Bond acted a trifle dumb, but picked out a stone, gripping it by the bolted handle. He was surprised at how easily it slid over the ice.

"Come on, Sir Hilary!" shouted someone.

"We expect great things from you," cried another.

Bond crouched and then pushed forward. The stone spun along the ice almost dragging Bond with it. Taken off guard, he lost balance, let go and tumbled onto the ice. There was some laughter and consoling words.

Ruby was first to him, pulling him to his feet. She escorted him to one side and offered him his half-drunk glass of gluhwein.

"Don't worry, Hilary," she whispered. "I've still got your book. I hid it in my clothes draw."

“Oh, good girl, we don’t want the evil dragon finding it. When can I get it back?”

“After dinner?”

“All right, eight o’clock,” said Bond. “I wanted to see you before you went anyway.”

“Ooh, Hilary, you are naughty.”

The girl went into fits of giggles, broken by the grating tones of Fraulein Bunt, who insisted it was Ruby’s turn to throw a stone.

A new sound cut through the air. It was the Count, dressed in a heavy duffle coat, a thick lamb’s wool Persian dress cap covering his bald head. He carried a filter-less cigarette between two fingers which he brought to his lips with the whole of his hand, covering his mouth and chin as he tasted the tobacco.

“Good morning, ladies,” he bellowed over the twittering shrill voices and received a chorus of cheerful hellos.

Bond felt it polite to walk over.

“Ah, good morning, Sir Hilary,” the Count saw him coming. There was no trace of menace from the night before. In fact, Bond thought he sounded in fine fettle. “And how is your research?”

“Riveting and very promising,” replied Bond. He was about to continue when an Englishman’s angry tones rang through the air, distracting the Count.

“I’ve never heard anything so ridiculous in all my life,” said the man, whose words were laced with a strong clipped accent, as if he’d spent several years in the army. “Since when has climbing been a criminal offence?”

“Excuse me one moment,” the Count raised his cigarette hand to Bond and walked across to the iron railings. He stared down at the plateau below. When he spoke it was with both annoyance and authority. “Piz Gloria, Sir, is private property.”

“The whole bloody alp?” retorted the angry man. “Don’t be ridiculous!”

“There are many signs, Sir,” continued the Count, “and you were warned yesterday by my staff at the cable car station.”

Bond caught the harsh school madam tones of Irma Bunt: “Sir Hilary, it is your turn I think.”

“Oh, no, Fraulein,” Bond answered, walking slowly over to the girls, half an ear on the shouting match developing to his right. “I’ve had one throw. Made quite a mess of it, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, that doesn’t count.” She was almost playful. “You can throw again.”

Backed by the encouragement of the girls, Bond offered a half-hearted smile. “Well, that’s very civil

of you.”

Bond picked out a stone, concentrated and sent it spinning and sliding along the ice. It came to rest a few inches from the skittle and the throw received a round of applause. Bond acted as if he didn't care, stuck his pipe in his mouth and retreated back towards the railings.

“That doesn't entitle these goons to man handle me and steal my equipment!” shouted the man.  
“Who the hell are you anyway?”

“I am the Director of this institute,” replied the Count firmly. “You will be sent down by cable car and you will refrain from troubling us again.”

“What about all my clobber, my belongings?”

“They will be sent down later, after we have inspected them.”

“But they're mine damn it!”

Bond stood right up to the rail and peered down. It was just as he suspected. The over adventurous climber was Shaun Campbell. His face was a mixture of annoyance and fear. Bond almost froze. Instead he removed the pipe, hoping to cover his face. It was too late. Campbell shot him one long glance. For a brief moment Bond thought he was going to say something, but instead it was the Count who broke the silence.

“We have certain rules which must be observed.”

“The authorities will hear about this!” shouted Campbell as he was bundled towards the long tunnel stairway.

“Good day, Sir,” finalised the Count and turned aside.

Bond watched his colleague go. What the bloody hell was going to happen now? Was Campbell really going to be sent back down in the cable car? He doubted it. If there was any truth in all that rubbish about spies and chemical companies Bond was certain the clinic had its own form of justice. Bond began to feel distinctly uneasy. How long could Shaun Campbell hold out? If his training was good he might last a few hours maybe as many as ten or twelve, offering the merest giblets of information, after that, you couldn't tell. Everything depended on what method of questioning the Count might purvey. Whatever happened, Bond felt his cover being torn apart. Time was running distinctly short. He had to hope Campbell didn't know anything, or could hide it, or at the very least made it all sound so ridiculous Bond could pass it off as a bizarre case of mistaken identity. Whatever it was, he had to move fast. Bond's immediate concern was not to be perturbed by the interruption.

“Director,” he started, edging forward, “or Count as I think I can now safely safe.”

“Yes,” the one word spoke volumes. The tight, straight faced, thick lipped smile suddenly looked grotesquely serene, as if the Count had never doubted anything for a second.

“I thought I might take the afternoon off; perhaps do some Christmas shopping, things for the nieces

and nephews, you know." It was the best excuse Bond could think of. "So if you're sending the cable car down I'd..."

"But you've already had the morning off, Sir Hilary."

"A brief respite," countered Bond. "I had to get some fresh air. Your ancestors are very hard work."

"And the College of Arms is being very well paid."

"Well, if you put it like that."

"I do put it like that."

"In that case, let me show you what I've achieved and we can plan this trip to Augsburg and finalise the certificates and title deeds formally."

Bond was clutching desperately at straws. He didn't want to remain on this mountain any longer than he had to. Half his mind was with Shaun Campbell, being dragged down the tunnel by the burly, over-zealous guards.

"Not over Christmas, Sir Hilary." The Count could hardly have sounded more charming. "The archives will be closed, would they not?"

The sickly smile passed over the Count's lips again and the black eyes stared long and hard into Bond's.

"I'm sorry, Sir Hilary, I also now have important business to attend to."

The Count turned around and followed his guards down the stairway. Bond watched the dark figure for a few seconds. There was no need for the phrase 'important business' to be spelled out. Bond knew exactly what the Count was going to attend to.

He downed the glass of warm spiced wine and was about to make his way back to his suite, when the curling game began to break up.

"Come now, girls, it is time for your massage," called Irma Bunt. "That's enough curling for today."

Katarina was one of the last to leave. As she sloped past Bond, a green mitten dropped to the ground. Bond bent to pick it up and their heads almost collided.

"I must see you tonight," the young girl said urgently. Traces of worry were etched across her brow.

"Nine o'clock."

Bond handed her the glove. That was interesting. What had she got to be worried about? Bond's stomach started to churn. Had his night out been detected? Had the girls been wrong about the lack of surveillance? It certainly wasn't true today. Everywhere he looked, Bond now felt under observation. The guard on the balcony, the waiter who brought him breakfast, Irma Bunt's witch's

eye, Blofeld's tinker's stare, even the girls and the bright gold disc of the winter sun seemed to pry into his world. Bond pulled up his collar and trudged after the melee of bodies.

Safely ensconced back in his room, he set to work preparing an escape kit. He took out his warmest most pliable clothes, the finger nail file Katarina had happily left him and his heavy climbing shoes. He selected a few of the documents to take with him, which he hoped could be proved as forgeries. Lastly he laid out the only things he had for weapons: a razor blade, two pens and the twelve inch straight edged rule. It wasn't much. Ideally, if he wanted to escape, he'd prefer to stowaway on the cable car, but that was manned and rarely made the journey to the berg. The alternative and quickest route was probably to ski away. He knew where the institute kept its equipment, having seen the store room earlier, but getting there would be a problem as a guard was always seated at the reception desk. The final probable was to climb down. Bond hadn't kept up his mountaineering skills and to add to his lack of confidence, he'd have to descend at night time to avoid detection. He wasn't convinced he'd make it. Yet climbing might be his only viable choice.

There was another option. He could simply sit it out and wait for the Count to approach him, to meet him genuinely, face to face. Campbell might not even talk. He might even have been sent down in the cable car, although Bond doubted it. If he waited, reasoned Bond, despite the danger, he might be given an opportunity to attack and kill the Count, kill Blofeld, head on. It would be a suicidal risk, but it would terminate SPECTRE in one swipe. The idea appealed. There was only one doubt that crept into Bond's mind: Tracy.

If he died here on this mountain top, for whatever reason, however noble, would she ever forgive him? Could she live without him? Bond didn't know the answer. The tragedy of her life still lived in his thoughts. When he remembered her face, her touch, her gay gentle laughter, his spirits lifted. He wanted to see her again. He knew she wanted it also. Tracy had taken his advice, and her father's love, and was attending sessions at the Kommer Clinique close to Nice, in an attempt to understand and restructure her life. Therapy only went so far. Bond knew what Tracy really wanted because deep down, he wanted it too.

No, it had to be escape. Bond would visit Ruby and Katarina tonight, obtain the details of the other girls and, while the farewell party was in full swing, he'd make his secret departure, probably on skis. It wasn't much of a plan, but it would have to do.

Bond could have taken lunch in the Alpine Room, but he refused, citing the need to work. He also wanted to avoid any prying questions about the book, which he was certain Irma Bunt would throw at him if he did attend. Instead, forsaking the pointless heraldic research, Bond rested, his body relaxed, but his mind tense with anticipation.

Dinner was an hour to forget. Bond began to wonder if something dreadful really had happened. Katarina still furrowed her brow at him and Ruby tried to be her usual cheery self, but the other girls did a fine act of 'sending him to Coventry.' Bond squirmed under the intense burning eyes of the Bunt woman, scorching into him over her trout pate. Even her previous fraudulent manners had disappeared. She did not even address him as Sir Hilary. The change was worse than frosty. Bond tried to make light conversation, but was snubbed at every turn. He skipped dessert, made his excuses and left. This time there were no goodbyes.

What a God-awful meal, thought Bond. He'd hardly tasted the food. It didn't matter. His mind was

made up. Campbell must have cracked. Or the Count knew of his midnight philandering. Whichever it was, and it could be both, Bond's cover was blown. He had two hours to get all the information he needed and flee.

Bond dressed in a pair of slacks and a cardigan over a cotton shirt. He picked up the finger nail file and, after listening carefully at the door, he slid it around the frame until the panel slipped open. He made it to Ruby's room in seconds.

It was even darker than before. Bond crept forward. The girl was taking another rest.

"Ruby, it's me," whispered Bond, approaching the ruffled bed, the sheets piled around her body.

He sat down and shook the buried shoulder. "Hilary's so sorry Ruby's leaving," he continued, "Has that old bitch told you..."

Irma Bunt sat up, her face carved in stone, the slit of a mouth bared with sharp, yellow teeth, the tiny, dog eyes, staring cold and hard.

"Fraulein!" exclaimed Bond. "Fancy meeting you..."

Something hard struck him on the back of the head. Everything started to swim. Bond's body doubled over and collapsed onto the blood red floor.

**Fifteen:**  
**A Madman's Plan**

The bright tiny spinning light seemed to burn into Bond's retina. He blinked. The room was still spiralling around his head, but it wasn't the same room, it was a richer colour, hung with heavy velvet curtains, bedecked in leather, with a tinsel decorated spruce pine standing to attention to one side. Bond was staring at the angel on top of the tree. A little golden bulb representing a candle flickered in her hand.

Angels and demons, thought Bond. He opened his eyes fully and shifted his position. He was sprawled across the leather couch in the Count's office. Grunther and a second, watchful thug were standing guard at each end of the room.

The man who wanted to be called a Count, but was surely Ernst Stavro Blofeld, turned away from a huge map of the world. It was set in the wall behind his desk. Bond could make out photographs of female faces dotted around the map, but had no time to fully take it in before the two halves of the book case slid in and covered it.

Blofeld was wearing a tight crew neck sweater that showed off his physique. He picked up a couple of items from the desk and stepped forward, a docile smile spreading across his face.

"Merry Christmas, 007."

"I'm Sir Hilary Bray," replied Bond wearily, sitting up and running a hand through his hair. If he was to be interrogated he may as well start off being negative.

Blofeld tossed the missing copy *Boutell's Heraldry* towards Bond and it landed at his feet with a thump.

"No, no, no, Mister Bond," chuckled Blofeld. "A respectable baronet from the College of Heralds does not seduce young female patients in health clinics."

Blofeld held up Bond's spectacles, turning them over and around as he spoke, staring through the lens.

"On the other hand, they do get their professional details correct. The Bleuchamp tombs are not in Augsburg Cathedral as you said, but in the Saint Anna Kirche. Sir Hilary Bray would have known."

Bond rubbed his hands down his face. Caught from the very first meeting; now the sheer undiluted folly of his plan was revealed, unravelling like a ball of string.

"A small slip," Blofeld snapped the glasses in half and dropped the broken pieces on the floor. "It will take more than a few props to turn 007 into a herald."

"It'll take more than cutting off your ear lobes, Blofeld, to turn you into a Count."

"I may surprise you yet," Blofeld answered, without concern for Bond's anger. "But I'm afraid you have no surprises left for me. I know all about your mission, Mister Bond. And I know all about you. Your colleague, Mister Campbell, was such a keen climber, such a brilliant conversationalist, before he left us."

It was said with finality. So Campbell was dead. Bond gulped. So, it had been M's doing. He'd not wanted Bond to go in unarmed and without a proper means of communication. This had been his solution: send Shaun Campbell to keep an eye out. But Campbell had over stepped his orders. Now the whole operation was in jeopardy and Bond's life with it. Carefully, quickly, Bond thought through each possible angle of argument. He picked the one he hoped to be true.

"You realise he will have reported where I am?"

"I doubt that," Blofeld was calmness personified. "In any case no one is going to come your rescue, Mister Bond. In a few hours the United Nations will receive SPECTRE's yuletide greeting: the information, told in clear certain terms, that I now possess the scientific means to control or destroy the economy of the entire world. People will have far more important things to think about than you."

"That's if they believe you."

"They will," Blofeld sat down and opened a slim cigarette case. Removing one he inspected it, before inserting it between the second and third fingers of his right hand and lighting it with a Swiss flint lighter. The snap cut across the room and there was a low hiss as the tobacco smouldered. Blofeld sucked the vapours deep into his lungs. The slow deliberate action allowed the two small words to sink in, drowning in the sweaty air of the office. They sounded so close, Bond almost mouthed them in reply.

"Last year I performed a demonstration," explained Blofeld. "Do you remember that disagreeable outbreak of foot and mouth disease in England last summer? I shall instruct the United Nations, in very convincing terminology, exactly how it was achieved. One person, my estimable assistant Fraulein Bunt, visited the Norfolk County show and infected one animal. Just one, Mister Bond, and the result was the death of thousands of cattle and panic across the country. Suddenly British meat exports of all kinds suffered. The Common Market decreed your country as being unsafe to rear livestock, Mister Bond. And it is only now Britain is recovering."

Bond's mind raced with thoughts of infections, disease and economic disaster; but by what hand? Germs, micro-organisms, insects, pests, toxic plants and artificial compounds; each one a route for pestilence. Bond glanced at the shuttered window. The laboratory was developing allergy vaccines. He smiled grimly. No, it wasn't. The technicians were preparing something completely different.

"Bacteria," he muttered. "Bacteriological warfare."

"With a difference," hailed Blofeld triumphantly. "My capacity has increased way past mere infectious disease. The great breakthrough since last summer has been the confection of a deadly genocide, a Virus Omega resulting in total infertility of plants or animals."

The black eyes seemed to glitter like two pearls of jet. The mouth twitched and took on a fixed, mad

grin. Blofeld was enjoying the revelation of his apocalypse. Silently, Bond witnessed the evil take over.

"Not just disease in a few herds, Mister Bond, or the loss of a harvest, but the annihilation of a whole strain forever throughout entire continents. If my demands are not met, I shall proceed with the systematic extinction of whole species of cereals and livestock across the globe."

"Including, I suppose, the human race?"

Blofeld sucked contemplatively on the cigarette. "I do not think, do you, Mister Bond that the United Nations will let it come to that. Not after their scientists analyse a small sample of Virus Omega which they will receive on Christmas Day. Think of it, Mister Bond: an epidemic of sterility. Nothing is born. No seed even starts to sprout. It is, you must admit, the work of a genius."

"No. It's insane," concluded Bond bitterly. "And they'll find an antidote."

"Of course they will; given time."

"They'll have time. Once they've been warned, you'll have problems dispensing the stuff."

Blofeld stood up and beckoned to Grunther, who retrieved the big duffle coat from the cloakroom. As he put it on, Blofeld made a tiny clucking sound with his tongue, as if Bond's comment surprised him.

"That problem has already been solved. I have been training my own special Angels of Death for precisely such a purpose."

The realisation sunk in. Deep hypnosis and mind control, instructions hidden deep in the subconscious, secreted away in the memories of Ruby and Katarina and ten more innocents.

"Those girls," Bond muttered.

"Yes, those delightful, wonderful, young girls, and dozens more like them. I have been programming patients for a whole year, Mister Bond. Twelve months of waiting and soon, at any time I choose, any one of them can unleash the destruction I have created. It's beautiful, isn't it? Almost poetic, I would say, for one single generation of youth to wipe out centuries, millennia of evolutionary development."

"But exactly how will they do it?"

Blofeld offered his sickly grin once more. "Oh no, no, Mister Bond, that must remain my secret."

"And how many hundreds of millions do you want for your services this time, Blofeld?"

Bond grinned at the monstrous face, matching Blofeld's joviality, leaning easily back on the couch. There didn't seem any sense in fighting the man. He may as well act nonchalant while he weighed up his options.

“This time the price is of another kind. You’ll be even more amused when you know what. In the meantime, I want to keep you here as my guest. You’ll be very useful in helping me convince the authorities that I mean what I say and I’ll do what I claim.”

Blofeld buttoned the coat and made his way to the office door. “Come let me show you to your new quarters.”

Grunther and the second guard took hold of Bond, locking an arm each so he couldn’t struggle without the threat of breaking an arm or wrist.

They trooped along the short passage and through the antibiotic chamber.

“You’re likely to be with us for some time, Mister Bond,” continued Blofeld, “so first you will require a little therapy to soothe your restless nature.”

The cave was as cold as Bond remembered. Without the extra lining of a coat he instantly felt the freezing atmosphere. His limbs trembled and the hairs on his neck stood up against the cold. Bond hadn’t taken more than a few steps when he stumbled to a halt, his eyesight attracted by something hanging from the roof of the cave.

Blofeld paused.

“Oh, the poor fellow,” he said blankly. “He was restless too. You perverse British; how you love fresh air and exercise. This year several amateur climbers perished in the same predicament. We drop them off the blind side of the Schilthorn at night. It’s not climbable you know; the gorge has become a sort of waxwork show for morbid tourists.”

Shaun Campbell’s half naked body spun on a single chain suspended by his feet. He was trussed and stiff. The skin was bruised and bloody under the white film of frost that was inexorably spreading across his torso.

“You bloody bastard!” shouted Bond and launched himself forward, pulling the two henchmen with him. One of them jabbed him hard in the stomach. Bond kept straining, desperate to reach Blofeld.

The monster stood still, unconcerned, deliberately smoking, as Bond’s impassioned face swept towards him. Another blow rained down, then a third and a fourth. Bond, winded, still twisted and arrested, stopped struggling.

Blofeld shook his cigarette in front of Bond’s face, as though he was admonishing a child or a pet dog.

“Now, now, Mister Bond, we’ll have no more of that. You must learn to be absolutely calm before we accept you back into polite society. You are clearly not ready to for the treatment I have prepared for you. Come.”

They walked to the elevator and ascended to level two. This time Blofeld opened the doors set in the rear of the lift. They stepped into a damp, dingy service corridor, lined with pipes and electrical wiring. At the far end of the stone chute was a thick steel door flashed with a series of complicated

signs Bond didn't have time to take in.

Blofeld opened it with a single large key.

"Put him in here. I'm sure Mister Bond will moderate his feelings soon enough."

The two guards shoved Bond through the gap and he stumbled onto a chiselled icy brick surface. The heavy door slammed shut behind him. Bond heard the key turn and the bolt lock. The slam, click and clunk echoed around the chamber.

Bond waited while his eyes adjusted to the half-light. It was bitterly cold, wherever he was. However, the chamber was not completely open to the air as Bond couldn't feel any wind. The clinging, dank taste of oil and engineering grease stuck in his throat.

The only light came from high on the far wall. A square of moonlit sky was just visible. Stars speckled the indigo black and big flakes of fresh snow blew inside and spun in tiny tornados. Bond saw two thick, tense ropes running through the open aperture.

Gradually Bond's eyes started to make out his surroundings. The bricks underneath him felt like massive slabs. Cement building blocks, he presumed. The chamber must be built on the side of the mountain, cut into the rock precipice. He gingerly felt around him with his hands and feet. He was squatting on a platform four feet deep. As Bond searched the perimeter, his foot knocked a rusting metal bolt abandoned on the brickwork. It fell off the edge of the platform and Bond waited seconds before hearing a light tinkle as it hit ground zero. The chamber was very deep.

To his left, beyond a short iron footway he could make out two huge upright steel cogs and wheels. These were supported on a plinth by thick cement towers, almost ten feet tall. The plinth itself topped a giant square column accessed by the footway. Bond shuffled to the edge of the platform and looked down. He could see the perpendicular lines of the central column and cut into them the bunched fibres of steel cable that led to the huge anchors, buried deep inside the mountain. Blofeld had shut him into the upper station of the gondola lift.

He pondered the situation for a few minutes. There had to be a reason why Blofeld wanted him out of his office and away from the patients. What had the mesmeric message been to Ruby last night? He had to give her one more important instruction – but he hadn't imparted it yet. Blofeld's office contained that strange mixing desk. It had to be the relay system for the hypnotic treatments. Blofeld couldn't let him hear that ultimate instruction, the one which led to certain calamity. Bond had only sympathy for those twelve unfortunate girls, and God only knew how many more, all indoctrinated against their will. Bond felt ill at the thought of the terrible famine they could induce. And he hadn't managed to get more than two names. He wondered if the girls were still on Piz Gloria. His watch said it was just after nine. What had Ruby nervously told him over dinner before Irma Bunt had interrupted her? She was scared of flying from Berne at night. The girls were all booked on the midnight-thirty service to Paris, from where they had connections organised on Christmas morning.

So they would still be here, still upstairs, sharing in the festive spirit with the ghost of Christmas, the unholy matron Irma Bunt. He could almost picture it: carols, stollen cake, the tree, crackers, eggnog and chocolates. Going away presents maybe. An appearance from the fully appreciative Count,

blessing them and thanking them, and unknown to the girls each was playing a pawn to his king. And all the while that insincere cackle from the Bunt woman, her pig face distorted into its jowly posture, the beady eyes seeing all, the dog's ears hearing every sound. The fingers, like lumpen sausages, clasped in front of her, in mock prayer for the safety of her charges.

"Your very good health, my dears," she would grunt, a sinister smile splitting the jabber mouth. "It has been a pleasure to cure you."

**Sixteen:**  
**Angels of Death**

Bond made a decision. The girls were the key. He could stop them, warn them; all he needed was enough time to get Ruby or Katarina alone, time to explain what was happening. But he couldn't do it here. He had to intercept them at the lowest cable station, the one at Murren. Bond peered at the machinery. It was a bi-cable lift. A thin service ladder ran up the side of the wheel tower, between the two iron circles. Engineers probably used it to oil the hauling wheel, which was on the ladder's left. On the right was the stationary cog that held the track cable tight. Beneath those two wheels ran the huge chains, possibly as many as seven or eight, securely fastened into solid rock and taking the strain of hundreds of tons of cable weight, ensuring the structure stayed horizontal and did not tip over the side of the Schilthorn. At the berg there would be a counter weight keeping the cables taut and in the right position, correcting the balance as the car moved along the steel rope and ensuring a smooth ride. All the other machinery and controls would be at the lower station.

Bond studied the small rectangular window above him. The two cables split the centre of the aperture. There was just enough room for a crouching man to pass under them. He recalled that the Piz Gloria station was very low ceilinged. The stanchion for the gondola, the housing apparatus that ran along the lines, slotted into a crevasse above it, resting directly below the Alpine Room terrace. Bond couldn't climb onto the balcony from off the cables, but he might be able to use the housing if the gondola was at rest. At the lip of the window he could just see a hub of blue paint. The gondola was waiting below him by the station platform.

So now was his best chance. Quickly Bond crossed the footway. There wasn't much room on the central plinth. To climb the service ladder, he had to virtually turn sideways between the two ribbed wheels. Bond took hold of the first rung of the ladder. The metal was frigid. His skin stuck to the bars, frozen even after a second of contact. Bond moved up two or three rungs. He had to work fast. He had no idea how long it would be until they took the gondola back down to the berg.

The answer to his question was swifter than he thought. There was a loud clang and a scraping of gears. The big cogs started to turn. The hauling cable played out through the window. The gondola was descending. He felt the side of the big haulage disc brush against his arm. There was a tear and his hand came loose. For a moment he swung out. His hand caught inside the spoke. Bond felt his arm being pulled sideways and for a second he imagined his body rotating slowly around the wheel, his arm caught, the shoulder being torn apart. Then miraculously his hand dropped free. How, he didn't know, he didn't care. But he clung on with his one remaining hand, squashed tight on the rungs, one foot scrabbling against the cement.

He hung there for what seemed like hours. It was like hell given a mechanical form. The deafening grind of the cogs rotating, the sickly hum of fetid grease, the scrape of the cables over the rails, the scream of his hands and arms, everything a living breathing purgatory. Bond cast aside the pain and the fear and concentrated his whole body on not falling, not getting caught in the huge spinning discs.

There was a clang and a creak and the cogs slid abruptly to a halt. Quickly Bond dropped back onto his own feet. Why had the cables stopped turning so soon? The gondola couldn't have made it to the

berg already. Bond frowned. What did he know about the aerial lift? What had he noticed this morning? Yes, that was it: the safety tower. The gondola had paused at the pinion half way down the mountain. Bond checked the luminous dial on his wrist watch. The second hand ticked round. He waited. The gears switched on again and the wheels started to turn. Bond timed the second descent at two minutes forty seven seconds. The pinion might be exactly equidistant, but he doubted it. It would be either a shade further away or a shade nearer. Now though, once those cogs started to turn, Bond would know approximately how long he had to get onto the moving stanchion. It was better, he reasoned, than not knowing at all.

Bond dug into his trousers, taking hold of the lining, and ripped each pocket free. This would give him a pair of thin mittens and would stop his fingers freezing, sticking or slipping. Bond pulled them on. Next he remounted the ladder, reaching the very top, and, first with one arm, then the other, he straddled the two cables. Bond swung up his legs, hooking one ankle over the other. The position was not comfortable, but he was supported by the crook of his ankle, the length of his arms and the two ropes, which pressed into his chest. Slowly, he snaked his way along the greasy double lines, like a caterpillar, arms out, feet pushing, bottom raised, then repeat. He'd made good progress, he thought, almost two thirds of the way to the window, when he heard the crunch of the gears.

The cables rocked, jolted and the hauling line started to judder beneath him, pulling him back towards the massive wheels. Bond lost balance and toppled off the cables. One hand gripped tight. He brought his other up fast, but both hands were grasping the moving cable. Bond was being dragged back towards the central tower. The jaws of the wheel spun over. The metal teeth bit down with tremendous force, waiting for the moment his thin defenceless hands slipped under the jaws.

Bond threw himself forwards. There was nothing to grab hold of. His body pitched onto the edge of the plinth. Bond yelled with the shock. His stomach sagged on the curb. He felt himself slipping over the rim. Too much of his weight was underneath him. Desperately Bond kicked up with his legs, trying to make them horizontal with his upper torso. The jack knife saved him. Bond's body leapt frog-like onto the plinth and one of his hands scabbled for the bottom rung of the ladder.

Breathing heavily, Bond scrambled back to safety. He composed himself. There would be only a few moments of stillness before the gondola made its final approach. He had to take full advantage and get across to the window. He didn't have another chance.

The wheels ground to a halt. Bond climbed the ladder in seconds. This time he took hold of the guide cable only and simply swung out underneath it, one hand over another. The pressure on his arms was immense. He heard the muscles crack and pop as they strained to hold onto the rest of his body. Bond fought the pain as well as the fear. He was not going to drop. That was unthinkable. He measured the distances, four feet, three feet and now two feet. Bond swung his feet up at the window. His soles slid off the sill. And again. Bond switched to grasping at both cables.

Suddenly the clank and scrape of the gears kicked in. His left arm was moving backwards his right stationery. Panic made him launch his feet up. The soles came down square, slipping on the icy surface. He let go the haulage cable and grabbed the static line. Hand over hand Bond pulled himself into the window. It had a three foot span. He wasted no time and went straight to the other side. As he suspected directly beneath him was the entrance to the upper cable station. The aperture sat under the eaves of the balcony, but the sides were smooth and covered in a layer of night time frost. The falling snow was settling on the walls as much as the peaks. He watched the big flakes sink to

the escarpment below. Rocks and an eighty degree incline would meet him if he fell. The trails of the two cables played out below him, stretching to the blue gondola which blazed white light from inside.

Bond flexed his tired fingers. He took hold of the stationery wire. The surface was covered in ice. It cracked under his grasp. With two hands taking hold, Bond took a last deep breath and swung out over the abyss.

Slowly, one hand pushing to the other, Bond edged along the cable. He tried to keep a tight hold, not to slide too far at once, for if he did he knew in a matter of seconds the mittens would disintegrate, the skin would be ripped from his hands and the finger bones be shaved to nothing. Bond gripped ever tighter. He thought only about holding on and watching, watching the big blue box wind its way up the twin tracks, slowly, steadfastly. Come on, come on, you bastard, Bond spoke to it, come on. The stanchion was curved, the rolling gear fixed on a long oblong box, which also aided stability. He could see the two round holes where the cables entered and were fixed with grippers. If his hands got caught in there they would be smashed, crushed by the mighty force propelling the gondola screeching up the mountainside. And yet Bond had to wait until the last possible moment, until his fingers were virtually inside those deadly cavities.

Suddenly the squealing sound seemed to be right on top of Bond. The gondola was only feet away. Bond tried to reverse up the cable, to create more distance, but he had no energy left for the climb. He saw the head of the stanchion bearing on him, twelve inches, ten, eight. Bond gasped and lunged down, almost throwing himself onto the roof of the gondola. He smacked into the main pillar of the stanchion and slipped. For a second the crags below welcomed him. Bond stared at the bald flinty surfaces, blue and silver in the moonlight. Then his hands both found sure holds and he was safe.

Bond didn't pause to celebrate. In seconds he was mounting the stanchion, standing on the broad bolt heads that stuck through the metal, until he could ride the roller housing, legs astride as if he was on a horse. He'd only just had time. The gondola jerked to a halt. Flat down on the casing, Bond listened, half expecting to hear activity as the guards sought a mad trapeze artist. There was nothing. The doors opened. The doors closed.

Gingerly Bond manoeuvred himself into a kneeling position, and then stood upright. The very bottom of the balcony was within his grasp. Bond stretched up and took hold. His feet found purchase on small rocky knuckles and slowly he lifted himself level with the railings.

Footsteps rang out. Bond ducked back. They faded away. Bond eased upwards again. The balcony was clear. The external entrance to the Alpine Room was directly before him. Good; Bond remembered the door was neither guarded nor locked. Quickly Bond vaulted the balustrade and made for the entrance.

His first thought was how deliciously warm it was. Bond made his way quickly to the elevator shafts. As he did so a movement outside the window caught his eye. The guard was returning. Bond crouched down and crossed the floor, shrinking flat against the wall beneath the window sill. The bored footsteps clicked past and faded away.

As Bond listened he became aware of another sound, not one he'd expected to hear. The party, he assumed would be in full swing. The girls would be laughing and gossiping. He even thought there

might be music. Instead all he could hear was a low electronic throb. It was the same repetitive pulse he'd witnessed hypnotising Ruby. And underneath it he could make out the deep, almost sensual tone of Blofeld's voice.

"Journey..." it was saying. "A journey home... First you must rest... Rest... Rest..."

Bond crept towards the curved stairway. He trod tentatively up the first few steps. There was no guard. He could clearly make out the merry go round of windows revolving at its largo speed. A multicoloured kaleidoscope of light was weaving its way around the Alpine Room, like a rainbow lost in the sky. Bond moved closer, almost at the top of the stair, sheltering behind the carved wooden banisters overgrown with climbing plants which had entwined their leaves and stems through the lattice work. Gently he bent back the foliage and peered into the lounge.

Irma Bunt's offensive posterior, clad in ill-fitting trousers, faced him. She was standing about ten feet away, her head moving to-and-fro as slowly as the windows rotated. Spread out across the plush furnishings were all twelve girls, dozing, heads lolling, breathing constant. They were still dressed immaculately.

"And now I must tell you all about the very special cure I have prepared," continued Blofeld's voice. "It is a very special cure. But it must be our secret. I will teach you how to use it. I will teach you when to use it."

Bond looked at the still faces. He could see Ruby, the same satisfied smile drifting across her lips, the eyelids not shut, but blinking rapidly as if she was in a dreamland. Only this was no dream.

"You may open your eyes again," said Blofeld. "Each of you has been given a present, such a prettily wrapped present. Now is the time to open it."

Bond watched as the girls scabbled at the glossy paper. They had each received a small black crocodile skin make up bag.

"You see how beautiful and special these gifts are. They are beautiful and special because they are gifts for very beautiful and special girls. You are longing to know what is inside them. Open the case. Look inside and see what beautiful and special things I have given you."

Bond strained to see. Luckily the Chinese girl, who was closest to him, tipped her case and he saw glass bottles, brushes and a small round compact, exactly the sort of things a girl might expect in a modern vanity case.

"You may use anything but the atomiser. This you must never touch. Never until I tell you how to use it. Never until I tell you when to use it. Never until I tell you where to use it. You must never open the compact except when I tell you to. I will instruct you in how to use the compact. But you must never open it except when I tell you."

There was a pause. The Chinese girl's hand hovered over the shiny black disc.

"Pick it up. Now, open the compact."

Bond watched the Chinese girl's fingers flip open the lid. It did not feature a buffer and a mirror. Instead where the small looking glass would normally be, he could make out a miniscule pair of control buttons set below a tiny loudspeaker.

"Turn the button on the right."

The girl did as she was told. Immediately a tiny aerial extended from the back of the compact.

"Adjust the volume control."

The girl twiddled the left hand button. The room was filled with the sound of Blofeld's voice echoing metallicity twelve times over.

"Every night at exactly twelve o'clock you must be alone. You will open the compact and you will switch on the receiver and listen for my voice. When you hear my voice I will talk to you about the special cure. I will tell you what to do. I will tell you when to do it. I will tell you how to do it. I will tell you where to do it. After you have listened to my voice, turn back the button on the right to conceal the receiver. Turn it now. Close the lid. And after you have listened to my voice and concealed the receiver, you will want to do what I have instructed and deliver the special cure to those animals and plants which you love so much. You must treasure this parting gift, because it is beautiful and special, just like you are all beautiful and special."

Bond had heard enough. Now it was even more imperative he made contact with those girls. And it couldn't wait for a worldwide hunt or a newspaper campaign. Bond's first instinct had been correct. If he could intercept them in Murren or even at Berne airport, he might be able to convince them something was amiss with the clinic. At the very least if he escaped from Piz Gloria he may get a chance to contact the S.I.S.

Blofeld's dulcet drone was still reverberating in his head as he retreated silently down the stairs.

"Now rest... Rest... Rest... And in a few moments you will wake up and you will not remember what I have told you until twelve o'clock every night..."

Bond pressed for the elevator. He stepped inside and went down to the third floor, the reception level where he'd first arrived. Bond remembered the lobby was always manned. He hoped there was still only one guard at the desk. The lift hissed to a halt. Bond stood back against the far wall, tensing his muscles, waiting, anticipating.

The ping of the arrival bell had sounded. The guard would be expecting the door to swing out into the corridor and a person, somebody, to exit the lift. Bond wanted the guard's suspicions to be aroused. He wanted him to come to the door. Nothing happened. Bond waited, counting the seconds. His hands bunched into fists, moisture seeping out of his pores. Then a shadow passed over the mottled strip window and Bond kicked out at the door with his right foot.

The door smashed into the guard, splitting open his forehead. He was thrown backwards, off his feet, blood spilling on the carpet. Bond hurled himself forward, the swinging door crashing onto his shoulder. He almost landed on top of the guard who was already springing upright. Thrown off, Bond swept his right fist across the man's jaw. He heard it crack. Bond was on him like a whirlwind, a back

hander, a knee to the groin, an uppercut and a final cutting chop across the side of the neck. Bond heard vertebra snapping.

The guard collapsed in a heap. He looked like one of the Corsicans. Draco might be well pleased, considered Bond as he dragged the prone body towards the door which led to the ski store.

Once shut inside, he rolled the dead man across the floor, blocking the entrance. The delay would give him precious minutes if his escape was discovered. The guard would be missed soon. Bond could only hope it would not be too soon.

Quickly he surveyed the equipment. Racks of skis and ski poles lined one wall. Most of them looked to have bindings that were made for smaller feet. Women's skis, he assumed. But then, closer to the door he saw a pair of powders. Wide fittings, six feet long, ideal for variable terrain, and made, in the new style, from fibre glass. Bond took them down. The lowest rung on the rack carried rows of boots which conveniently matched the skis above. On the opposite wall were upwards of thirty hooks, all occupied with insulated clothing. Bond grabbed what looked the closest fit, an outfit of moon blue ski pants and jacket. Without any particular care he took a thick woolly hat, thermal gloves and a pair of goggles, tinted orange for dull conditions and with a broad panorama, allowing him to maintain peripheral vision.

Bond stripped off his own oily trousers and cardigan, but pulled the ski gear over his shirt for extra warmth. He walked to the external door and opened it. He found himself on a short platform. Fresh flakes were still falling. The blue-white sheet of compacted snow spread away from him at a steep angle.

Bond put down the two skis and stepped into the bindings. He wriggled his feet, making sure the heel and toe pieces were tight. Finally, Bond pulled the ski goggles down over his eyes. It was time to say 'Goodbye and Merry Christmas' to Piz Gloria.

## **Seventeen: Escape!**

Bond straightened his knees and then flexed his ankles, feeling his shins take the strain. For a brief moment he recalled how he usually performed warm up exercises before skiing. Too late for that now. Instead he'd have to remember that the art was to steer with the hips and thighs, not the knees. His skis were parallel, his shoulders rounded, his head up. Bond skated forward several strides until he reached the edge of the ridge. The skis tipped onto the slope. Immediately Bond thrust down with the poles, felt them hit the packed ice and pushed.

Instantly and with terrifying speed he was descending the high shoulder of the Schilthorn. The wind cut across his body and he gritted his teeth as it whipped at his tired torso, causing him to quickly adjust his balance, shift his posture. Snowflakes smacked into his face like tiny bullets. Keep looking forward. Keep the distance between your thighs equal. Don't spread your feet. Point downhill all the way. Bond didn't have time to worry about the niceties of powder skiing. His only concern was speed.

The shoulder was shrinking. In the haze of the three quarter moon, Bond could make out a channel to his left, which passed under the cable lines, heading north, and around the pinion tower. It then swung southwards and passed above the berg. Bond had no option but to take the run. It left him dangerously exposed to the lookouts on Piz Gloria, but he had no other chance. The only alternative was a dangerous route, a curving, sheer descent on the arm of the mountain. Not for the out of practice.

Bond executed an almost perfect j-turn, the narrow edge of the skis increasing the speed and pressure of his moves. He felt the upper ski drift away. Automatically he tightened his hamstrings to prevent it slipping out of line and eased out of the turn, cutting a plume of snow behind him.

It might have been the white wake that attracted them, but suddenly Bond heard shouts of alarm. A yellow halo illuminated him, tracking his descent. He clearly heard curses, carried on the Alpine winds. It was only seconds before he caught the unmistakable rattle of sub machine guns. The bullets traced the glare of the searchlight, kicking white volcanoes of snow around his feet. Bond ignored the shells. There was no time to worry about them. If the bullets hit it was curtains anyway; all he could do was stay upright.

Bond carved out a series of broad S shapes as he zigzagged his way down the mountain. He'd forgotten what speed felt like in the open air. No cheap thrill of a metal box, an engine and four wheels. This was an adrenaline rush to outstrip even the fastest of cars. A forty five degree descent, the whoosh of ski on snow, the buffeting as your body slices through the air, the sheer thrill as the ground zoomed up to you in a blur of noise and colour and shot past you in seconds. During the day it would be thrill enough. At night it was almost petrifying. Part of you wanted to make it end, but the mind was riveted, caught up in the roaring stimulus, invigorated. The heart thumped. The blood rushed. Every bump and burn was magnified, sending shock waves up the spine, messages to the brain that said 'stop.' But you didn't stop. You revelled in a moment of manifest tranquil fear.

The crackle of fireworks sounded high above him. Bond didn't need to look. The landscape was

suddenly bathed in a warm green glow. Flares, two of them, launched either side of him, hanging on their parachutes, drifting aimlessly and deadly. Now, the dark of the night was gone for Bond.

As he rounded the pinion tower, Bond saw the black shapes, squat like enormous beetles, fanning out, descending after him, black antenna pointed. He didn't have time to count the numbers. The guards skied without poles, the Heckler and Koch MP5s swaying side to side, aiding balance. The stubby stock of the MP5 was perfect for shooting on the move and, thanks to the flares, Bond was the easiest of targets, exposed as clear as if it was daylight. Speed and distance was his only defence. Bond had a good start on them, but the guards would be swift skiers, better practiced than he. Every second was a bonus.

As he sped on towards the berg he felt the slope steepen, making him increase speed. It caught him by surprise, and as he leant over into the next arc, he felt the centripetal force tugging across him, fighting with gravity, toppling him. Bond veered alarmingly. He lanced a ski pole into the snow. The third point of contact saved him, kept him from a fatal collapse. Balance restored Bond shot through the tail of the S shape and headed straight down, shoulders crouched, quadriceps bursting as they absorbed the thunderous jolts of the uneven piste, hip flexors wailing under the strain of keeping upright.

The berg sat on the crest of a plateau. Bond saw the ridge spreading out from both sides of the cable station. The blue tinted snow of the higher range suddenly turned dark as it rested in the shadow of the overhang. He could make out the low top of the bob run station on its left. Bond headed right. Once past the berg he could swing north again. It was straight downhill to Murren from there, following the earth bound tramlines. Bond headed as far as he dared, traversing along the plateau, then he cut back towards the shelf. There was no pause. He had no idea how deep the ridge was. Bond took it head on and careered over the kicker.

For a second he was air bourn. A spine tingling vertical drop. He had no time to consider his posture. The skis sailed almost a foot apart. He felt his back arch, leaning backwards, as he plunged. His legs straightened. He saw the landing zone rushing towards him. It was a frighteningly steep white scarp. One ski came down flat, the other on its rear, the shock making his ankle scream, as it twisted upwards. Bond almost fell, his backside touching the long sleds on his feet, the poles askew, the arms correcting his balance like the wings of a glider plane.

Then he was off, the cushion of powder swept under the skis, seeming to push him faster and farther downhill. Bond carved through the slope, swinging into another great arc, feeling the snow and the skis give under him as he executed turn after parallel turn, heading for the town.

Suddenly the air was filled with bullets. The shots came from a direction he wasn't expecting. Almost dead ahead. The two figures were slicing through the terrain, the muzzles of the guns blinking red and amber. The shrapnel tore into the ground. Fountains of snow and ice splattered across Bond as he swung back south, away from Murren. The guards had appeared from behind the berg. They must be Blofeld's security men at the cable station, alerted from above, no doubt. Bond tried to fix his location. He was being headed off, shepherded into an area of danger.

To his right, as he slewed through the drift, he saw three more black coated guards. Unlike the others, this trio hadn't followed Bond's route, but taken the harder steeper descent down the arm of the Schilthorn. They were on a direct course to intercept him. Bullets splayed across his path and

brought up his rear. The crossfire panicked him and he almost stumbled, losing precious seconds. Now he swerved, left and right, making his target hard to hit, hoping the billowing snow would disorientate the marksmen. Bond zoomed over another ledge, not so deep this time, landing square.

He was over the steepest part of the piste. The slope started to pan out at around forty five degrees. About two hundred yards ahead Bond saw the wall of pine trees. He heard the clump and shh of the guards expertly riding the last kicker. More bullets sawed about him. Closer. Now it was a race, pure and simple. The rising copse was his only refuge. Inside it, with luck, he'd avoid the guns and lose the guards. As he sped on, oblivious to the cacophony of sound, the zip and smack of metal that welled around him, Bond tried to identify exactly where he was on the mountainside. The gold and platinum lights of safety sat to his left, perched on a low outcrop of the Lauterbrunnen Valley. Murren looked so near, yet seemed far away. Indistinctly, Bond reckoned he was heading for the foot of the Schilthorn.

Another burst of gunfire. Another exploding flare. Bond could almost feel the sting of the bullets as they splattered in his wake. The bastards were closing in. Fifty yards. Forty yards. More bullets, ever closer. Did he hear instructions? A voice had boomed very loud, he'd heard it even over the machine guns. Bond crashed through the tree line, ducking under a loose branch.

He'd hardly made it through the first tall pines when something cracked underneath him. Vaguely Bond saw the tail end of his right ski spiralling through the air.

Immediately his right leg collapsed under him. Bond crumpled into a heap. A stray bullet had sliced the blade in two. An inch or two higher and the bullet would have turned his heel into mincemeat. Bond unclipped the useless ski and sat up, digging his ski poles straight down and hard. The rattle of the MP5s jerked him upright. He could see the trio of guards who had made the fast descent coming through the tree line. They must have thought he'd been hit when he fell. Their aim was slow and askew. Bond pushed off with his right foot.

He didn't know anything about skiing on one blade. It was a purely instinctive reaction to the danger of the situation. Trying to keep his loose foot above ground, Bond used the sticks as a counter balance, taking the weight as he bent and twisted his hips, almost skidding around corners, the single ski burrowing a deep channel in the soft carpet.

He seemed to be following a winding path through the trees. Bond avoided the lowest branches, dodging more by luck than stealth. The snow was blown in dunes and ridges, drifts that ran up to the thick tree trunks or piled across his riding line. The firing had abated. The guards couldn't get a clear shot through the greenery and when they did, Bond was only a fleeting figure, swathed in the cladding darkness. The glow of the flares couldn't penetrate the forest gloom. Instead the pines lurked like black giants and cast grotesque shadows over the ground. On the turn, Bond ran over a kicker, landed on his ski, jamming a piton hard in the snow to stop him toppling. The undulating ground would be tricky with two skis. With one it was almost impossible. He was living on borrowed luck.

Behind him he heard a cry, the snap and rustle of breaking branches. Someone had had an accident.

Bond ploughed on, swishing through the firs, brushing the odd limb, snow cascading from leaves and cones. The ground was sloping dangerously away again, making his passage abruptly swifter. There

wasn't the room to navigate smooth turns. Bond cut shallow snakelike figures in the snow as the track wound through the wood. He had no idea how close his pursuers were. He couldn't hear the tell-tale swoosh of ski on snow. The only sounds echoed from Bond's own body. The scat of the blades as they scored the ice, the explosion of his breath, the drum roll of his heart and the thud of blood, the scream of arms and legs, muscles that wanted to surrender, roll over, die.

Bond cut across a clearing. Too late he saw it was creased with stunted moguls. He ploughed over one of the heaps of snow, losing his balance. Desperate to stay upright, Bond jabbed a stick down, felt it catch on something, a root, a rock, anything, and fly out of his hand. Bond was already spinning into the fall line. His final movement was almost a roll, the side-cut tilted to the extreme, his ankle turned, his arm reached out. This wasn't a mogul he was jumping; it was a mound of branches and earth, a barrier. Bond gasped as he crashed over the top of the obstacle.

The ground fell away. Bond grabbed at anything. His hand clasped a root, slowing his fall. His ski got caught under him, the binding on the toe popping loose. It wobbled in his eyesight. Bond let go of the ski stick and watched, heart in mouth, as the thin lance spiralled over the precipice.

Bond was staring over the edge of a vertical crag. Eight hundred feet below him, the bottom of the valley resembled a sea of snow. The roads, cleared by snow ploughs, resembled waves rolling over the ocean. The dark-and-light island of a village sat like a ring of coral. Multicoloured fountains of fireworks were blooming above the town, washing the breakers with vivid reds and greens.

Bond scrambled back from the abyss.

There wasn't time for him to think clearly. He could hear one of the guards swooping through the clearing after him. Bond unclipped the ski and hefted it over his shoulder like a club. There was a strangled cry as the guard tumbled over the barrier, half in control. Bond swung the six foot blade and it cut the man's legs away.

The cry turned into a scream. The guard somersaulted through the air and plunged over the lip of the precipice. The body, all arms and legs, spun as it fell. The scream tailed away, fading as the black figure melded into the shadowy sea below. Bond saw the man land with a crump. So still was the valley he even saw the snow billow under the impact of the human missile. The man had surely died of fright long before he hit the ground.

Bond stepped his way up the spit of safety. Hadn't three guards following him into the copse? He thought one of them had been injured earlier, but where was the third? Yes; there it was; a sound, the low swish of skis. Bond saw him coming, a tall figure, the MP5 cradled in his arms. Bond took up his makeshift club once more. This had to be an accurate punch. He couldn't afford to lose this one into the ravine. He needed the man's equipment.

The guard charged over the barrier. Bond hit him in mid-air. The edge of the ski sunk into the man's stomach and he gave one startled exclamation. His body dropped to the ground. Bond leapt on him, his right fist smashing across the man's jaw. Stunned, the guard fell back, breathing heavily.

More noises. Voices! Still holding the man down, Bond peered over the barrier. He could make out the yellow phosphorous glow of hand held flares. Skiers! Blofeld's men!

The shrill whistle of rockets touched his ears. More fireworks erupted and kept doing so, covering the sound of his silhouetted hunters. Bond watched their bright shadows patrolling deeper in the forest. They were moving methodically through the undergrowth, chasing trails. Bond prayed there were too many tramlines to follow.

The guard moved. Bond's first instinct was to hit him again. The man started to shout as he reached up with his hands for Bond's shoulders. No, no alarm from you, thought Bond. Quickly he grabbed the ski, crushing it hard onto the man's throat. There was a surprised gasp, followed by a strangled gurgling sound. Bond pressed hard. The man's fingers scrabbled at Bond's arm. One of them scratched his face. Bond pushed harder. The gurgle became a wheeze. The gasps hissed out of the man's throat in short rasping breaths and clouds of steam.

Bond added his knee to the pressure. His hunters were still out there. Even with the snap and boom of the rocket display, he couldn't take any chances. No sounds. Nothing. Bond kept pressing. The guard's hands dropped, his head slid to one side. Bond did not release the ski. Something cracked and the throat gave out a final gagging sigh. Slowly the flares vanished back into the undergrowth.

Bond prised the dead man's skis loose. Bond finally took in his location. The great flat U-shaped valley swung away in both directions. Bond was perched on the edge of the massive cliffs in the south. The village below was probably Stechelberg. Another mile or so further up the valley would be Murren. Bond wondered if he still had time to meet the cable car. He checked his watch. It wasn't yet midnight. The fireworks must be an early display, perhaps to ensure it didn't clash with Murren's own Christmas celebrations.

Quickly Bond slipped on the new skis and adjusted the grips as best he could in the half light. Satisfied he stepped up the bank, skirted the barrier, which he now saw was man made, but had been covered with a layer of disguising snow, and headed in the opposite direction to the guards, back towards Murren.

It was a hard slog. Exhausted from the fast descent, from its sudden ending, sick with the closeness of death, Bond traversed the forest, heading steadily towards his planned destination. He didn't see any signs of Blofeld's men. No more flares shot into the sky. Bond forced himself forward, ignoring the howling pain and the sharp bitter wind that seemed to have blown the snow out of the skies at last.

In the quiet, Bond heard the sing of the cable car. Looking back towards the Piz Gloria, perched, beacon-like on the Schilthorn peak, he could make out the gondola descending to the berg. He couldn't see, not at such a distance, but he knew who would be inside that car: twelve girls. Damn! He was going to miss them at the lower station. Bond's thoughts began to work towards intercepting them at the airport; but how could he hire a car in his current state? No identification, no money, ragged, bruised and spouting ridiculous stories about a deadly allergy clinic, no one would believe him. He simply had to reach the cable station.

Bond put on an extra burst of speed, but his body wouldn't sustain the effort for more than a few minutes at a time. Despairingly he saw the gondola pull into the berg. Bond had a moment of hope as there appeared to be some delay, probably while the girls' luggage was transferred from stage to stage. Bond could make out the footprints of Murren, the street lights forming an amber aura, like a bubble of hot air around the town. There was an oval patch of silver to one side. Bond could just

identify tiny stick like figures weaving their way across the open space. Theatre lights panned across the surface of what was obviously an ice rink. An indistinct strain of noise reached his ears. The nearer Bond got, the more he was able to interpret the music. It sounded like Mantovani.

The lower gondola had started its descent. Bond frowned grimly and skied on. The car would beat him to the town, but the girls had to disembark and get organised into a coach. He still had time.

As the terrain flattened out, Bond began to skate rather than ski, ploughing through the day's slush which was starting to refreeze. He found one of the access roads to the piste and made his way along it. The gondola had arrived at the cable station. Bond was perhaps a mile shy. His ankles begged him to stop. Bond forgot the pain and took big heavy breaths, sucking in the cold air, forcing his limbs to move, one-two-front-back. The skis were becoming useless now. Bond unclipped the bindings and tossed the blades aside. Ski boots aren't designed for running in, but that was what he did, the heavy flat soles, the ankle supports, rubbing and thumping against his toes and heels.

There were people surrounding him now. The day to day people of the world out enjoying mulled wine, sauerkraut and sausages. The spirit of Christmas was ringing in the air. Happy faces, red with booze and good living, wrapped in scarves and Santa hats. Bond didn't have any goodwill for them, but pushed past, dodging the couples who kissed and the groups who laughed and jested and jostled.

There it was! The cable station, no more than a hundred yards away. There was a private hire coach outside the main entrance, the headlights blazing. As Bond moved forward, he saw who was mounting the step. It was Ruby. Curly hair poked out from underneath her fur hat. Behind her was the wispy figure of Katarina, the long blonde mane pulled into a pony tail. And after her walked the exotic Egyptian girl, Danni. He saw smiles and laughter. Bond put his arm up and waved, hoping one of the beautiful young faces would turn his way.

A face did turn his way, purely by chance.

Bond was caught flush in the glare of the coach lights, but even with his eyes squinting, he recognised the sack of flesh that was Irma Bunt.

## **Eighteen: Midnight Pursuit**

She had been guiding the girls aboard, offering false seasonal wishes and shakes of her fish like hand. The woman's squat face blazed as she saw the desperate figure in blue chased by the haze of the headlamps. Bond could almost feel the snake eyes stab him.

He wished he'd left the goggles and hat on. They might have disguised him, at least for a second. Now he didn't even have a second.

Bond crossed the road. Half his mind was taken up with intercepting the coach; the other half couldn't erase the bald hate which emanated out of the Irma Bunt. He crossed the road at a canter trying to put distance between himself and Blofeld's people. The girls were a lost cause now. It was an international phone call to London or nothing. Bond's heart sank as he moved on, half running, half walking, trying not to draw unwarranted attention. Perhaps the reptile eyes had missed him. Unlikely. Bond risked a glance over his shoulder. The coach was pulling away, heads inside craning back, hands waving gleefully. The Bunt woman raised her fat glove. The neck twisted without the torso moving, eerie, silent, staring his way.

Bond scooted past a sad looking man selling toffee apples and candy floss and shouting the season's greetings. Suddenly, he was exhausted. The escape from Piz Gloria, the scintillating deadly descent down the piste had worn him. He was running on empty. His mouth was dry, his feet and ankles and legs ached, his mind was a whirl of changing plans, nothing was clear, every opportunity was flawed. Bond shook the malaise out of his body. Come on, James, don't give it all up! You've got this far, he told himself. Thwarted you may be, but you're alive, and that gives you a chance.

Bond started to run, forcing the tired limbs to move while his addled mind reassessed the situation. The mazy streets mostly led downhill from the cable station in a series of snaking terraces. They headed towards the main road which ran through the town and linked all the villages along the valley. The flow of people was with him. Occasionally a car, its klaxon hooting, would creep along the narrow avenue, and bodies sidled away from the bonnets and dipped yellow lights. As Bond hugged a lamp post, allowing a green Citroën to pass, he checked up the road, seeking the sign of the hunter, the orange jackets and black fur caps. Initially he thought he was safe, that the crowd had smothered his flight. Then he saw a flash of tangerine. Two flashes, spread apart, fanning the street. It was strange how bright colours blended into excitable crowds, but stuck out sorely when one was in danger. The men did not appear to have noticed him. Bond ducked his head and shoulders, trying to find sanctuary in the bustle of life that hugged the roadside.

There was a bar doing noisy business a little further along the avenue. The tavern looked older than most, set right back against the embankment behind, so its roof touched the lip of terrace above. Smoke wound its way out of two chimneys. It was big traditional looking place. Bond would expect to see a wood floor and tables and a roaring fire. His mouth watered at the prospect.

The seasonal tourists were racking up the festivities there. Even on this cold night, tables were positioned precariously outside and hardy souls were drowning hot punch. Bond dodged past the tables and went inside the tavern. It was full to bursting, not a seat spare and shoulder to shoulder

to stand. Bond forced his way to the counter, turned and watched the door. For several moments he began to believe he'd wriggled out of harm's way. It was not to be. The pit of his stomach screwed itself up as he saw the thin, angular looking man, enter the bar. He had a long, tapered nose. Bond seemed fixed on that detail, even as he looked away and made a fuss of ordering a drink he had no intention of paying for.

A furtive flick of the head, over the shoulder, told Bond the guard hadn't spied him yet. There was a long coat rail beside the counter. It was crammed full of jackets and scarves. Having caught the barman's eye and stumbled through ordering a lager, Bond made for the coats as soon as the 'keep's back was turned. He saw two doors marked with the universal stick symbols for 'men' and 'women.'

He grabbed a hefty chequered short jacket and passed into the gentleman's convenience. As he entered the pungent, whitewashed room, Bond caught sight of his reflection in a mirror. He looked dreadful. The ski outfit was dirty, streaked with melted ice and scuffs of earth, the two blended into damp brown stains. His hair was a mess, stubble scratched his chin, he was red faced, blowing hard at the cheeks and there was a grazed eyebrow and a bump forming on his forehead. His gaunt, haunted look told a story of a hundred ghosts, a hundred close encounters with death. Bond felt exactly how he looked. Snap out of it, James, one thing at a time; deal with the guard. Bond didn't want to fight him, not in public, not unless he couldn't avoid it. Looking around, he saw the long window across the back of the room, high up on the wall. Bond entered one of two cubicles and locked the door. He pulled on the warm jacket. Standing on the toilet bowl he was able to reach up for the window latch and twist it. As he did so, he heard someone shout. It was the man with the long nose.

Bond yanked the window down and pushed upwards, jumping for the slit of air. The window was exactly level with the terrace above. There was a twelve inch gap for the soil pipes. Directly ahead of Bond, on solid ground, ran an alley between two buildings. Bond's hands reached out and dug into the slush, grabbing what felt like stone and grass. He started to scramble through the window. Behind him there was a yell and a thunderous crack. Wood splintered. The cubicle shook. Bond felt the tremor as he rolled onto the snow on the terrace above. He saw the man leaping after him, the shattered cubicle door in a tattered heap next to the toilet. Bond lashed out with his foot and the boot smacked into the man's long nose. Bond heard the bone snap. Blood spurted down the man's face, but he still climbed after him. Bond kicked out again for the eyes, saw the shocked expression on the pinched face and watched as the man tumbled backwards.

Bond was on his feet and running. He heard another cry of alarm, glanced sideways, and caught sight of the second man, standing in the street outside the tavern, his finger pointing, directing someone to Bond's whereabouts.

Bond sprinted down this new street, oblivious to where it was taking him. Running parallel to the road below, he reckoned it still led to the town centre. There were fewer pedestrians here. A family group turned right towards a flight of stone steps linking the two streets. Bond was about to follow, when the grim faced guard materialised at the bottom and began to mount the steps two at a time. Bond ran on instinct. The pursuing guard was a big man, fat at the belly, and not built for sustaining speed. Bond had no trouble out running him.

The road bent left and narrowed. Small alleys and lanes opened left and right. Bond felt he was in a honeycomb of streets, interlocked at strange angles, non-uniform. He was reaching the centre of

town, the rabbit warren of tiny cobbled aisles and arcades, all pretty windows and snow draped doorways. There was grit on the streets. Bond skidded over the stones, getting no purchase on his flat soled boots. Bond twisted left and right, not sure of where he headed. He slunk under the eaves of a municipal building, some relic to tradesmen past. In front of him lay the main square, the low twin turrets of a Gothic church looming omnipotent, lit from inside with a ghostly hue. Next to it sat the squat town hall, a modern out of place hotel and the nineteenth century guild halls, their crests on display above the vestibules. The Latin inscriptions, the banners, mocked him. Bond had had his fill of shields and mottos. His tired eyes swung down to the rows of pine cabins, hatches down, laden with arts and crafts and sweetly scented foods. It was a Christmas market, packed full of people, presents in spangley holdalls, linking arms, all gas lamps, candles, winter colours and aromatic warm spices.

Bond paused on the threshold. He didn't know where the fat man was. Still lumbering down the alley, he hoped. Bond stepped into the square, hoping to hide himself among the busy stalls and cheery crowds. Something, he didn't know what, made him turn and look back down the lane. A single flash of orange lit up the melee.

Bond sank deeper into the market. Had the fat man seen him? No idea. He simply had to keep moving. Bond needed to cut across to one of the corners, find another of the little twisted avenues and head for the main road. He passed between two stalls, selling crepes and beer. A great combination for another time. A vendor shouted, waving his fist. Bond zigzagged between the barrows and the busy people, all occupied with their own lives, frivolous, unbeknown. Bond cut them up rough, brushing an arm, knocking a beaker of coffee, forcing a route to the far side. He burst through the final row of market traders, the nearest selling woodcut souvenirs shaped like the Schilthorn, and stopped dead.

Irma Bunt, flanked by the man with the broken and bloody nose, was striding purposefully into the market square. Christ! How in God's name? Bond hardly finished the thought. The lips of the bitch curled. Bond saw it even at distance. He was spotted, exposed. Bond spun around and headed back into the market.

Disorientated, Bond moved through the throng. He bumped into the same couple whose coffee he'd overturned, accepted the stares, the delayed abuse, and pressed on. There was music in the air. It hadn't been noticeable on the town's borders, but now, in the open space, unencumbered by walls and overhanging roofs, he could hear the strains of 'The Christmas Waltz.' Cahn and Styne hardly sounded less festive. It was a morose dirge to accompany his flight. Every chord seemed to suck him further from safety.

Bond found the main road out of the square and took it. Fighting against the flow of bodies he kept looking about him, left and right, forward and back, looking for orange. There it was! Not the Fraulein, but one of her hoods, channelling through the forest of bodies towards him. Only one. Where were the other two? Where was Bunt? Was he being cut off, trapped in a pincer move? Bond didn't have the time to think. He switched direction again, pushing through the men and women, apologising, ignoring. The new guard pressed on too, almost serene in his spring like step. Bond started to choke. Involuntary, panicked, he spun.

A nozzle flashed. Bond jumped. The camera bulb went off directly in his face. It was held by a seven foot tall polar bear. The fake plastic jaws laughed at him. Bond shoved the bear-man aside. The

human marionette was still laughing, the haw-haw noise amplified by Bond's nerves. There wasn't anyone ahead of him, no streaks of tell-tale orange. He vaguely got the impression of the bear snapping more photos, more flashes blinking across the heads of the crowd.

The music was increasing in volume. Bond realised he had inadvertently muscled his way into a queue. There was a small window-booth ahead selling tickets to an ice dance. The poster advertised it as 'Grosser Eiskarneval.' Bond pushed his way through and dug in the coat pocket. Earlier he'd heard some francs rattling. Luckily, the pocket contained more than enough for his entrance fee.

He found himself facing the ice rink, the one he'd seen all those minutes, those hours ago from the mountain top. Four pairs of skaters were performing an elaborate routine to a piece of Euro-pop, something about Christmas trees. Bond skirted the arena, where mobile stalls plied their fast food trade. He ignored the girl who tried to offer him a set of skates.

Bond glanced behind. The guard had barged through the pay station. No one had the inclination to stop him. Bond slowed. The man was coming on fast. Bond tensed. Reflexes built up over years of intense training kicked in. The weariness mattered not. This was instinct, survival, glory. Bond ducked between two vans, one sizzling with frankfurters, the other incongruously selling crème de glace. The guard tried to take the turn, but Bond tripped him, his open hand thumping across the man's neck. As the guard spread-eagled himself, Bond brutally trod on his spine, heel down, stepping over the wriggling body. There was an obdurate groan. Bond snapped his heel back as he walked away, cracking it on the man's forehead. Aware of the sudden stares, of an astonished cry from a trader, Bond vanished into the thick crowd.

One down, but too many remained. Stumbling, Bond shoved his way to the rink side barrier. There was an announcement; Bond didn't catch it, something about all partners together, for everyone to take to the ice. The band – Bond hadn't realised there was a small live orchestra – struck up the first bars of 'The Skater's Waltz' and spectators began to glide into the centre, forming long chains of bodies, joined by hands on waists, like an arctic conga.

Bond saw only one entrance and exit from the makeshift stadium. Irma Bunt would have a man on the door. But Bond couldn't see the bitch herself. And he was still too close to the fallen guard. If – no, when – he was discovered, it would mean another fight, another chase. Bond was all out of fight and all out of running. The muscles simply wouldn't respond. That last swift, brutal confrontation had seized the ultimate of his reserves. There was nothing left.

For a moment Bond thought about turning himself in to the police, but he didn't trust Bunt or Blofeld to let him sweat the night out in a cell. They might well have the local force in their pocket anyway; after all they blatantly paraded around with machine guns at the clinic. No, he had to hide, he had to go to ground, to rethink his position, his tactic, and get word back to that dull grey building in London., a building and city which seemed so distant, not only half a continent away, but a whole different life away, secure, stable, not this Christmas card version of hell.

Bond stepped onto the ice, feeling the smooth surface under his rough boots. He didn't try to walk, but rather slid and skated across the rink, joining hands with a few loose dancers, avoiding the long snakelike trains that were forming concentric circles in the middle of the arena. A few minutes later, on the other side, Bond stepped off the ice, puffing, relieved he hadn't fallen and drawn attention to himself.

There was an empty table close to the ringside. He called for some gluhwein, handing over the last of his change. He didn't know if this was safety enough. Through the macabre Christmas pantomime before him, he could see another of the blunt orange guards easing his way around the rim of the dance floor. Damn! No respite for the wounded. Bond clenched and unclenched his fists. Shaking, he grasped the glass of mulled wine. A useful weapon, if it came to that. His mind searched for other possible implements; the chair, the table, his hands, his feet. He should never have sat down. His tired body started to sag. He felt the nausea, the contractions, the fear, felt it all pull on him. The efforts of the past few hours were catching, had caught him, and now he was trapped again, his last hope a public scene, an arrest, something to accuse the hunters of.

Bond perched, hunched over like a wounded bull, sipping at the hot glass, the last meal of the condemned man. He waited, tense. If he had any energy, if there was one ounce of battle, he needed it now. He waited like a pugilist preparing for the fifteenth round. It was only a matter of minutes. And when that moment came he had to be ready, to strike out one final time, to challenge and combat and run, run like the hunted fox flees from the hounds. Bond's muscles tightened, coiled, ready, to spring and bite. No, whatever else was going happen, there would be no easy surrender. Not today.

The bark of gunshots cracked overhead. Startled, he looked around, then up. The midnight firework display! The strains of 'White Christmas' started to ring hollow in the air. Even in bloody Switzerland, thought Bond. Worried the flashes of colour would give him away he turned up the collar on his coat and sunk even deeper into the plastic seat, staring at nothing but the few square feet of ice directly in front of him. No surrender. Not yesterday, not today, a new day; Christmas Day.

And Bond shouldn't be here. He thought about the white sands of L'Etate Calvi, the warm bed, the sumptuous food, Draco's sly smile, the one that said he knew something James Bond didn't, and Tracy. Dear, lovely, adorable Tracy. Those brilliant violet eyes, the smile that flashed and spun silver, the hands that caressed and soothed, the laughter, the kisses and the love. Love, thought Bond or sentiment? He couldn't find out here, in the Alps, cut asunder; he shouldn't be in bloody Murren chasing evil foxes, not any more. What had he said to Moneypenny? Resign from the secret service. He should have stuck with the promise. The rest of the world could deal with Blofeld. Or could it?

Bond shook. He felt his shoulders tremble. Not from cold, but from another encompassing numbness; futility. It was all finished. The guards were going to get him and the world would learn its fate from Blofeld's hands. There was nothing, not a single thing, a single person left to help him. Bond was alone, not unbowed, but beaten. The impending, certain tussle with the guards only had one outcome. The hunters would find the hunted. A pitched struggle, a brief affray, hand-to-hand blows, a knife, a gun disguised as a firework, a dead body splashed in the fresh yuletide snow, and it would at last be finished. He almost sighed with relief.

Sadly, the grip of failure succouring him, Bond stared at that small strip of ice, trying to think of one saving grace, one final chance to alter the future.

Out of the crowd of whirling celebrating figures, a slim girl, clad in a tight fitting jump suit and matching jacket, all in taupe, sped across the ice like an arrow and swished to a stop directly in Bond's eyesight. The tiny broken ice particles tapped his ankles.

Bond looked up. Astonished, he saw the violet eyes he'd been dreaming about.

"James!"

**Nineteen:**  
**Love to the Rescue**

Tracy was smiling, but it vanished as soon as she saw Bond's dishevelled appearance and haunted expression.

In an instant she was by his side, her arm wrapped around his shoulder and her warm soft lips pressing against his blistered, chilled mouth. Unable to raise the twitch of a smile, Bond simply held her close and whispered her name repeatedly in her ear. She broke the embrace, but kept him close, a gloved hand brushing the fringe of his hair away.

"Darling, you're in trouble," she stated. "What is it?"

"There are people after me," croaked Bond.

"Can I help?"

"I need to contact London," he answered, his voice strengthening. "Do you have a car? I have to get out of here."

"My car's outside," she nodded. Quickly the girl started to unlace her skating boots. She carried a haversack, slung from shoulder to hip, and inside it were her snow shoes.

As she packed her things, Bond looked warily around the arena. Across the far side of the skating rink, four large Catherine Wheels were spinning, showering the ice with sparks. Behind them as if emerging from the spiral of smoke, was Irma Bunt. Bond winced. He ducked his head, pulled the girl near and nuzzled her hair.

"It's good to see you, Tracy," he said.

"And you too, James," replied the girl. "Now – stay close to me."

She virtually had to pick him up out of his seat and drag him the first few steps. Bond's legs were leaden. Gradually, staggering most of the way, the girl led him through the melee and around the stadia.

Bond hugged her tight. He kept watching the way ahead, his senses primed for danger. At one point he saw the ominous flash of orange and black, lit up by another exploding rocket. Bond tensed, but the man was looking heaven wards, distracted by the clear white starburst. The girl dragged him on, passing the guard within a few yards, unseen, not safe, but amazingly on the way to freedom.

There was another entrance, slightly to one side, and Blofeld's men hadn't been clever enough, or numerous enough, to man it. They passed through, mingling with the spectators who thronged the exits leaving the Ice Carnival.

Bond could see Tracy's red Ford Cougar, parked several spaces away in a makeshift car park, the

surface of which was strewn with hay. The zippy little convertible had its top up. A rack holding two pairs of skis was bolted through the rim of boot. Eagerly he moved forward, a spring materialising in his step.

Then, just as suddenly, he pulled up. A black Mercedes Benz saloon was reversing, temporarily blocking the pedestrian exit. The man driving it was one of Blofeld's guards, unmissable in his uniform.

Bond pulled at Tracy's arm and she immediately saw the car and guessed his fear.

"Come here," she whispered, pulling him to her mouth again. "When we get to the car, go for the nearside door. I'll drive; you don't look as though you can manage it."

Still wrapped in a kiss, the girl walked him past the Mercedes Benz; the fug of the exhaust blowing at their ankles. After it, they virtually sprinted to the XR7. Bond pulled open the door and leapt inside, sinking as low as he could into the leather seat. The girl was already at the wheel and turning the ignition. The car's V8 engine roared into life and the girl slammed the gears into first and released the hand brake. The car jumped forward with a quick squeak of tyres on ice.

The guard had got out of the car and as the girl drove past, Bond had that unfathomable sensation of being watched. In the side mirror, Bond could see the guard staring after the Cougar, as if not quite certain who he'd seen.

"Maybe he didn't notice me," Bond muttered.

"I wouldn't go banco on that."

"Giving up bad habits, eh?"

The girl chuckled at the jest. "Not yet. Listen, James, there're some international phone booths outside the post office; opposite the SFR station. Will they do?"

"That's good. I just hope I've enough time."

The girl was driving conservatively, for people were still walking the streets and taking troika rides. Bond looked over his shoulder, scanning the road behind.

"No sign of them yet," he commented.

"Or of someone saying thank you."

Bond looked at the girl's proud profile. She looked more alive than he'd ever seen her, almost radiant. Her skin was peachy, light, the lips moist and the luscious brown hair seemed to bounce and curl about her head. The lips were breaking into another sardonic smile.

"Thank you, Tracy," he said firmly. "You've got very sharp eyes."

Bond reached out and squeezed her hand on the steering wheel. She noticed the gesture and this

time her responding smile was gleefully welcoming. She leant over to kiss him quickly once more and turned back just in time to avoid colliding with an on-coming motor car.

“But keep them on your driving, darling.”

They made it to the train station in five minutes. Bond saw the big grey post office building opposite the main concourse. There was a row of three telephone booths against the front wall, lined up like empty glass coffins. The girl slowed to a halt at the kerbside and Bond stepped out.

“Hurry, James.”

Bond went to the first booth. He fished in his pocket for the few coins the girl had given him. He had about three minutes worth. That would be enough to speak the day’s code word and organise a reverse charge one-to-one call to M.

The bell at the other end of the line rang twice. Bond turned to check Tracy was still there. He didn’t have to; he wanted to. He wanted to see her face light up again. As he turned, so a big dark shadow, yellow eyes staring came speeding down the road. It took Bond a precious second to realise what he was looking at. Bearing down on the little red Cougar was a dirty great Mercedes Benz W112 saloon. He could see the uniformed guards crammed inside it. He could see the squat square shape of Irma Bunt in the passenger seat. He could see the stunted black lance sticking out of the rear window. Bond ducked at the very moment the MP5 started its death rattle.

The booth shattered. Shards of glass and metal flew around him as he curled into a ball on the floor of the decimated phone box. Bond nudged the door open and it swung off its hinges. He could hear the girl screaming for him. Bond made for the red Cougar, more bullets winging their way around him.

The Mercedes had passed the XR7 and the gun man was leaning back, his aim and stance awkward. The girl was already spinning the wheel, turning the Cougar in the road. The passenger door was open. Bond skidded up to it and hopped in as the last of the gunfire erupted, cutting the icy tarmac at his feet. The girl drove away, went only as far as the end of the station and took a hairpin turn down an embankment and over a level crossing. The Mercedes had trouble manoeuvring and the driver performed a desperate three point turn, wheels spinning.

“Good girl,” chivvied Bond, anxiously looking behind him.

“They tried to kill you!” she exclaimed.

“Occupational hazard,” said Bond nonchalantly. “Let’s get out of here, Tracy!”

The girl needed no encouragement. She was already slewing the car down the access road to the valley highway, the rear of the car fishtailing as it slid on the compacted ice. She accelerated out of the swishing movement, scraping the wall of ice the snow ploughs had built by the roadside.

The highway followed the contour of the shelf of the valley, taking a wide left hand arc. On both sides, over plains of undisturbed lilywhite ground, the crystal spikes of trees rose. Behind the conifers the craggy peaks of the Alps watched them like oppressive gods. The further they travelled

from Murren the deeper the darkness, until it embroiled the little car in the night, until only the head lamps, their white ghostly beams refracted off the ice, offered solace. Even the once clear moonlight blue sky had become covered in a sea of grey threatening clouds.

There were more threats from behind. The twin yellow spots pursued them up the road. The girl was a good driver, but the frozen roads tested her skills and she often had to go slower than she might have wanted to avoid crashing or spinning. Bond watched as the big black torpedo of the Mercedes Benz caught them. The windows were wound down and from both sides men were hanging from the car, guns at the ready. The shots smacked into the snow walls. Something winged off from the side of the Cougar. The girl made no comment, merely spun the wheel into the next bend and executed a fine braking turn as they wiggled out the other side.

The Mercedes driver was not so clever. The rear end collided into the wall with a thump and a scrape, dragging dirty snow onto the roof of the car.

They were into a straightish run and the girl stepped down on the pedals, using the racing engine to outstrip the lumber-some Mercedes. The road signs indicated a steep gradient and hairpins. Bond tensed as the girl took the first bend too fast, slamming unceremoniously into the side of the road. She corrected the mistake, but lost precious seconds. Bond heard the growl of the Mercedes. In a moment it was replaced by the crackle of gunfire. The girl battled round the next bend, the power brakes cutting in with the merest touch, controlling the drive while the wheels seemed to want to move in four different directions.

The steep slope zigzagged again and again, descending from the shelf to the trough of the valley in a matter of half a mile. The Cougar seemed to have the edge, but the handling of the driver behind ignored the dangers. Spurred on by the chase he took risks which kept him close. At the bottom the turns, the road made one final flat arc. The girl expertly glided around the wide U-shape. The Mercedes, sensing an opportunity to close the gap, over-steered the corner and the car drove off the road across a blanket of snow, the wheels sending waves of snow bucketing around the car, the mistake slowing them.

They were approaching the valley town of Lauterbrunnen. Some of the dense night was lifted by the glow of the village. On the outskirts Bond saw a makeshift sign marked 'Stock Car Eis Rennen.' Beyond it, down a track marked with an illuminated Christmas tree, he could see crowds of people and a floodlit stadium.

"Turn left," he instructed. "That crowd might distract them."

The girl turned into the lane, still at speed. Someone jumped athletically out of her way. Up ahead a single red and white pole barred the road. Without any thought, she smashed straight into it, the wood splintering on the lip of the bonnet. Another sudden turn to the left, past an astonished group of spectators and the Cougar rammed head on through two hay bales.

The girl struggled with the steering wheel as the red sports car skated across the ice track. Two dozen multicoloured cars, Fiats, Citroens, Fords, Triumphs, were howling around the oval arena, the semblance of a competition, a motor derby in progress. They'd just driven into the middle of the stock car race.

The Cougar slammed into the side of the nearest car, a Volkswagen of some description, painted in green and gold. A big black 6 emblazoned on its doors and roof. The girl squirmed. The VW driver's mouth was hanging open. Automatically he slowed and received a shunt up his rear from a fast moving Fiat.

"Looks like we've hit the rush hour," quipped Bond, grabbing the arm rest with both hands for balance.

Behind them the Mercedes followed the exact same route and skidded in front of two wailing whirling stock cars.

The girl burst between two Mini-Coupes, one red and displaying the number 1. The driver kept pace, determined not to be out done by this fanciful interloper. The far bend came up on them quick. The girl committed herself to the turn, angling across the Mini, taking his racing line. The Mini slipped behind and then pulled out, going wide and re-taking the head as it exited the bend. The back end of the Cougar slipped. There was a thud as the other Mini gave them an unwelcome shunt.

Bond had a vague impression of the big black saloon causing chaos as it entered the bend, cutting a swathe across several driving lines. Around him hundreds of stunned faces blurred and blended into a carousel of colour and noise. He could hear a commentator, his excited voice breaking out over the tannoy, trying desperately to explain what was happening and where these two unmarked teams had come from.

The Cougar bounced. Another car had rammed them. The girl spun the wheel over, blocking the overtaking manoeuvre, absorbing a second crash. Another stock car, avoiding the incident, overshot the entrance to the bend and careered head on into the wood and hay barriers. A green Citroën slammed into it and both cars came to a standstill, blocking half the track. The drivers struggled free and leapt for the safety of the stands, gesturing madly and shouting at whoever would listen that chaos was in full ensue.

"James!" shouted the girl. "How do we get out?"

Bond had no idea. He was too absorbed in the moment. The stands passed by so fast, the other cars zoomed up and down and across them, the squeal of wheels and engines, the roar of the crowd, the smell of diesel, of oil, the grip, the sheer urgency, the unstable clamorous sensation. He felt the Cougar collide with another car, playing dodgems, the wheels scraping, bouncing off each other. The girl's face was a mask of concentration. Among all the craziness, she was almost serene, her eyes flicking to the mirrors, her feet pumping the breaks, the gas, the clutch, her hand shuffling the gear stick up and down, all the time a fixed, grimace on her face, which split into a grin when she made a good move or passed a car. She might want to escape, but there was more to Tracy than fear; she was revelling in the sensation too, giving in to it, accepting it, and fighting what ever was there to be fought.

The black Mercedes appeared in the side mirror. The driver was making headway on the straight, passing at a ridiculous speed. The girl spotted it in the rear view and evasively moved alongside a green and white striped Fiat. She kept pace, speeding almost hub to hub. The driver inclined his helmeted head an inch her way, inspecting the competition with some surprise and not a little fear. Bond offered him a twitch of a smile.

The Mercedes entered the bend just behind, but even on the outside line, the driver caught them and all three cars exited the curve level. The Mercedes crashed sideways and the Fiat, caught in the crossfire, slammed against the Cougar. Bond felt the whole car jerk under the assault. The girl ignored the bumps and twisted the wheel, smashing the Fiat back against the saloon. The race driver gave a desperate shout and tried to accelerate out of the problem. The two fighting cars kept pace, the Mercedes slinging across again, the wheel arches crunching together, white hot splinters breaking off the chassis.

Looking through the stock car, Bond could see the intense vivid expression on Irma Bunt's wicked face. Creased with exhilaration, the ogre sensed the kill. Her teeth pulled back, bared, snapping instructions to the animals under her command. Bond saw the man in the rear seat raise the MP5, taking aim. He didn't know if the girl saw it too, but she spun the wheel one last time, harder, faster and at a sharp angle.

The front valance of the Cougar ploughed into the wheel arch of the Fiat. The trapped racing car bucked and crashed against the Mercedes, cutting across its course. The Mercedes seemed to ride up the side of Fiat. It must have hit something, thought Bond, some debris on the track from one of the other smashes. For a moment it hung suspended in the air and then it rolled over, the momentum still carrying it forward, sliding over the track towards the stands.

Bond didn't see exactly what happened next, but there was a collision. Another racer had found the Mercedes directly in his path. There was no time to avoid the inevitable. At first there was simply a sickening thud and a grinding of metal on metal. Then something popped, the gas tank of the saloon, he expected, and suddenly the undercarriage caught fire. The guards were trapped upside down, struggling to unbuckle and scramble clear. Bond saw the flabby arms and shoulders of the Bunt woman forcing their way through a window. And then the explosion happened. A massive sheet of flame shot upwards and engulfed both cars. The sound and shock of the blast stunned the crowd into silence. Over the whizzing and crackling fireball and the droning hum of the speeding cars, Bond could hear a new sound: the screams of burning living bodies. The pig like wail of Irma Bunt seemed to lodge itself inside his ear. The bitch was dying a horrid death. Coldly he cast the sound away.

"We can get out there," Bond shouted, pointing to the rough and ready pit stop.

"If you say so," replied the girl, took the exit and smashed through another control barrier.

She still drove the battered Cougar as if their lives depended on it. The adrenaline was still thumping. Bond considered that Tracy had probably never experienced a thrill quite like it and it had intoxicated her. A few hands of baccarat and a fast drive along the French coast hardly counted. A few months ago, Tracy would have wished this as an opportunity to maim herself, now it was a different thrill, one of exhilaration and ultimately, relief. Drunk on it, she sped on into the dark night, a darkness which no longer seemed so grey to James Bond.

## **Twenty: Bloody Snow**

"I told you that crowd would discourage them," Bond said shortly.

The girl laughed, taking the left fork for the main highway.

"We didn't even stop for the prize!"

They drove in silence for a while. Bond advised the girl to keep off the highway as much as possible and she eventually took a circular route via Saxeten. From there they could head through the pass to Interlaken. The heavy clouds started to shed their weight and snowflakes the size of golf balls started to drift across the Cougar's twin beams. The girl turned up the heater to full, to melt the snow as it touched the screen. The wipers brushed the water away in dirty streaks.

"Why were those men trying to kill you, James?" she eventually asked.

Bond had sensed Tracy's concern during the long fidgety silence. He didn't want to hide anything from her. Whether this was an official secret or not, the girl deserved to know what was going on.

"Do you remember your father got some information for me, about a man called Blofeld?" started Bond.

"Yes; I remember."

"Well, I came here to find him. Your father's information was correct. Blofeld's an insane genius, Tracy, and this time he's developing biological weapons. Right here in the Alps. That's why I had to contact London. It's also why they tried to kill me, because I know too much about them."

The girl nodded, her brow creasing. "I thought you said you were a policeman?"

"I am."

She laughed. "Don't be ridiculous, James, I know exactly what you are. I forced Papa to explain everything. He's taken quite a shine to you, you know."

"Has he, now? And what about his daughter; does she forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive, James, now I've found you."

"Which reminds me, what exactly were you doing so near to Piz Gloria?"

"I have a new interest in life," declared the girl, all puffed up.

"Winter sports?" smiled Bond. "Very wholesome."

“Just one winter sportsman. And Papa told me where to find him.”

“Well, I’m more than pleased he did. God, Tracy, that was hell. I really thought for a moment, before you came that I’d had it, that I...”

“No, James, don’t tell me. I don’t want to hear it. You can’t think like that. There’s me to think about too, you know.”

“And millions of others,” said Bond distractedly. “If only I’d got through to London.”

“At least you’ll get another chance.”

“Yes, but when?”

Bond sat back into the warm seat. Perhaps Tracy was right. He surreptitiously inspected her. She’d been magnificent all along, he thought; would I ever find a girl like this again? She’s everything I need. She’s beautiful, adventurous, exciting. She’s brave, she’s resourceful, and she loves me – he’d heard her say it. Maybe it was time to stop all these casual, untidy affairs, all the Ruby’s and Katarina’s of the world, and think about the future and a life with someone, one person he could care for and love, someone for himself, uncluttered, wonderful, adorable. It had to be Tracy; there simply couldn’t be anyone else.

The snow was falling harder now. The wipers were struggling to keep the snow off the wind shield. She caught his eyes watching her.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“I’m thinking about us.”

“What about us?”

“Stop the car, Tracy; I need to tell you something.”

Momentarily, the girl looked concerned. “Stop the car?”

Bond nodded. “It’s getting too difficult to travel anyway, you can’t see. Pull into the trees.”

For some time they had been driving through a forest. The tall pines lined the roadside and their overlapping branches formed clutches of shelter. The girl ran the Cougar as far up to the trees as she could, the tyres losing grip and spinning as she did so.

“Well, now we’re in, I doubt we’ll get out,” said the girl matter-of-factly.

“That’s okay; we’ll have to use your skis.”

The girl busied herself, pulling things from the rear seat, like scarves, a thick fur coat and a blanket. Abruptly Bond grabbed her hands and held them tight. Immediately she sat upright and looked at him, searching his face for some clue about his intention. Bond thought she’d have been worried,

but now they were bedded in for the night, she was practical and relaxed. The faintest trace of unease crossed her face.

“Tracy, I’m still work On Her Majesty’s Secret Service,” he started. “There are things an agent does which put his life in danger, and the lives of those around him. You saw that tonight. When I work, I can’t be concerned with anybody other than myself.”

The girl half shut her eyes. When she opened them again, they had turned misty, but there were no tears.

“I understand,” she said. “We’ll just have to go on the way we are. You running off and leaving me every few weeks and me...”

“No.”

Bond cut her short. His fingers moved to stroke her cheek and she pressed the back of his hand, holding it to her face.

“I’ll have to find something else to do,” said Bond. “I love you, Tracy. I know I’ll never find another girl like you. Will you marry me?”

Bond didn’t know what reaction to expect. He’d never asked for such a commitment from anyone, not even from himself, and now he was asking two people. He was certain, more certain than anything he’d known in his life; but the girl looked almost sorrowful and for the first time he could remember, scared.

“Do you mean it?”

“Yes. I mean it.”

Now Tracy took his face in her hands and kissed him, over and over, little warm caresses that told her she loved him and wanted nothing else in the world except to be with him. She didn’t have to say ‘yes’ because they both knew the answer.

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Bond had no idea how the guards tracked them down. He had no way of knowing that Blofeld’s informants were numerous and prone to favour. He didn’t know that the local authorities accepted Blofeld’s bribes and his charitable and commercial contributions. Bond had no inkling that when there had been a dreadful fatal accident at a stock car rally in Lauterbrunnen, and it was discovered the Mercedes Benz W112 was registered to the Bleuchamp Institute, the Count was immediately informed.

Bond never realised that Blofeld’s men were searching for a red Cougar from the early dawn, that the police and the mountain guides had been alerted, that not one but three Air Rescue helicopters

were scouring the blankets of fresh snow, searching from the skies for the fugitives. They did not search to capture them or arrest them. Their instructions were merely to inform the Count, who was most anxious to renew the acquaintance of two very special and difficult patients: two violent youngsters, who had begged for the Count's help to cure them of their sickness. It was a very sad story of childhood abuse and the wilful misuse of their bodies through addictive drugs. The Count could not have turned away from such an appallingly tragic case. Alas, they had not responded well to the treatment. They had become restless and escaped. It was very unfortunate. The Count gave strict orders the couple were not to be approached except by the Institute's specialist team.

"These two people are not criminals," he said magnanimously. "They are two very sick individuals with an ailment which needs permanent and expert attention."

Bond and the girl had spent the night in the car, huddled together in the chill, wrapped in each other's arms and several blankets, using the old adage of body heat to provide warmth. Once the car was covered in a layer of snow, creating an insulating carpet, they did experience some semblance of comfort, though it was never more than tepid. The sun rose a little before seven, no more than four hours after they'd halted. Bond was keen to get moving, shoved open the passenger door and released the skis from the back of the car.

It was a glorious Christmas morning. The red sky seemed to fill the earth with beauty. Everything looked still and unharmed. It was quiet and tranquil, only a gentle breeze rocking the tree tops hinted at the blizzard which had deposited such bright, sparkling powder.

They skated on skis following the path of the road and the exercise made them sweat and re-heated their cold muscles. As they skied, a helicopter came bobbing up the valley, skimming the forests at the bottom and then rising as it moved towards them. Bond glanced up at it, watching as it flew high, before swinging back and circling overhead. It was a Bell Ranger, similar to the one at Piz Gloria. Bond could see the emblems of Rega, the Swiss Air Rescue. They're probably worried in case we get caught in a fresh drift, he concluded. After a few minutes, the Alpine emergency services moved on, and Bond didn't give them another thought because his mind was elsewhere, thinking about the wonderful girl, who, only hours ago, he had committed his life to.

Half an hour later and they could see the slopes stretching down to a vivid green forest. This wasn't high in the Alps, but the glacial valleys fanned out like bird's feet and cut deep towards Interlaken. Taking the broad shallow valleys seemed the easiest way to reach their destination. The sun hadn't quite melted the surface snow and the skiing was slow as the blades scythed hard into the softening fall. Bond managed to exchange excited smiles with the girl as she laughed and called out to him while they carved over ridges and around knuckles. Would every Christmas be like this, Bond wondered.

He thought of the plans they'd made as she snuggled next to him in the car, of when they could marry – sooner not later, they both agreed – of where to hold the ceremony and who to invite. Tracy insisted they honeymooned in Monaco. Bond wasn't sure if she was kidding him, for they humoured each other constantly, especially when discussing possible addresses; he favoured Tunbridge Wells, she extravagantly preferred Venice. Most of all, they talked about their future, not as individuals, but as Mr and Mrs James Bond, and it relit the fire which had burned so intensely in the autumn. Papa, she told him, could provide everything, but Bond wouldn't hear of it. A husband had to support his wife through his own endeavours; he would not be happy living off handouts, however grand and

well intentioned. Bond still had the years' worth of wages he'd won that night at Le Hermitage, and he owned the flat off the King's Road; for now, that would have to suffice. They would offer him a desk job at the Service, until he found something better or more active to do. Tracy suggested active was best: she did not want him putting on weight.

Yes, he considered, definitely the right girl and at the right time. Not one to worry about his emotions, Bond for once felt safe and secure and very, very happy, almost stupidly, distractedly so. That was when Bond realised Blofeld's men were still on the hunt.

They'd made it almost half way down the highest valley when the throb of engines reached them. The shadow ran across their path, a puddle of darkness with a spinning wheel. Bond glanced over his shoulder and saw the Ranger helicopter, decked with that stark livery, the same as everything at Piz Gloria. Bond executed a wide turn, so he could see the helicopter as it flew behind them, blocking the sun. As he watched orange and black coated figures dropped like stones from the whirling monster above. Their feet were already strapped onto skis and as soon as each man made the short jump, he took off down the escarpment.

Bond shouted at the girl to keep going. He felt his stomach begin to curl. There were five of them. Bond knew they would all be good skiers. They would all know the terrain. It was a repeat of last night's battle, played out in the rising sunshine. The race was on again.

Frantically, they peeled over the horn of a ridge and sailed down the crest, cutting across the piste, making for the next valley, which they knew led straight on to Interlaken. They snaked down the slope, the girl's parallel turns precise and rhythmic; finishing one turn, she immediately set herself for the next, the inside leg softer, steering into the arc. Bond was straighter, his bends shallower, aiming for speed over balance, his poles hardly touching the ground. The sound of gunfire made the girl cry out in alarm. Bond urged her on. The bullets were not near them; not yet. They had good distance to spare.

Behind them the wake of their turns spanned out across the snow, inches deep, feet wide, small hills of powdered debris kicked up from the side-cuts. The black shapes followed them down and seven trails led down the valley, the straggling threads of a mountain giant's hair. Bond could almost feel the skis bending under the pressure as his hips and ankles moved forwards, cambering the curve, leaning into the slope, gripping as he finished the turn.

The girl was keeping up, just. Bond heard more gunfire, heard her scream, and thought she'd been hit. The bullets had whistled around them. The aim was too close. The guards had come well within range. Grimly, Bond whooshed into the next valley, seeing the long steep gradient descend to the forest of pines. He was only vaguely aware of the sign which read 'Avalanche' in three different languages. The girl followed him.

After only a few seconds Bond suddenly became aware of how still everything was. He could hear the wind rushing past his ears, but there was no other noise, no birds calling, no motors running, no excited shouts of glee, no deadly smack of bullets in snow, no bark of gunfire. Nothing. He felt for a moment as if he must be in space, in a vacuum, where there is no sound. Then he heard the swish of two pairs of skis. Only two: his and the girl's. Bond risked a look behind. The guards had not followed them down, but had paused at the high entrance to the valley. He turned back, cautiously elated. Safety was in sight. The guards had given up. But somehow that did not feel right. Everything had

been too easy.

As if to answer his own fears, Bond heard two loud thumps, close together, high up the valley sides. They were followed by two identical thuds. Immediately there was a deafening crash, like a bolt of lightning when it split the air, and an almost simultaneous boom of thunder. From the corner of his eye Bond witnessed a sight to send terror squeezing his spine. A ledge of snow, tens of feet deep and piled twice as high, overhung the summit, precarious, tilting. Two sparks of colour, two flares, had erupted just above the towering jetty. There was an explosion of sound deep inside the shelf of snow and suddenly, with that single rolling roar, the whole side of the valley seemed to tumble towards him.

Avalanche!

The bastards had invoked death. And it swept down the crags towards him. And towards Tracy. My God! All of sudden Bond was afraid and not just for his own life. He shouted for her to follow him, to head for the trees, but he'd no idea if she heard him. How fast did an avalanche travel? A tidal wave of snow, starting almost motionless, tipping, and then a sudden fury, a powerful, unstoppable landslide, destroying everything in its path, tearing up the earth, decimating the landscape. And it would only take seconds. At full speed they travelled as fast as trains, one hundred miles an hour or more, with the force of a hurricane. You couldn't out run an avalanche.

Bond pointed his skis downhill, hit the glade with his poles and went screaming down the white chasm. The onrush of air seemed to slow him down. All he became aware of was the rushing, roaring behemoth of sound that grew louder and louder every second. The ground was shaking. The snow seemed to quiver and splinter, great cracks appeared in front and to the side, the whole surface of snow was on the move, sucking him downhill, dragging him under the enormous weight of gravity. Bond felt his knees start to go. Where was the girl? Close by, he couldn't see her. Over his shoulder there was a glimpse of brown. Then it was gone, lost in a godforsaken thunderstorm of ice and wind.

The tumult of sound was on him now, tearing at his ear drums, pummeling his back and chest with echoes and punching vibrations. There was snow everywhere, great clouds of it, billowing around his head and rising at his ankles. He was almost into the trees. It had taken twenty or thirty seconds, yet the moment was lost to Bond. Time had ceased. Life, his heart, his soul, seemed to leap up his throat.

He hit the tree line only yards in front of the huge prow of snow. Bond tore into the forest, twisting left, right, funnelling between the big strong trunks. Where was the point of the wave? Didn't avalanches follow the deepest channel, like a river of water? Was he safe, or had he skied too close to the apex of danger?

There was an ear splitting crash as the first of the pines took the brunt of the assault and snapped apart like Christmas crackers. The froth of white reached his blades, covering them and it was only his own forward momentum that kept him upright, skimming out from the foot of the monstrous breaker. He slid right, shimmied, tried to retain balance and then it was all over. The wall of snow, dragging torn timbers with it, slammed into him and knocked the breath far out of his body. His chest was squeezed, his ribcage contracted, his head pounded, buffeted left and right, back to front, all together. The skis were lost, torn from the bindings, his goggles ripped away. He tumbled, trying

to curl into a ball, to roll with the torrent, to stay near the roof of the icy mobile tomb, to stay alive. As he rolled on the sea of snow, his hands found their way to his face and he held them there, tight and firm. His body was catapulted across the surface of the rolling fearsome wave, dragged under, spewed out and then pulled back down. The wall of destruction ploughed on, digging up trees by the roots, hurling them aside, tossing loose rocks and boulders, changing the valley for ever. Then the head of the beast left Bond behind and charged on through the forest, its power slowly dissimulating as the massed banks of pines finally held firm. The last remnants of its awful sickening power poured out of the forest, the snout rising, tumbling and somersaulting as it spread six, eight, ten feet tall across a once tranquil meadow.

Bond came to rest under snow. He was breathing, but there was a heavy weight across the whole of his body. He desperately tried to move his legs, but they were stuck firm. Not broken, he couldn't feel pain, but rooted, hemmed in by a thick layer of snow and ice. He couldn't be buried too deep or the sheer mass would have pulverised him. Perhaps turning himself into a human ball really had worked. The hands which were in front of his face gave him a tiny pocket of air. Bond stared into its blackness. He tasted blood. Slowly he pushed his right hand away from his face, aware that the compacted snow might collapse into the little haven and suffocate him. Fingers first, gently scratching at the dark matter, Bond started to prise upwards, forcing a thin pillar-like tunnel through the debris. It seemed to take ages, nudging and cajoling the ice particles aside, tickling at the thick ceiling of his burial chamber until, without warning and at almost the full extension of his arm, the hand wriggled free as it broke the surface. Now, having created more space around his body where his arm had originally rested, he retracted it and started to punch upwards, enlarging the tunnel on both sides until he could see the crisp clear blue sky. Bond sucked in the fresh, cold air and began to force his other arm up the channel. As the weight came off his shoulders, he found he was able to dig across his chest, pushing mounds of loose snow away from him until, with an effort he was able to struggle free, yanking hard on his trapped feet, and claw his way out onto what passed for ground.

Bond spat out blood. He'd bitten the side of his mouth. Another fresh wound bled under his hair line, the evidence a trickle of red slime covering his face. Nothing else appeared to be damaged, thank God. He had been carried some way into the forest and it had been this which had saved him. The multitude of obstacles had slowed the onslaught and the avalanche had weakened on the flanks as it tried to break through the trees. The centre of the tumult had decimated the wood, but Bond had headed to the right hand side and missed the main assault. Everywhere the ground was scarred with overturned trees and branches. Churned up soil had coloured the lilywhite snow a dirty brown and what had once been smooth was a mass of channels, humps, dips and ridges.

Bond's thought turned to Tracy. Where had the girl last been? She'd not been ahead of him. He'd heard a scream, but it could have been his imagination, or it might have been the sound of fury. Bond scanned the devastation, keeping his head low, tucked behind a large shattered spruce. He saw her. At least he saw her arm. It was sticking awkwardly out of the snow about one hundred yards further up the piste, but even more to the right. She'd been sensible and kept to the higher, safer ground. Bond was about to make for her, when he saw two black figures skiing and stepping gingerly over the crumbled surface.

Blofeld's men! As he watched, the two guards dug her limp body free and dragged her up the broken piste. The helicopter had returned and landed on the killing ground, the rotors spinning gently, engine ticking over. Bond kept watching, his mouth dry and his spirits sinking as the girl was

lumbered into the aircraft. The men followed her and the machine started its whirring, buzzing cry and ascended into the air.

Bond stared despairingly after the black metal bird and grimaced. He wanted to shout, but the words wouldn't come. His fist reached out, sunk onto the snow and that final effort exhausted him. Bond's head collapsed after his hand and he passed out.

## **Twenty One: Demolition Deal**

Two days later, James Bond still had that image in his mind: two guards hauling Tracy out of the crush of snow. And he still felt physically sick with the memory. The very first day of his engagement and he'd failed to protect the woman he loved. How could he let it happen? He shook his head, contemplating, trying to sort out why he'd been so pre-occupied that morning, why he hadn't detected the danger. He told himself it was not his fault, that given the blizzard conditions of Christmas Eve, the rescue helicopters would have been out in force, and Blofeld's men could easily have joined them, under the disguise of offering local aid. It would be the sort of gesture expected of a Count. But he knew the real reason: he'd let his guard slip. The life of a secret agent was fraught with danger and so were the lives of those he lived with. A genuine realisation, not simply a few spoken words, whispered in a moment of predilection in a snow bound car, hit him low. Bond knew the fault was his own. Yet he tried to justify it. Was this what it could be like, married life? Constantly assessing and reassessing one's failures? Bond was angry. He was angry with himself. He was angry with the totem of domestic bliss. He was angry with the bastard black heart of Ernst Stavro Blofeld. And as the day wore on, his ire froze and could not be melted.

Bond had been found by a patrol of skiers about an hour after the avalanche. He'd recovered from his faint and struggled down the bruised blanket of snow, a weary, battered body, trudging, slipping and sliding over the uneven surface.

He had been taken straight to hospital, where he gave a false name, and insisted on seeing the British Consul representative. It was the Consul who put him back in contact with London, although not until six in the evening.

M was already at work. A crisis had broken out at lunchtime and he'd arrived at the office almost before he'd digested Mrs Hammond's turkey and mince pies.

M couldn't explain fully over the phone, but Bond knew what had happened. Blofeld's Christmas gift, a phial of Virus Omega, had arrived at the United Nations, along with a message of good will to no man quoting his demands. King Wenceslas he was not.

M wanted Bond back in London on the Boxing Day flight from Zurich. He was reluctant to go. Bond neglected to mention Tracy, but she was upper most in his thoughts and having lost her once, he hated the idea of abandoning her again. He didn't tell the Admiral, dressing up his feelings by suggesting he could best provide help close to Piz Gloria, close to the enemy.

M wouldn't hear of it. 007 had to come back and report.

Grimacing, Bond boarded the flight. The Consul man, a bespectacled formal chap called Hargreaves who seemed out of his depth, ensured he made it.

Bond spent Boxing Day afternoon and evening debriefing. He'd been given one hour to change and smarten up. Aching and tired, Bond showered and seized the first suit in his wardrobe, a double breasted navy number.

M greeted him formally. The first debrief took only half an hour, during which Bond sketched the days at Piz Gloria. Then he was required to relate the story again, in detail. This time the Chief of Staff and an attaché from the Ministry of Defence attended the debriefing and a stenographer was brought in to take notes. The poor girl was a bit young for some of the racy elements of the tale and she turned a distinct shade of deep pink on several occasions. M, as was his manner, ignored her discomfort and covered his own by noisily refilling and lighting his pipe, even if it didn't need doing. Her agony was doubled when required to quote back Bond's answers and explanations. Once all the facts were laid bare, and the secretary, much to her relief, had left, M called in an expert on biological warfare, who confirmed that if Blofeld's Virus Omega was genuine, then his method of attack was at the least very dangerous and at worst lethal on a pandemic scale. Finally they received a prognosis from a medical professor, who agreed it was feasible to use deep hypnosis successfully in the fashion Bond had witnessed, although it often eventually resulted in severe trauma to the mesmerised.

It was late in the night when M sat alone with Bond in his office, repetitively lighting matches to his pipe.

The buzz of the intercom cut through the snap of Swan Vestas. It was a call from the United Nations building, New York. For many years the Service had employed an inside man working with the British delegation. While strictly speaking banned under U.N. regulations, this gentle form of spying was common practice among the bigger nations. M found the whole thing rather amusing; even the politicians could spot the odd man out in most of each other's teams.

"M here," he growled. "Yes... What's the outcome likely to be...? I see... All right... Thank you."

M replaced the red scrambler phone and looked at Bond, who had taken to pacing the room while the Admiral received the call.

"No decision has been announced yet," declared M. "Of course, there's a total news blackout, but my informant was very plain. They're going to buy Blofeld off."

Bond heaved a disappointed sigh. His shoulders hunched over and he leant against the window frame, studying his tight reflection in the pane of sooty glass.

"And the price?" he asked.

"Amnesty," answered M. "A full pardon for all past crimes and full recognition of his title – when he retires into private life as the Count de Bleuchamp."

M tapped the barrel of his pipe on his ashtray, the base of an upturned mortar shell.

"He seems to set great store by that," he mused quietly. "Curious thing snobbery."

Bond had seen enough of it in recent months: at Royale, at the College of Arms, in the face of Irma Bunt, but not in the countenance of Blofeld. That was pure greed, mixed with mockery. Blofeld didn't want to join the establishment, only to embarrass it.

“When will they conclude the deal, Sir?”

“Blofeld wants to know the Council’s decision by midnight the day after tomorrow, the twenty eighth.”

Bond crossed to the desk, suddenly animated. He placed both hands firmly on its edge, the frustration tipping into fury. There was antagonism not only in his voice, but in his manner, palms down, flat on the leather top, leaning, almost snorting. He was charging in.

“Sir, that gives us time to get to Piz Gloria first and in force. We could...”

“No, OO7,” M’s hand was final, his tone like a rapier to the throat. “My instructions from the P.M. are clear. We wait for the Council’s decision.”

“But, Sir, we can destroy the institute and Blofeld’s virus with it.”

“It’s been rejected as too risky. This isn’t a couple of nuclear explosions like before, although God knows that was hell enough, this could lead to worldwide famine, starvation, economic crisis and we all know that’s a recipe for revolution and war.”

M shook his head, as if he was only now starting to comprehend the fiendish nature of the plot, how well it had been executed, how brilliant their adversary really was.

“Dear God, those poor girls,” he murmured. “We don’t know how many there are, let alone where they are.”

“But if we destroy Piz Gloria,” continued Bond forcefully, agitated and dismayed by M’s lethargy, “we’ll destroy the centre of communications that controls the girls. Without Blofeld’s voice, those girls can do nothing.”

M trusted Bond’s observations from Piz Gloria. His instinct, like his agent’s, was to go on the offensive, but this time, with such a human cost at stake it simply wasn’t a viable decision. They would have called it a tactical withdrawal during the war.

“I have my orders, OO7. And now you have yours: forget it.”

“And the girl who helped me escape,” roared Bond, “we just leave her there?”

He knew it was a cheap shot, playing the personal card, preying on M’s compassionate nature. But in his fury, Bond had forgotten that his superior wasn’t prone to lapses in emotional judgement.

“This department is not concerned with your personal problems, OO7,” stated M flatly.

“This department owes her a debt! She saved my life!”

M’s eyes turned cold. He did not appreciate his subordinates contradicting him. This wasn’t about OO7’s romantic entanglements. Somebody needed to tell him. He’d speak to the Medical Officer; he got on well with Bond.

“Operation Bedlam is dead,” replied M firmly. “Do you understand?”

It was an order. Bond recognised it instantly and buried his resentment.

“Yes, Sir, I understand.”

He straightened, cast one single glance at the cool eyes and stony face, which for a moment could have resembled one of the faces on Mount Rushmore, and left the office. He was careful not to slam the door, although he certainly wanted to.

It only took the elevator journey down to his office for Bond’s own eyes to turn cold. He decided to issue some orders of his own. If Her Majesty’s Secret Service couldn’t help him, he knew exactly the man who could.

Bond spoke to the switchboard, asking for an international call to be placed to Marc Ange Draco at Draco Construction, Herault in Montpellier. While he waited for the ring back, Bond drafted a memo requesting the rest of the festive season off, citing the physical and psychological injuries he sustained in Switzerland.

Two minutes later, the telephone rang. Bond snatched at it.

“Hello; Draco?”

“Yes, who is it?”

The voice sounded sleepy, but wary, intrigued. Bond guessed any call to Draco at around midnight was usually bad news.

“Bond, James Bond.”

“James, thank God, where are you? What’s happened to Tracy?”

“Later, Draco.” Bond was short, to the point, urgent. “Listen; I’m coming to see you... No, tomorrow... I’d like to interest you in a demolition deal.”

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Bond slept restlessly that evening. His mind was spinning with thoughts of Tracy and what was happening to her. While he knew Blofeld was a ruthless man, he also considered he was not taken with unnecessary violence. Tracy had been kidnapped. If death was the purpose, she would have been killed in the aftermath of the avalanche. Something told Bond she was required for a prize, a trophy to show off, someone to mark his assent to respectability. Blofeld was determined to be recognised as a Count. And Tracy of course was already a Countess. Bond’s blood boiled with the

thought of ugly marriage proposals and scenes of forced politeness. She might go along with it, to ensure Blofeld stayed calm. Bond felt certain her heart would not be in it, but if she believed Bond was dead, her mind might persuade her marriage was the best option, at least until she could formulate some escape. Bond was certain Tracy would already be seeking a way out of the situation, but it would not be easy. Blofeld may use deep hypnosis. He might be altering her mind as Bond slept. There was no way of knowing. It was another reason for him to reach Piz Gloria quickly, before she committed an awful folly, this time through ignorance or persuasion.

He was told to fly into Marseilles airport. There he was met by Tousaint who drove his dusty Citroën at break neck speed to the harbour. Draco's boat, the big cargo vessel Bond had first met him in, was moored at the quayside.

Inside the roomy office, Draco was waiting for him. After a warm embrace and the offer of refreshments – Bond took only coffee – the Capu sat him down next to the fire, and asked for a full explanation of the situation.

Bond explained it all. He was quite used to it now, having delivered a similar monologue to the big-wigs at S.I.S. Draco sat smoking, his face impassive, his eyes glinting as the story wore on, as the death toll mounted, but he didn't interrupt once until Bond had finished the story. When it was done he let out a heavy sigh and stubbed out his cheroot.

"An interesting tale," remarked the Capu. "You have been very busy, James. But tell me what is it you propose?"

"I want to rescue Tracy, apprehend Blofeld and then destroy the place before the U.N. accepts his terms. It must be done before midnight tomorrow. We will need helicopters and armed men."

"What you ask is impossible at short notice."

"I want you to make it possible," Bond knew this might be the reply and had already prepared his gambit: "Think of it as a wedding present."

Draco nearly missed the remark and then, as the words hung in the air, his walnut features spread into a huge smile and the teeth glimmered as he spoke: "My God! James! Why did you not say before? When was this? Is it true?"

"We're only engaged, Draco," answered Bond, trying to cap the man's obvious enthusiasm. "I proposed in the car. It was rather romantic, a bit mad and wild; I think you'd appreciate that."

Draco laughed, sitting forward, animated. "I do I do, but tell me, she said yes?"

"She did. And I really mean it too. This is for keeps, Draco."

"Except she isn't here," he replied, his attitude changing suddenly, his head nodding ruefully. "Le Blofeld has her."

The two men were silent for a while. Then Draco put his hands on his knees and looked long and hard at Bond his expression a firm, tight lipped, questioning glare.

“Are you certain we’re going to find Tracy?”

“Even if she isn’t, there’s a good reason for going.”

“So you’ve explained,” grumbled Draco. “Quite a crusade.”

“I know I’m asking a lot, but my government won’t help, they can’t take the risk,” ventured Bond, aware his voice edged towards the desperate. “But we can. I know it’s a dirty business, Draco. But I also know you. You’re a man I respect and a man I’m not afraid to have as a father-in-law. I know you break laws and I know you’ve probably killed people, or certainly ordered it, but I’ve also seen the other side of you, your family and your friends. It can’t be easy being the Capu of the Union, juggling business with crime. I don’t expect you to get any recognition for what you’ll do, but this man Blofeld must be stopped. He isn’t a criminal like you. I don’t know the full extent of the Union’s operations, but I know they’d never threaten the world with biological weapons. Blofeld’s evil, there’s no doubt about it.”

“So you come and ask the Union to make war on this Blofeld, to destroy him and his virus forever, eh?”

“That’s what needs to be done.”

“You started on a long road after this man, James, many years before you knew me, I’d wager. It is time you reached the end of it.”

Draco sat back and lit another cheroot, “You don’t need my answer,” he chuckled, “You already know it. Let me bring in my Lieutenants, we will explain the operation to them. They will know the best men for the work.”

“What about the transport?”

“I have some favours to call in. Do not fret, James, it will not be easy, but everything will be in hand.”

Draco was as good as his word. Bond spent lunchtime and most of the afternoon deep in conversation with Tousaint and Che-Che, although Tousaint did most of the talking. Bond drew maps of Piz Gloria and explained the layout of the lower levels. Tousaint knew an explosives expert, ex-army, and called him in. This scruffy, wiry little man enthusiastically scoured the plans and declared the best explosives would Semtex 1A. Luckily he had a fresh stash in his warehouse. Two crates should do it. He was more than happy to accompany the expedition and set the charges. In fact, he was ecstatic, jiggling up and down on the spot as he informed everybody of his decision.

Bond thought the explosives man, who for no discernible reason liked to go under the name of Le Chef, was just a little bit crazy. Draco informed him later that the man suffered from pyromania and was only out of gaol because the Union allowed him to channel his phobia appropriately. Bond didn’t want to know what appropriate arson looked like.

The Lieutenants produced a detailed topographic map of Switzerland. Bond had no idea where it came from or why they had it, but he was able to mark the position of Piz Gloria. The men mapped

out a speculative route into the Alps across the Jura Lowlands from the Moselle.

Bond asked why they were going from so far north.

“That is where our transport will be,” answered Draco, who had spent much of the afternoon making telephone call. “I have a friend who is anxious not to upset me. He is a colonel in the air force, in command of the Combined Transport Squadron at Luxeuil Saint Sauveur. I have some incriminating photographs of him with young boys. It would be dreadful for his family to find out and even worse for his career. Let us say, these photos will be forgotten about, if he loans us three Alouette helicopters.”

“Good God!” exclaimed Bond. “Won’t that get the French Air Force in trouble?”

“No, no, no, my men already have the aircraft. They are painting them with fresh camouflage as we speak.”

“Camouflage?”

“The colours of the Red Cross,” smiled Draco. “This is after all a humanitarian crusade, isn’t it?”

## **Twenty Two: 'My Honoured Guest'**

When the white wall of snow collided with Teresa, she was fleeing scared through the pine forest, terrified of the buckling noises, the rumble and crack from the onrushing avalanche. As the mountain collapsed towards her, she had tried to keep up with James, but he was too far ahead, skiing into the high side of the valley. She followed him and on instinct, Teresa aimed even higher, almost slowing to a stop as the blades bit into the icy powder crust which hugged the forest. Once in the trees she twisted and turned, dodging branches, trunks and splayed roots, aware all the time that the snow was catching her.

Then it hit and she was tumbling, spinning, rolling, blasted by a force she couldn't fight. It knocked all the breath from her. Teresa felt the poles snatched from her hands, felt her ankles almost torn away as the skis snapped and broke loose. One of them spun back amid the maelstrom of blinding white and smacked into her head. It was the flat edge of the side-cut which knocked her out.

Teresa didn't remember being pulled free from the wreckage of the forest. The first thing she felt was the jolt of the helicopter taking off. Her eyelids flickered open and she was staring into the blank, grim face of her chief captor. The man was thick set, heavily built and refused to smile. His face, framed by a thick woollen hat and scarf, betrayed nothing. Teresa thought he might have made a good villain in a gangster movie.

She pretended to be drowsy and allowed her eyes to slide shut again. This allowed her time to think. If these were Blofeld's men, then she was being taken to his mountain hideaway. Teresa thought about the horrific escape James had made and her muscles tightened, even those in her stomach. She couldn't do any of that. No, she would have to play a smarter game. Perhaps this mysterious Count had a reason to kidnap her; perhaps he wanted her to tell the world he was serious about his aims. Another life held in jeopardy, exactly how James predicted it, the crisis of a whole world held to ransom.

James... Teresa's mind wandered as she listened to the whine of the engine and the judder of the rotor blades. What had happened to him? Was he alive? God, she hoped so. Silently, she prayed for it, even though she'd given up believing in gods. Teresa only knew he'd still been upright, racing the massive surge of white towards the trees, when she'd last seen him. But had he been so lucky? Somewhere deep within her, Teresa found a small spark of faith and refused to believe the worst. While there was no news to tell her the opposite, she must assume James was alive, maybe bruised, damaged, but alive. What she needed to do was to formulate a plan of action, something to distract Blofeld, to make him believe she was compliant. It might just provide her with the opportunity of safety and, with luck, freedom. Still, the thought of it frightened her. She remembered James' bedraggled appearance at the ice rink and shivered. What would these beasts have in store for her at Piz Gloria?

The journey took about thirty minutes, during which Teresa's heavy eyelids occasionally opened, gazing bewildered at the snow caps, before she closed them again, and lost herself in her own meanders. Eventually she felt the helicopter make its descent, a sudden downward rush until the aircraft panned out, hovered and touched lightly onto what felt like solid ground. Teresa was shaken

awake by the big man opposite, who spoke to her in several languages. Teresa could hardly refuse the instruction to wake up and get out. The brute was kind enough to help, but it was more the way a farmer manhandles his livestock. Once her feet crunched onto the icy rooftop, Teresa made an effort to push the big man away. She stood on her own feet, her gaze widening as she took in the surrounding peaks and valleys, all glistening in the late dawn air. The atmosphere was thin and graspingly cold. Almost immediately, Teresa collapsed in a faint.

When she recovered, Teresa was lying on a large comfortable bed, under a sheet and a blanket. Initially she had trouble adjusting to the semi-darkness, but she reckoned on sparse, modern furnishings, and could taste the stuffy, homely scent of a wood fire. She slowly sat up, leaning on her elbows, until she was able to see the open hearth crackling in the corner of the room. A very neat, presentable man was sitting on one of the adjacent couches. Carefully he uncrossed his legs and walked towards the bed. There was no urgency in his stride.

Teresa quickly glanced down at herself, relieved to find she was dressed in what was best described as a hospital gown. It was very decent and not particularly becoming. She inclined her head back to the man, who she now saw carried a small black holdall with him. The man offered a smile, but it had no warmth. When he spoke it was in German.

“Ah, you are awake. Good. How are you feeling?”

Teresa had studied German at her finishing school and she automatically answered in the man’s own language. “I’m better. Tired.”

“Of course, you must rest.”

“Where am I? Who are you?”

“My name is Doctor Van Sant. The Count asked me to look after you. You had a very nasty accident.”

The Doctor made a ‘tut-tut’ sound behind his tongue, sat down and started to fiddle with things like stethoscopes and blood pressure gauges.

Teresa said nothing while he completed his checks. Finally, he declared she was well on the mend.

“Doctor,” ventured Teresa, “there was a man with me in the avalanche. Do you know what happened to him?”

“No,” replied the Doctor flatly. “You were the only person the guards found. You are very lucky. Now rest. I will leave some pills, in case you have any pain.”

The Doctor stood up, repacking his equipment. “There are fresh clothes in the dresser. If you need anything to eat or drink, or if you need me, press this and someone will attend to you.”

He indicated the button on the bedside cabinet and offered the same non-entity of a smile. “I suggest you eat only a little at first.”

“Thank you.”

“It is no trouble,” though he sounded like it was.

“Tell me, what time is it?”

“It is almost six o’clock in the evening,” was the barely alive answer. The Doctor pressed the exit button, paused and then stepped back to the bedside. Quietly he explained: “I have been asked to inform you, the Count is most anxious to make your acquaintance. Now you are recovered, may I give him the good news?”

Teresa didn’t like the sound of that at all, but she stifled the fear and replied in English: “Yes, all right.”

The Doctor appeared to understand, gave a curt little bow and left the room, the door magically sliding back as he approached it. Teresa noted another thick set guard outside. She folded her arms around her and gave a grim smile. Well, she considered, at least it was comfortable.

Teresa decided to feign injury and illness until the morning. This allowed her time to inspect the room. She didn’t like its fey attempt at modern glamour. The paintings were rubbishy splodges and the decor was all single tone colours, right down to the plasticky upholstery and the linen. Exceedingly bland, she mused. While she looked around her, she scanned the suite for anything which looked as if it could be used as a weapon. Sadly there was nothing. Even the light bulbs were fixed behind obdurate shades. She didn’t investigate the sliding door and decided leaving her cell would not mean she had fled the prison. The bathroom contained a small selection of toiletries, unmarked, but smelling of Imperial Leather. Teresa wrinkled her nose disapprovingly. The clothes were surprisingly expensive, the sort of labels you saw in Globus. She tried a few outfits on, to while away an hour or so, and chose one or two as suitable for wear. More gratifying was the ankle length negligee and the assortment of practical underwear.

She called for some food and refreshment at almost midnight. Her request for a green avocado salad, olive bread accompanied by St Clements and coffee raised no eyebrows, and it was delicious.

When the waiter brought the meal to her room, on an exquisite silver tray, there was a hand written envelope addressed to ‘My Honoured Guest.’ Teresa opened it after the meal. It was signed from ‘Balthazar, Le Count de Bleuchamp’ and was an invitation to breakfast in the Alpine Room. Teresa sighed. Best to get it over with, she considered, and gave her terse instruction to the waiter when he came to retrieve the empty plates.

“Tell the Count I will meet him at nine tomorrow morning.”

The waiter merely nodded. Teresa hoped she sounded appropriately noble. Even when she’d been in charge of a villa full of servants in Lombardy, before the Comte di Vincenzo bankrupted them, she’d rarely been so brusque. There had never been anything snobbish about Tracy Draco, but she had learnt to cold shoulder the affluent gentry when it suited her. She felt those skills may soon be put to the test.

Teresa slept fitfully. Her mind was full of the snow and the whirl of helicopter blades, explosions and gunfire, cars speeding fast, James Bond. If only he were here now, she kept thinking, what would he

be doing? Playing the game, waiting for the dealer to make his charge, place his gambit, and seek out the bidder's weakness. Yes, the baccarat table. You stand on five. Conserve what you have, don't throw it away unless the odds are running hard against you. But how poor are my odds she wondered.

With little sleep behind her, Teresa washed and applied a delicate touch of rouge to her lips and cheeks. To wear, she chose a pair of calf length boots and a medium-leg brown corduroy skirt, slightly flared, that came with a matching jacket. She picked out a plain white blouse.

There was a rap at the door and it hissed smoothly open. It was the big man, the one she'd sat opposite in the helicopter.

"The Count is waiting, Comtesse," he said in dull English.

"Thank you."

Teresa tried to sound disinterested, but her mind was in somersaults, fear and worry gnawing at her insides, running like mice on wheel in her stomach. She followed the big man down the corridor to a pair of double lift doors. She noted one of them was marked 'Personal Nur.' They took the other and the elevator ascended a few floors.

Teresa was led up a curving staircase and into a beautiful view.

She almost gasped at the sheer gorgeousness of the silver tinged mountains which ringed the Alpine Room. The day outside was bright and sunny, unlike the dreary gloom of the lower floors. She'd never even considered drawing the blinds to her room. The lounge itself featured more large leather sofas and cushions all in pastel colours. There was a central cocktail bar and to one side, slowly revolving around the axis stood a single table. Breakfast was laid for two and it looked to be a quite extravagant feast.

Luckily Teresa recovered herself in time and managed to appear aloof, unconcerned by the richness of what she witnessed.

Rising from one of the big sofas was a bald, powerful looking man, whose face looked younger than his slightly paunchy body. But he moved with ease, stepping effortlessly towards her, his expression creasing. The flabby lips, especially the top one, which didn't quite rise into a smile, seemed to resist speech. Cautiously, Teresa held out her left hand and the big plates seized it. He's almost cumbersome, Teresa thought, not a monster at all. And then the man looked up as he kissed her fingers with the salivary mouth and she saw where the evil lay. The eyes of the man were black, not even deep lapis lazuli, not even indigo, but black, like the raven, the crow, the very devil's disciple.

Teresa almost balked. It was only her training, those years spent at finishing school, learning the behaviours of a lady, the expectations of society, everything she'd despised and thrown away, which kept her upright and stopped her gagging.

"Comtesse Teresa di Vincenzo," said the man in clear English. His voice was as deep and dark as his corneas. "What a pleasure to receive you."

“Charmed,” was all she could squawk.

“I am Count Balthazar de Bleuchamp, Director of the Bleuchamp Institute for Allergy Research. Welcome to Piz Gloria.”

The Count straightened and Teresa realised he was no taller than she, perhaps only five feet eight or nine. Their eyes met. His flashed; hers blinked. Teresa forced a smile.

“I’ve never heard of a Count de Bleuchamp,” she heard herself saying, “but I have heard of a man called Blofeld. I understand that is you.”

Blofeld chuckled, as if he enjoyed her challenge.

“Oh no, no, no, Comtesse, Blofeld is all but dead. In a matter of hours, my past life will cease to exist and I shall become forever a respectable peace loving Count.”

“A Count, perhaps, but never a respectable one.”

Blofeld retreated back to the sofa and picked up his cheroot and filter. He sucked on it for a good few seconds, studying the creature that had just walked into his domain. Teresa felt his simian eyes claw at her.

“So it seems we have a mutual friend. Or had. Mister James Bond, I believe.”

“He is a friend, yes.”

“Was.”

The cut of the word went to Teresa’s heart, but she covered it with a stony edifice. Was it true? Was James dead? Did he have proof? The doctor said only she had been recovered from the avalanche. Her mind raced quickly through everything she did and didn’t know. Her personal documents had been in her skiing outfit. Blofeld could quite easily have traced her background. Yet he knew nothing of her association with James, at least she hoped not. She mustn’t betray him. If there was any chance, that slim vital strand she clung to, she had to give James every moment and keep this madman at bay for an equal time.

“How did you come by Mister Bond? Is he an old friend? Someone you met before you married? Or someone you met during it? Is he a lover? A casual acquaintance, perhaps, someone your father knows.”

Blofeld’s suggestions rankled, but Teresa let him carry on, refusing to be provoked.

“I have learnt that people often unravel great secrets when put under enforced pressure,” said Blofeld calmly, a cloud of smoke circling about his forehead, emanating from his wide nostrils. “You wouldn’t want me to put you under any unnecessary duress, would you, Comtesse?”

Teresa slowly shook her head.

“My friends call me Tracy. That’s what Mister Bond calls me, because he is a friend.” She couldn’t avoid using the present tense, the alternative hurt too much.

“I believe Mister Bond may no longer be with us, buried as he is, as you saw, beneath a deadly blanket of snow. Admit it.”

“Mister Bond told me a lot about you,” Teresa ignored the jibe, “and about your plans. I would find it hard to be associated with a man who plotted such a holocaust.”

Unconcerned, Blofeld stubbed out the cigarette.

“Tracy, today is the feast of Stephen; let us eat well,” he said affably, ignoring her remark and instead gesturing hospitably towards the breakfast table. “As we do, let me explain how a great man has been brought down to the level of a criminal.”

The food was sumptuous and Blofeld ate a lot of it. Teresa picked at the smoked salmon and rye bread, nibbled at croissants and pain au raisins, drank coffee and turned down the champagne. She found his appetite unsettling, as if he was gorging, feeding his greed until it would overflow and spill across the table. Whatever was not eaten was being thrown away. The food seemed to represent the world and what Blofeld thought of it. Disposable. Consumable. A waste.

While he ate Blofeld told a long story about his birth in Gdynia, in 1914, to a German father and a Polish mother. He showed great aptitude as a youth and despite the emotional set back of losing his father and his mother at an early age, the young Ernst Stavro Blofeld flourished at school, earning a place at the prestigious Warsaw University, where he studied engineering and electronics. His tutors saw him as a future Nobel Prize Winner, but Blofeld’s interest wasn’t in the field’s technical development, but in its future as a communication tool. He obtained a position at the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs, cipherring government communiqués. Adolf Hitler was on the rise in Europe and war beckoned. Blofeld’s role involved encrypting telegrams for the military. Always aware of the world, Blofeld saw that German expansion was inevitable. The occupation of the Sudetenland sealed his belief that Hitler’s next assault rested on Poland. The army believed it too and was preparing for war. Clumsily, but then with more dexterity, Blofeld started to filter information to the German Military Attaché. He claimed to be the leader of a sympathetic group of National Socialists code-named ‘Tartar.’ He asked for money. There was no ‘Tartar,’ but the German’s paid him quickly and well. When war broke out, Blofeld, his position secure, switched his allegiances and began to supply German secrets to the Americans and the Swedes. He insisted on being paid in U.S. Dollars and only into a Zurich Bank Account, which he opened in the name of Serge Angstrom.

He operated safely throughout the war, until the Russian advance, when he chose to flee, first to Germany and then over the border into Switzerland. From there, his full monetary reserves totalling some two hundred thousand dollars, Blofeld or rather Angstrom escaped to South America. He invested wisely in several multinational corporations, was briefly married, and began to fraternise with the Odessa Fascists. His criminal activity did not restart until the early 1950s when, after the death of his wife, he found her estate still to be held in the hands of her father, a retired Brazilian rubber merchant. While Blofeld’s acquisition of his father-in-law’s assets was never in doubt, his methods were entirely dubious. Blackmail, he suddenly saw, could open up a route to riches. Best of all was the sensation which returned to him, the intense feeling of power as he manipulated a person, the desire to hurt and ruin a career or a life. His brief years of solace were broken. Using

newspapers as a guide, Blofeld sought out those whose situations he could inevitably help: politicians, industrialists, sports and film stars, the gentry and even the criminal fraternity. Every customer rated his work highly. Initially it was not to do with money, but as his success grew and his demands increased, monetary rewards flowed and the trappings of the good life held him enthralled. Not that he was ever ostentatious or boastful; his role as the continent's leading architect of organised criminal entrapment required low key conduct. None the less his personal fortune, however large, never seemed quite large enough.

Additionally, Blofeld became disenchanted. He saw no future in working only for other people's satisfaction. He was sitting on a huge pile of secrets, knowledge obtained as he dealt with the filth of people's lives. One day in late 1958, he decided to use that filth to feather his own nest. The recipient of the first grenade through the letter box was the drug baron Zoyar, who masqueraded as a successful nightclub owner. Blofeld obtained the nightclub and the drug business, which he then sold on to Zoyar's competitor at an exorbitant price. Before the next year was out, seven more actions of gross extortion had occurred across Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. SPECTRE was born.

At the turn of the decade, Blofeld felt it safe to return to Europe. Using his assumed name he entered the continent via Istanbul and immediately contacted the Turkish underground to whom he explained his particular talents, citing various reliable references. They were only too pleased to accept his help as they were experiencing some problems of their own concerning the over-supply of heroin from the Middle East. Blofeld solved the problem within two months and with fifteen horrific deaths. His reputation was assured. In Europe, he discovered that an expert with such a reliable organisation did not have to seek rewards: people brought them to you. SPECTRE, the Special Executive for Counter-Intelligence, Terrorism, Revenge and Extortion, started to fund projects for other organisations and became employed as a high cost trouble shooter for errant governments, and all this in addition to their own personal projects. Only a few times had failure become an issue and those moments were painful and often expensive.

Recently Blofeld had engineered an elaborate blackmail scheme. It had incurred vast expense, but ultimately had floundered. It was, not for the first time, the obstinate Churchillian British who foiled the plot. The loss of a potential \$100 million, and even worse, the loss of face among the criminal elite, made Blofeld reconsider his career. But then, when he was at his lowest ebb, Blofeld discovered a marvellous scientist in the Ukraine, a man called Pavlikov, who was experimenting with bacteriological viruses, essentially for open warfare. Inspired, Blofeld seized the hapless professor, spirited him away from the Soviets, and installed him in his clinic, here above the Lauterbrunnen valley, where together they refined his precious Virus Omega, which was now the subject of new multinational blackmail.

Teresa had been listening for over an hour and she'd already heard more than enough to understand Blofeld was a hideous and frightening combination of a man: a complete lunatic marked with genius.

Blofeld poured two flutes of pink champagne and passed one across the table to her.

"So you see," he concluded, "this is a time for celebration."

"Perhaps," Teresa did not touch the glass. "If they agree."

"They can do nothing else and you know it and they know it." Blofeld sipped the fizz, letting out a

contented sigh. His tone became harmonious, gentle, almost suggestive. "I shall be able to offer you anything you should wish for."

"Paid for with how many lives?"

"Oh, come now, Tracy," said Blofeld, hardly perturbed by the retort. "Don't be so proud. Even your father's profession is not entirely within the law."

Teresa was lost for a reply. She sat still for moment. As she waited, Blofeld's hand snaked across the table and rested over hers.

"Now, if you are very nice to me," he murmured. "I could make you my Countess."

"But I'm already a Countess."

Teresa withdrew her hand. The act stung Blofeld and he slammed the glass down hard on the table, spilling champagne over the remains of the pastries.

"Whereas if you displease me," Blofeld's voice was harsh, lightning sharp, tinged with the violence he had practiced throughout his life, "I can promise you a very different estate."

Teresa said nothing. She clutched her hands together in her lap and turned her face down, like an obedient wife or slave. Blofeld growled and stood up.

"Good day, Tracy. I suggest you give serious consideration to my proposal."

### **Twenty Three: Over and Out**

The first strips of orange light were creeping over the distant mountains as the three sturdy Alouette III helicopters, freshly white washed and bearing the crimson emblems of the Red Cross, made their approach over the Jura valleys.

Bond sat directly behind Draco, who had taken pole position in the passenger seat of the lead aircraft. Occasionally he glanced across at the other two flying machines, silhouetted against the strip lights of dawn. One of them carried nothing but explosive equipment, the pilot and the gibbering pyromaniac, Le Chef. Tousaint was charged with keeping him under control. The other, like Bond's craft, carried seven armed passengers, led by Che-Che. The attack squad totalled fifteen, excluding the demolition expert, and Bond thought this was more than adequate to cope with Blofeld's forces, which he calculated amounted to no more than twenty to twenty five guards and technicians.

He was living off only a few hours' sleep. Draco's Lieutenants had summoned the men quickly and transported them via a non-stop coach journey north. Draco, Bond and Che-Che took the Capu's Rolls Royce, which Bond likened to attending an execution in dinner dress. Draco laughed off Bond's misgivings. Once the whole group was assembled at a disused air field on the out skirts of Luxeuil Sait Sauveur, Draco explained the task to the men and the reasons for going. He introduced Bond as Le Commandant. On the battlefield, Bond's orders were the Capu's orders. The men looked a tough, uncompromising bunch, endlessly chewing tobacco or gum, spitting, smoking and swearing. To a man, Bond wouldn't have wanted to cross them. Their faces told stories of violent lives, death and hard times.

Everybody was given a white jump suit and cheater to wear and was equipped with Sterling sub machine guns and grenades. Che-Che took particular pride in a flame thrower the wild pyromaniac had brought along, 'for fun' he claimed. Dinner was coffee and bread laced with thick slices of garlic sausage. The night was spent in sleeping bags on the cement floor of the hanger. There was nothing to eat for breakfast. Instead flasks of brandy and schnapps were passed around.

"It makes the men fight harder," said Draco. "They care less."

Bond took a swig of brandy and mounted the aircraft.

They had been air bourn for only twenty minutes and the earliest streaks of sunlight were just starting to lighten the way for the pilot, who had navigated carefully over the border in the dark and was now directing the posse over the pinpoint lakes of grey smoke that represented early-waking Switzerland.

There was a crackle of static in the headphones.

The polite tones of Swiss Air Control cut in cut in, asking for the helicopters to identify themselves. No one said anything.

The voice asked the question again, this time in French.

“Swiss Air Control Basle calling unidentified aircraft. You’re flying in controlled airspace. We have no flight plan filed on you. Please identify yourself.”

Draco leaned back towards Bond, a guilty smirk on his face. “I think some people do not know we are crusaders.”

The voice cut in again, this time with more urgency: “Swiss Air Control calling unidentified aircraft, over. I repeat: it is essential you identify yourself. You are flying in a restricted military zone. We require full registration, pilot’s name and destinations, over.”

“Swiss Air Control this is Foxtrot Golf Sierra,” started Draco. “We are leading an International Red Cross helicopter flight carrying medical supplies to Italy. What’s the trouble, over?”

There was a pause, while the records were checked, Bond assumed. When it ended the voice suggested intrigue as well as authority.

“Foxtrot Golf Sierra, this is Swiss Air Control, we have no record of your flight plan or registration, over.”

“Then your registrations must be out of date, over.”

“You are flying in a restricted zone. You must land at Zurich and report. I repeat, land at Zurich and report, over.”

“Do you wish to commit murder?” Draco barked. “I told you this is a mercy flight carrying blood plasma and emergency equipment for the victims of the Italian Flood disaster at Rovigo.”

Well done, Draco, thought Bond. There really had been a flood on Boxing Day. He remembered reading about it on his flight to Marseilles.

“I repeat: mercy flight,” continued Draco. “Do you understand me?”

There was a longer pause.

“Foxtrot Golf Sierra, I’m sorry, you have no clearance. You must land and report. We have despatched fighters to intercept you, over.”

“No clearance?” repeated Draco indignantly. “Of course we have clearance, over.”

“Who gave it to you, over?”

“Zurich Control, over.”

Suddenly the helicopter rocked. A flash of silver sped past them and circled wide around the three Alouettes. It was a Mirage with Swiss markings. As the boom of its engines echoed, Bond saw another fighter jet approaching from the port side.

“Foxtrot Golf Sierra, Zurich hasn’t lodged any details with us.” The voice sounded equally indignant. “There is no record of your mission. Alter course to Zurich and land. You can verify your details there, over.”

Draco was remarkably unruffled. “I suggest you check your details again; carefully, over.”

“I repeat, alter course to Zurich and land, over.”

The Mirage jet flew past again, so close Bond could see the fire of its afterburners as it tilted and accelerated to starboard. The helicopter shuddered once more.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Check with Zurich. Check with Geneva. Check with the Red Cross in Geneva. Meanwhile call off your Air Force which is making my passengers sick.”

After another pause, the voice came back on air, sounding surprised: “Foxtrot Golf Sierra, you’re carrying passengers?”

“Of course I am,” answered Draco. “Distinguished representatives of the world’s press. They’ve had enough of this nonsense. And so have I.”

“Foxtrot Golf Sierra, one moment, please, over.”

The wait seemed excessively long. The two Mirage fighters snaked away from the trio of helicopters and finally the crackle of static broke into the cockpit.

“Foxtrot Golf Sierra, what is your anticipated flight plan, over?”

Draco gave the briefest of outlines.

“Very well, you may proceed,” answered the relieved voice. “Over and out.”

Bond too gave a sigh of relief. Now the golden tips of the Alps rose up to meet them and the silver span of Interlaken glinted below. Bond checked his watch. They had barely ten more minutes to go. The bodies around him shifted nervously, anticipating the action ahead. Bond stared between the two front seats, the pit of his stomach starting to churn as the great peaks soared into view and the posse of helicopters plunged on towards a hellish corner of the world called Piz Gloria.

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Teresa did consider Blofeld’s proposal. She thought about it for the whole day. She also used the time to formulate a plan. It was madness, utter idiocy, but she had seen, spread about the Alpine Room, the very implements she lacked in her suite. Knives, sharp objects, glass. If she could tempt Blofeld back there, on a pretext, a caprice, she might have an opportunity to commit the foulest of deeds. When she thought about it, the idea made her heave, and she spent several minutes in the bathroom. But gradually Teresa persuaded herself that Blofeld’s death was probably for the best,

and anyway James had quite likely died also. Even that thin sliver of hope was fast vanishing for Teresa.

She planned her moment of attack meticulously. Timing was everything. The deepest of sleep was just before dawn. It is a moment when most people are vulnerable, when even the lightest of sleepers will not hear the creak of the door and the patter of the rain. If she disturbed Blofeld's sleep, she might have him weary enough to accept her change of heart, her uncharacteristic action, and allow her to dictate the flow of the conversation. She would flatter him, pander him, seduce him in all but the physicality of the act. She smiled at herself as she dressed for the occasion. Well, she told the beautiful radiant reflection, it's been done before and by greater women than I. It was four in the morning when Teresa pressed for the guard.

She'd pulled on a flatteringly tight trouser suit, flared at the hems, the collar softened by a mink ruff. While she had no intention of offering herself to Blofeld, the anticipation of it might befuddle him. Teresa knew these schemes were what an amateur gambler would call 'long shots' or 'outside chances.' It was all she had left to deal. A king pair. Zero a la baccarat: the lowest of low scores.

When the guard arrived she demanded on being taken to see the Count. The Count was asleep.

"Then wake him up!"

The guard hurried away and Teresa, who had stepped outside the door, followed him. The man turned around, about to usher her back, when Teresa gave him a tetchy shove, on his shoulder, scolding him.

"Come on, we don't want to keep him waiting."

At the elevator, they took the door marked 'Personal Nur' and Teresa squeezed next to the guard as it descended to the sixth floor. She was taken aback by the chilly cave she stepped into, but hid it well, as she strode confidently behind the scurrying man. Teresa's stomach was jumping again. Her throat was dry and she could feel her face fixing itself into a steely mask. Loosen up, Tracy! She told herself. The man may be a monster, but he is still only a man, with man's desires and needs. The flattering games she practised on all those old feckless Barons might suddenly become useful.

The guard made her wait in a softly illuminated passageway. When he returned to issue her forward, Teresa passed through a small chamber, spraying her with something that smelt like chlorine. She sniffed unappreciatively. The room beyond was a plush office, formal in the extreme, banked on one side by a long window which opened into a laboratory of some kind. The lights were low, but the guard pressed something on the desk and the shadow of a Christmas tree became a shimmering pillar of gold.

Blofeld appeared from one of three doors set in the far wall. Teresa had wanted to catch him unaware and she had. He was still dressing, hurriedly pulling closed his tunic. Blofeld forced one of his half smiles.

"Comtesse, what an unexpected surprise."

"I'm sorry, I couldn't sleep."

"It is often the way for the great among us. I myself have struggled to rest since the inception of Virus Omega. And since your arrival it has been doubly so."

"I've been thinking about your proposition," started Teresa, accepting his lips on her hand and wondering how they could be so wet in such dryness. "Please, tell me more."

"There is a lot more to tell."

"Then tell me everything."

"But surely there will be plenty of time later?"

"For there to be a later, you must tell me your intentions. Both good and bad."

Blofeld paused to light a cheroot. Slowly his eyelids arched upwards as if they had taken a few minutes longer than his body to fully waken.

"I see. Then please, sit down, let me tell you of my, of our, future. Coffee or champagne?"

"Champagne," declared Teresa. "Let us drink to your success."

"Oh, indeed!"

Blofeld sounded almost wistful and issued an order. While they waited for the drinks, Teresa positioned herself at one end of a couch. Blofeld came and sat on the wide arm, his body pressing gently to her shoulder. She was careful not to move away, to remember the game she was playing.

"When do you expect the signal from the U.N. accepting your terms?"

"Any time before midnight tonight."

The champagne arrived, pink again, and Blofeld poured. He took a sip, placed his glass down and started to talk in the same low dulcet tone he'd used over breakfast. He talked of beautiful gardens and a castle; he talked of charitable works, of sponsorship, of education; he spoke of families and children. Most of all he talked of continuing the work of the Institute, this time for humanitarian reasons, of ridding the world of disease and of death, of funding scientific research, of Nobel Prizes and worldwide recognition.

"After all, out of every evil must come something good," he stated and sounded as though he really meant it.

At that moment the big guard appeared, shuffling nervously from foot to foot. Blofeld initially ignored him. The guard stepped forward.

"Excuse me, Sir."

Blofeld's irritation surfaced and without looking he barked his reply: "Grunther?"

“There is something on the radio I think you should hear.”

Blofeld forced a genial smile, suggesting the interruption was unwarranted. “Excuse me.”

Teresa replied with her own cliché ridden expression. She watched as Blofeld followed Grunther into one of the ante rooms. She could see communications equipment set up, a bank of wireless controls. An operator was sat monitoring the airwaves, his ears encased in headphones. He twisted a dial and the crackle of static echoed. Teresa could hear the metallic tones of an air traffic controller, communicating to someone in French.

“You are flying in a restricted zone. You must land at Zurich and report...”

“Well?” asked Blofeld.

“There are three suspect helicopters in the vicinity,” explained the operator. “None of them have answered air control.”

The voice changed. At first, because of the static, Teresa thought she was hearing things, that her mind was playing tricks, but as the conversation continued she knew it was true. The second voice was her father’s.

“Do you wish to commit murder? I told you this is a mercy flight carrying blood plasma and emergency equipment for the victims of the Italian Flood disaster at Rovigo.”

Teresa was puzzled. Papa was not the sort of man to go on a mercy mission. There could only be one reason why he was in a helicopter. He’d come to rescue her. But how had he known where to come? Teresa’s face broke into a warm, genuine, smile. It was James! He would know. He must have told Papa what was happening! Teresa controlled herself, hiding the smile back behind the mask she’d been wearing for the last hour. Idly she crossed to the Christmas tree and stroked the pine needles, all the while eavesdropping on the talk between Zurich Control and the supposed Red Cross. She quickly decided on her next course of action. Down here she wasn’t safe. Despite Blofeld’s intentions, it was closed in, difficult to penetrate. An attack might flounder before she could be saved. But up above the stakes would be lowered.

“Very well, you may proceed.”

After the last word from Swiss Air Control, Blofeld turned to Grunther and almost shouted at him. “There, you see, it is nothing.”

He stalked away, re-entering the study, and approached Teresa, the faint, fake smile daubed on his face. She didn’t wait for his apology.

“Take me to the Alpine Room.”

“Why? Are you unhappy here?”

“I want to see the sunrise.”

“Oh, so poetic a pleasure,” enthused Blofeld. “What were all the world’s charms to mighty Paris when he found that first dawn in the arms of his Helen?”

Blofeld clicked his fingers and Grunther gathered up the ice bucket and the glasses, going ahead of them. Blofeld took Teresa’s hand and led her gently along the passage, through the cave and into the elevator. He lit another cheroot and they stood in silence. Teresa felt his menace, which still poured out of those eyes, but she also recognised he was relaxed, content, expecting that his long wait for riches and power was at an end. Here was a man enjoying his success.

The doors slid open and Teresa walked forward into the barely illuminated dome. Slivers of red light shot across the morning sky. The mountains twinkled, catching the first rays of sunshine, and bringing blue life to the world.

“Thy dawn, O Master of the World!” she quoted.

She would have gone on, but Blofeld interrupted her.

“Indeed I am, Tracy, I feel it, like I felt the bones of my ancestors, the de Bleuchamp’s, living in my body. Power! I have it. I have it all!”

He poured more champagne and offered her another glass. “Soon the whole world will know the name Balthazar de Bleuchamp. It will be celebrated with all the great men of the age...”

He got no further.

Teresa could already see the three whirling insects growing larger and more threatening with every second. They were approaching from the West, fast and straight. As Blofeld gave his speech, she saw them separate into a three pronged attack, ringing the mountain top. It was Grunther who cut Blofeld short, storming up the stairway, his thumping heels making the floor shake.

“Helicopters!” shouted the big man. “We’re being attacked!”

Blofeld spun around, taking in the situation with one flashing glance.

“Get our positions covered!” he roared and flung his glass aside. It shattered against the fireplace. The sound of tinkling crystal was suddenly overpowered by the pounding thud of machine gun fire. The windows along one side of the Alpine Room caved in. Teresa threw herself to the floor. Bullets cut through the air, smacked into the walls and furniture. Blasts of freezing air followed the bullets through the space. The crescendo of battle followed the air, filling the room with hectic, shaking noise and the heavy scent of fear.

Teresa stayed down while the clatter and crash of guns echoed around her. Somewhere a grenade exploded and the Alpine Room shook with the blast. There were angry shouts, orders being given in several languages, and cries of wounded and dying men. With her head to the floor, she had no notion of what was happening outside. She could only see Blofeld and Grunther, both of who were crawling sideways, their backs arching to see over the broken window frames. Blofeld slunk back.

“See to the girl!” Teresa heard him say and watched as the monster slithered his way across the carpet to the elevator shaft. So much for mighty Paris!

Grunther, the brute man, looked across at her, his eyes very cold. The man seemed to be weighing up his orders, as if not certain what exactly he’d been instructed to do. His head twitched towards the battle ground outside, then flicked back. There was another explosion and the ceiling buckled. Grunther ducked as debris showered around him.

Teresa made her move. On her feet in a second, she sprinted, crouching, for the stairway. She thought it would be easy, for Grunther was a big bulky man. But he moved exceptionally fast.

Teresa only made it halfway when she felt her arm yanked backwards. She was thrown across the floor and landed on an elbow, rolling athletically, like a gymnast and springing back onto all fours. Her arm hurt, but she ignored it. Grunther was charging at her, like a bull. Teresa waited, fixed on his dirt face, the nostrils and cheeks blowing in the thin cold air, then at the final moment she dropped her shoulder, feinted to the right but moved left, executing the perfect dummy with an energetic forward roll. Any ecarteur would be proud of that! Teresa made for the stairs again. But Grunther had also recovered. He spun around, chased her and in three strides was blocking her exit.

The feint did not work this time and the two of them jostled at a distance. Teresa stepped away, her backside brushing chilled metal. The ice bucket! Desperately she scabbled behind her, grasping at the bottle neck. The big man sensed her nerves and pounced. Teresa heaved the bottle over. It smashed across Grunther’s neck and shoulder, bursting into tiny fragments and spraying them both in foaming sweet wine. Teresa frantically kicked out. She connected with something and Grunther collapsed sideways, crashing onto a coffee table.

This time Teresa performed no fancy moves. She hared off, taking the steps two at a time. Downstairs she saw chaos outside. Smoke billowed past the windows. A figure, clad in orange and black, was spiralling to the ground, shot through the head, the blood and brains erupting from the back of his skull. Suddenly a salvo of shots came her way. She didn’t know how she knew, but instinctively she felt the bullets heading towards her and ducked. The window panes broke. The bullets made huge pock marks in the wall.

Immediately, Teresa cringed as a great weight fell on her back. Two big hands gripped her shoulders and neck, pulling her onto her knees, squeezing at her throat. It was Grunther. The two of them wrestled. It was an uneven match. Teresa felt herself being dragged down the corridor, back towards the lifts, to the dungeons below. She slammed an elbow backwards, aiming for the soft, private parts of a man, the parts that hurt. And again. This time the man groaned and his hold gave just a little. A little was enough and Teresa wrenched free.

The outside door burst open and a figure, dressed in white overalls ploughed into the corridor, the stock of his machine gun raised.

“Tracy!”

It was James! She hardly took him in. The machine gun was spitting fire and death. Behind her, Teresa heard the wail of a dying man. Grunther, his chest a hollow of gore, slid down the wall, his mouth still open, still trying to shout.

## Twenty Four: Hell's Delight

When James Bond jumped from the Alouette helicopter he had already seen enough of the battle to know the SPECTRE guards were on the back foot. The helicopters had created a pincer movement. Bond and Draco's aircraft had circled behind the Alpine Room, making for the helipad. The Union men had started shooting early and with deadly accuracy. Grenades were being dropped from height, landing on the mountainside or the Piz Gloria buildings, blowing snow, ice and cement in all directions. The wind from the rotor blades sent clouds of white flakes spinning through the air in mad cyclones. Meanwhile Che-Che's helicopter was moving to the other side, where the plateau provided a safe landing zone. His crew was already dismounting and approaching Piz Gloria through the ankle deep powder, guns blazing.

The third helicopter hung back, as it contained the explosives, waiting for a bridgehead to be secured. It did not take long. The SPECTRE guards were more numerous than Bond had expected, but they were not as determined as the Union force. Also they appeared unprepared for attack, many of them, as Bond had hoped, pulling on clothes, having been abruptly woken from their sleep. There was an inexorable blood lust to the tough Corsicans and they drove forward in small bunches, pairs and trios, systematically accounting for one guard after another. They did not pause to worry about a fallen colleague. They fought together, but you looked after yourself alone.

Bond's boots hit the icy surface and he kicked off towards the Alpine Room, digging his heels in. Two guards were tucked into the corner of a balustrade. One of them took aim and Bond threw himself down, his chest grinding onto the ice, the Sterling pointing. Bullets whistled into the space where he'd just been. Bond's shots were accurate. The guard fell, his face a mass of blood. Someone else despatched the other man.

Draco helped Bond to his feet. There was no time for words. They were both off and running. Vaguely Bond was aware of Che-Che marshalling his men, the flame thrower on his back. The funnel was pointing down the external tubular stairway. The sheet of bright yellow flame leapt out of the nozzle and down the passage. Bond heard screams. He even felt the scorching thousand degree heat. Jesus Christ, what a death! He'd seen it once before.

Bond cast the horrific memory aside and took the far steps, descending to the terrace surrounding the base of the dome. It wasn't so long ago he'd been clambering over these walls, seeking a way off this bloody mountain, and now he was back, seeking to destroy it. The Union had cleared the balcony. The last guard had been shot. Through the needles of hanging broken glass, Bond saw two figures inside the lobby.

Instantly he recognised the girl's long brown hair. Someone had her in a throat hold, but she was fighting, punching backwards. Bond kicked the door open.

"Tracy!"

The bastard who had her was Grunther, but she'd just broken from his grasp. Bond didn't hesitate and fired. Grunther took the salvo in the chest.

Bond grabbed the girl's arm. She felt a dead weight. The poor bitch was about to faint.

"Tracy! Darling!"

The girl draped herself over him. Bond had to virtually drag her away from the dead body, so heavy were her movements. She's exhausted, he thought. Bond wanted to stay with her, but his mind was focussed on Blofeld too and the task he'd set himself.

Draco was close behind him.

"Teresa!" he called. "Thank God!"

Between them, the two men sat her down. She was weary, her head lolling. Draco waved for one of his team to come over.

"She's just a bit faint. Get her somewhere safe, Draco; quick," said Bond, fixing a fresh cartridge into his gun. "I'm going down to the laboratory. Don't forget to send the explosive team."

"Don't forget the schedule."

Bond checked his watch. "Is the building secure?"

"Enough. Le Chef is bringing the charges in now."

"Okay. Ten minutes then, Draco. If I'm not back in eight, you have to leave without me."

The Capu nodded. Bond walked to the elevator doors and pressed the call button. The electricity was still on and the lift arrived in a few seconds. He cast one quick look back at the girl, who slumbered awkwardly in the chair and pulled open the door. As the lift began its descent, he heard Draco shouting instructions in French.

The lift doors sprung open under Bond's shoulder barge. He ran across the metal walkway and stabbed at the release button for the passage door. He didn't wait for the antiseptics. The office was in half darkness, most of the light coming through the laboratory windows. The technicians had disappeared. Bond crossed the floor to the book case. He started to search for a catch or lever, something to open the two panels and reveal the map. Bond spilled ornaments, trophies and books off the shelves. They fell in total disarray. Bond couldn't understand it. There was nothing. He couldn't even see the join in the wood. How did the thing open? How did everything open at Piz Gloria? Of course, it was all push button operated. Bond turned back to the desk. A row of buttons was set to the side. Bond punched them one at a time. Lights came on, music echoed, the panels slid apart.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Bond took out his microfilm camera. The global map was in two colours, white on blue. On the left hand side was a strip of names next to passport sized photographs, each one neatly inlaid. There were eight lists of twelve. Blofeld had selected and hypnotised almost one hundred girls. Did that mean one hundred allergies and one hundred strains? Bond didn't know and it did not bear close thinking. That time for that was later. He took snapshots of the lists and then

focussed on the map. The girl's faces stared out at him, fixed to pin points indicating cities; but the cities had no names. Some guess work was still needed then. Bond raised his camera again and started to take a series of shots across the top. He had to hurry.

Behind him came the sound of footsteps. Looking over his shoulder Bond saw two of Draco's men enter the study. They carried a package containing over two dozen sticks of Semtex. Le Chef was taking no chances. They set the explosives down and immediately began work. As Bond returned to the map his eye caught a movement, a shifting shadow. He whirled round in time to see three barks of yellow flame. Three gun shots crashed through the laboratory window. Bond was already on his knees, the Sterling returning fire, obliterating the glass and filling the void with smoke and thunderous clatter.

Blofeld was already fleeing through a pair of double doors. For a moment Bond wanted to give chase, but then he remembered about those ninety six girls. He had to photograph the map. Cursing, Bond picked up the camera, which he'd dropped in his hurry to shoot. Quickly he took the final five photos.

The two Union had nearly finished fixing the charges.

"I'm going after Blofeld," said Bond plainly to them and headed through the second antiseptic chamber. Bond ran through the laboratory and into another dim cave-like passage, hewn through the rock and running uphill. Only half his mind was concerned with catching the head of SPECTRE, the other half worried about the time. Ten minutes, they'd agreed, and most of that had gone.

Somewhere up above him the two Union would return to Draco and give the message: "All set below."

Le Chef would be bent over his charges and fuses. "I'll set the timer for five minutes and ten seconds, as agreed. When these bombs go... whoosh... this place will be sealed off forever."

Tousaint might urge caution. The tall man had developed quite an understanding with Bond over the past few hours. "Will that give the Englishman time to get out?"

Draco, ever the pragmatist, would nod. "He knows the schedule."

All Bond wished was that they had Tracy safely aboard a helicopter. She would probably have kicked up an almighty fuss. Or perhaps not; the poor girl had looked physically burnt out when he'd seen her. For a moment Bond wondered if he should stop his chase, give it up and be satisfied with what he'd succeeded in. The idea vanished with a gunshot, up ahead in the passage.

Bond ducked back, the bullet ricocheting off the bare rock wall. When he stepped out it was to shoot, but after six rounds the magazine emptied. Bond tossed the Sterling aside. The shadowy figure was still ahead, disappearing vertically. Bond made it to the ladder in a matter of seconds. He glanced up seeing it scale about thirty feet high. There was no sign of Blofeld. Whatever was up there, it was bright. Bond started to climb for the oval hatchway. At the top he found a small box-shaped chamber. There was nothing in the room except an empty equipment rack. A door was flapping open. Bond crossed to it in a stride.

Below him, Blofeld was skiing down the mountain, the big curves of his turns cutting snake trails in the snow. Damn it! Bond didn't have the time to return to the Piz Gloria. His only way was down. Desperately, Bond jumped out of the hatch, rolling and sliding down the incline. He had no thought to what he was doing. His only intent was to get away from the Piz Gloria. Time was running out. Bond tumbled downwards. The sharp drop meant he constantly lost his balance, bouncing like an errant beach ball, using his hands and feet, turning, somersaulting, diving and skidding. In seconds he was almost one hundred feet down, his body finally burying itself to a standstill as the slope petered out.

Disorientated, Bond puffed out his cheeks. Anxiously he searched for the alp. And then all hell broke loose above him.

The crown of the Alpine Room was lifted into the air by the force of the first explosion. Huge fires of yellow and black ballooned out of the crippled torso. Smithereens of glass, masonry, stonework, wood and metal, shot towards Bond's defenceless figure. Instinct made him curl up. The sky battered him as if he was caught in a hurricane. Bond felt the blast, the sudden gust of wind, the burst of heat. The flames never reached him, but the intensity of the inferno seemed to singe his clothes, iron his skin, punch him drunk. Almost simultaneously, a series of other explosions pulverised Piz Gloria. Walls were blown out and the shattered cement blocks toppled down the mountain. Rocks were blasted free from their summits, rolling away in slow motion as if to prolong the agony of separation. Still more bombs went off, volley after volley of cracking, snapping retorts, meshing into a booming, swelling, thunderous crescendo. The noise temporarily deafened Bond. The bomb site became a horrific grave, blessed with stark mushrooms of bright fiery orange and funnels of wood smoke, black against the blue sheen of the sky. The once tranquil snow scape melted into a river of water turning white into ghostly grey.

When Bond's ears recovered he could hear another sound through the melee of the fires. It was a heavy metallic creaking. Suddenly there was a bang, almost as loud as the detonators. From below the Alpine Room, in the gondola chamber, the snapped cables whipped out, slashing angrily in every direction, nothing but a blur. The weight of the cable dragged it down the Schilthorn, kicking up snow and earth as it smashed repeatedly into the ground. Lower down the safety tower rocked as it absorbed the tensionless steel rope. Bond saw the structure buckle. Then the top tier broke off, jagged at three points, pulling the apparatus over at a sharp angle. It resisted for one second and then gave up, the last stanchion separated with a crack, and the pinnacle of the tower slewed down the piste towards the berg, dragging the two writhing cables with it.

Bond stared, sickly fascinated as the massive lengths of steel twisted their way towards a lone skier, silhouetted dark against white, desperately carving his way along the scarp. The broken lines pursued the shrinking grey figure down the mountain. It was a race he couldn't win. Blofeld almost made it to the berg, but then the cables rose up, like a cobra looking to strike, and slammed fatally down. The chains missed, but caught the back of both skis, which sheared off from the bindings. Blofeld pitched forward and rolled violently down the slope. He lay still except for an arm that twitched.

As Bond watched, he heard a third clamorous beat over the roar of chaos: rotor blades. It was Foxtrot Tango Bravo, Tousaint's helicopter, and it was swinging back towards him. The Lieutenant was leaning out of the hatch, manhandling the rescue winch. Tousaint must have seen him escape and come back for him. Bond gestured urgently at the Lieutenant, pointing downhill. Tousaint

looked puzzled. He turned inside the cabin and exchanged words with the pilot. When his head and shoulders reappeared, his hand offered the thumbs up. Good; they'd seen Blofeld's tracks.

The Alouette hovered overhead, the harness played out. Bond grabbed it, hooking his arms through the leather hoop. His feet left the ground and Bond felt the sway of the aircraft as it rose steeply up and through the air, changed course and headed for the berg. The winch started to haul him towards the hatch, but Bond waved frantically at Tousaint to stop, indicating he wanted to be dropped near Blofeld's body.

As the helicopter came closer, Bond saw the injured figure move. Shaking, Blofeld scrambled onto unsteady feet and started to wade through the snow. How Blofeld's ankles survived the shock of the cables' impact, Bond would never know. But survive it they had. Blofeld was making for a low slatted wooden cabin. The garage for the toboggans! The Alouette dipped lower. Bond was hanging only twenty or so feet from the ground. Blofeld disappeared inside the cabin. Bond couldn't wait any longer and dropped out of the harness. He hit the ground with a curse and a hard thump, turning into a sideways roll, absorbing the impact up his legs and thighs.

Where the hell was that garage? Bond could hardly run in the snow, his feet sinking into the powder, slowing his progress. He was too late. He slithered down the embankment and was just in time to see the flash of a blue and black two-man bob swish down the opening straight. Bond headed for the garage himself. Christ! How long had it been since he used one of these bloody machines? It had scared the life out of him then, even in his teens, what the hell would it do to him now? Bond regretted dismounting from the harness. He seized the first sled that looked in reasonable condition, a gold and black model, also a two-man. There was no time to check the runners, brakes or steering. He chanced on everything being regularly tested for safety. There was a helmet knotted to the brace bar and he pulled it on, yanking the Velcro strap tight under his chin. Bond grasped the handles and slid the toboggan down to the starter's ramp. He pushed forward, gripping tight, gaining speed and then leapt up and forward, both legs jumping into the foot-well of the sled.

Already he was powering down the hard surface, the scrape of runners on ice a constant rasping in his ears, the bump and jive of every dent in the chute reverberating across his body. He'd only been moving a few seconds down the long lateral opening straight, when he saw the gutter take a sharp turn ahead, a big banked curve. Bond grasped at the steering lines, two metal rings connected to pulleys which altered the direction of the front runners. He eased the right hand ring. Careful – if you go in too high the sled will simply spill straight over the edge of the turn. He angled the guidance runners and went for a point just below the top lip. He was into the bend before he knew it, the runners screeching as they ascended the bank, rose half way to the tip of the curve, and then shot giddily down.

Now Bond was into the descent proper. He didn't know how steep the run was, how many turns it took. Hadn't he read every run needed fifteen turns? Wasn't the gradient at least one to eight? He simply didn't know. All Bond remembered was his one overhead view of the course. It spanned the lower section of the piste, falling some five hundred feet along its route. What was it people said about the great courses, like at the Cresta Run or the Olympic course at Riessersee? They did it because they're crazy. Speed, to quote Huxley, was a disease. Once bitten, thought Bond.

In front he could make out another turn, this one to the opposite direction. God, they came quick! How fast was he travelling? Sixty, seventy miles an hour? Hadn't he read that modern runs propelled

you down the chute at over ninety? Dear God Almighty! The turn seemed to hurtle towards him. Bond swooped into it, gauging the angle of entry, rattling as he miscalculated, corrected, then with a whoop it was done and he was zipping down the slide at full pelt, brakes forgotten, speed, like Huxley said, the only infection.

Bond could see Blofeld's toboggan up ahead. It was floundering. He'd hit something and Bond could see a fountain of chipped ice erupting from the back of the left runner. The sled was slowing down, not by much, but at this speed even a little was a lot!

Suddenly Bond's sled went air bourn. The runners crashed back to the ice, jarring Bond's muscles. His brain pounded against his skull. The Leap! A hidden obstacle designed to throw the uninitiated and thrill the experienced. They usually came in threes. Yes, there it was! Crash and thump. And again. Smash, smack, hell!

Before he had time to adjust the direction of the sled, Bond was into the next bend. He slid every which way, dug at the steering lines, felt the back of the runners glide almost too far and then, as if by a miracle, he was through it, safe. Down the next straight, Bond now had his quarry in view.

Blofeld's sled must have been damaged on the Leap. So there really was a God. Bond dug into his tunic pocket, where the Walther PPK sat snug against his stomach. He pulled it free, released the safety with one hand and took aim. Two shots. Two misses. It was almost impossible to steer and shoot.

Everything happened too swiftly, a blur of sound and speed.

The hunched back of Blofeld half turned. He looked to be pointing something. It was his gun! There was a series of white flashes. Bond didn't hear the gunshots. One thud and a hole appeared on the belly of the toboggan. A single bullet had hit the target. Somewhere it had passed through all the metal. Miraculously it hadn't struck a limb.

The two sleds hit a wide S-bend, one after another, passing under two footbridges at each apex. Bond lost sight of Blofeld, but only for a second or two. When they hit the straight, Bond was closer still. He could make even out the colours on Blofeld's helmet. How far now? Thirty yards, perhaps. I've got you! Just a little closer and you're mine!

Just as Blofeld entered the next turn, Bond saw him toss something over his shoulder. Bond thought it was the gun, but as the sled ate up the space he could make out its hopping skipping gait. Aghast, Bond saw the pineapple squares of a grenade rolling toward him. He hissed through gritted teeth and then the bomb went off.

He didn't even see the flame and the smoke. Eyes closed, Bond had the sensation of flying. He felt the dead weight of the sled falling away, felt the cold air muzzling at his cheeks. And then he landed on soft snow, arms protecting his face, rolling and sliding down a steep incline. He opened his eyes. He was skating on thin powder, his backside rutting the ground, out of control. Ahead he saw the ridge guarding the next straight in the bob run. To his left the blue and black sled was making rapid progress towards him. Blofeld had taken the turn slowly. He had to because of the busted runner. Bond buffeted against the rim of the chute and stood up just in time to see Blofeld coming past him. Bond had lost his Walther during the explosion. Now he only had one option.

With a deep breath Bond leapt over the bank, hurling himself at the curled figure. He missed and slammed half-on half-off the tail board. For a moment he was slipping backwards, the toes of his boots dragging him off the sled. But he found a hand hold, a ring of metal the size of his fist. He didn't understand its purpose. He didn't care. Slowly Bond hauled his shoulders onto the back plate. Blofeld emitted a snort of surprise and twisted in his seat. Bond saw the gun hand come round again, the muzzle as black as Blofeld's eyes. Even with the combined screams of the runners, Bond heard the firing pin click. Nothing. The bastard was out of bullets. Blofeld threw the gun and it thudded into Bond's shoulder, hardly hampering his progress. Desperately Blofeld reached for Bond, but he couldn't concentrate on his adversary, not when the next vicious bend was only feet away.

Blofeld snatched at the pulleys. Bond, his legs swimming out of control behind him, rapping the hard ice, tearing his overalls, chaffing his knees, managed to force his torso further onto the sled. Finally, as they exited the turn, he pushed up and grabbed Blofeld by the arm. It was all the extra leverage he needed. Blofeld tried to throw him off, but Bond clawed his way into a crouch, riding like a surfer on the tiny seat at the sled's rear. The two men grappled furiously, the sled veering dangerously left and right as the guidance rings were abandoned. Blofeld had both hands on Bond's throat, forcing his head back. Bond lashed out wildly, missed and felt his neck and shoulder judder and kick as his helmet skimmed the wall of ice. For a second he thought his head was going to be torn from his shoulders. That moment of fear almost paralysed him. It also saved him. Fear made him lift his head enough to avoid a jagged burr of ice that hung out along the stretch of the gutter.

The sled crashed into the next bend. They saw it late. No one was at the controls. Blofeld reached for the steering gear, pulling back, trying to guide the runners as they nearly spun on the glassy opaque sheet. The distraction was enough for Bond to assert a fighting position. He shoved his feet in next to Blofeld's, tucking his body beside this monster, his hands reaching for the man's face. Startled, Blofeld gasped, let go the rings and attacked. Vaguely Bond was aware of the forest of pine trees which nudged the course, casting deep shadows over the track, disguising the obstacles. Blofeld's fists came down, their helmets bashed each other, fingers stabbed and clutched. Blofeld had manoeuvred himself on top, pummelling Bond's body. As he did so, he started to inch further along the seat, releasing him from the confines of the foot well. Bond fought back, blocking the blows and jabbing at the man's chin and throat. Another turn! Damn it! Bond heaved at the pulleys, Blofeld going for his throat. The cocoon of metal swept around the tight curve, hardly rising on the sides, taking the central channel. Bond took one hand off the rings, pressed it onto Blofeld's face, forcing the neck back.

The sled started to jump and clap, the undercarriage crying as it beat across a series of troughs and waves which traversed the chute. The Boneshaker! Jesus Bloody Christ, cursed Bond, unable to blot out the jarring pain that assaulted him below and above. In shock, he let go of everything. Seizing the moment, Blofeld crammed forward, punching, now almost kneeling on the back seat, his body out of the forward cowling. His breath rasped in Bond's face. He laughed with wild, manic, almost gleeful gusto. Bond wanted to silence the black mouth and the vivid devil's eyes. He shoved up, hard, his whole upper body corkscrewing off the foot-well, the hands pushing at Blofeld's body, throwing him off. Blofeld's head smashed into an overhanging tree branch. The sometime Count de Bleuchamp jerked backwards, his neck cracking under the impact, blood bursting from a broken face, limbs flailing in all directions.

The toboggan crashed on. Bond got one second's glance at the prone body as it lay in the gutter.

Ahead a giant bank loomed, almost vertical, hairpin, dark and frightful. So this was Hell's Delight! If he could negotiate this hazard, he'd be through and into the home straights. Bond seized the guide rings, heard something snap and realised he wasn't going to make it.

The sled went almost straight on up the incline, snuck off at the rim and hurtled over the edge towards the clump of trees lining the route. Bond fell out of the cockpit and for a moment he was flying again. This time he landed on something hard. His spine yelled at him and at last, curiously relieved, he fell into unconsciousness.

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Bond was woken by a hot sticky tongue lapping at his face. It was a big St Bernard dog. Bond's hands reached out for the animal and gave it a reassuring pat.

"Never mind that," he groaned. "Go and get me the brandy."

Bond struggled out of the copse and made his way back to the bobsleigh run. There was no sign of Blofeld's body. Bond would make a few enquiries with the Swiss Mountain Rescue. There was always the possibility Blofeld's own men, those stationed on the berg, had removed his body.

Whatever had happened to him, Bond was satisfied the route of his evil scheme was in flames. Far above, the scarred summit of the Schilthorn smouldered. Bond had a moment of worry about what M was going to say. Piz Gloria and Blofeld's Virus Omega was destroyed, but he'd gone against clear orders to achieve that end. It would probably mean the loss of his Double 'O' status. There'd be a disciplinary at the very worst.

And then Bond wondered why he was bothered. There was more to worry about than Her Majesty's Secret Service. Before they'd set off, Bond had arranged a rendezvous point with Draco, in case they got separated, but it was too late for that now. Instead he decided to contact Hargreaves, that officious Consul man, and persuade him to sneak a fugitive back into France.

Bond smiled. For a brief moment he thought this might be what it felt like to be a bandit, running risks and hiding from the law, this time from both sides. The Capu of the Union Corse would appreciate that. And so too, Bond felt, would his daughter.

## **Twenty Five: All the Time in the World**

The wedding of James Bond and La Comtesse Teresa di Vincenzo, took place outdoors in the grounds of her father's chateau, L'Etate Calvi, in southern France.

It was a glorious January morning, crystal clear, sunny and warm, with none of the hints of snow and rain you would expect in the depth of winter. The local mayor performed a short civil ceremony under a gazebo decorated with clematis and chrysanthemums. It wasn't a glamorous affair, with only a few carefully chosen guests and the families of those who worked the estate. The locally produced food came as an open air buffet, the three tier cake was baked and iced in the chateau's kitchen and the wine came from the estate's vineyard. The most extravagant thing was the bride's dress, an ivory white full length gown of overlaid taffeta, studded with tiny sequins. La Comtesse did not wear a veil, choosing instead to adorn herself with a lace headscarf, as befitted the daughter of a Corsican bandit. The ring was two strands of interwoven platinum and gold, shaped to resemble hearts and flowers.

When James Bond slipped the slim, delicate band onto Tracy's finger, he knew this would be forever. He'd not been as certain of anything in his whole life.

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Bond tendered his resignation from the Double 'O' Section of Her Majesty's Secret Service as soon as he returned from Switzerland, a troublesome journey which took three days. Bond had spoken to Tracy from the British Consul in Berne, assuring her he'd travel to France within the week.

M didn't chastise him as he'd expected, but neither was he pleased. Bond assumed his resignation saved the Admiral having to make a lot of difficult decisions. Bond was given leave of absence until they found a suitable administration post for him. Word spread quickly and a bachelor party was hastily organised by his peers. It was something of a rushed affair, involving drinks in Soho and a trip to the Windmill Theatre. There was a surprisingly high turnout, including the Armourer, who, late in the evening, took the opportunity to corner Bond and congratulate him.

"I must confess I've sometimes thought you a little irresponsible," said Q, his speech slightly slurred by too many scotch and sodas. "You really ought to have more respect for government property. But this time, my boy, I can't complain."

"Nor can I," chuckled Bond.

"And well, I know that we haven't always exactly seen eye to eye, but, anyway, if there is ever anything you need, you can always ask."

"Thank you, Q, but this time I've got all the gadgets and I know how to use them."

For the first time Bond could remember, the Armourer threw back his head and laughed out loud.

Bond flew into France the next weekend and found wedding plans well underway and a date set for the end of the month.

“We didn’t want to wait did we, James?” the girl reminded him.

Bond smiled broadly and let her fuss over the preparations and let her fuss all over him. Tracy was the effervescent soul of L’Estate Calvi and everyone saw it. Her laughter was filling the rooms and her smile was dazzling the air. Bond couldn’t help but become infected. Even Marc Ange Draco, as stern a man as you could ever meet, was susceptible and seemed to be much more jovial than usual. The only sour note for Bond was Tracy’s traditional insistence she slept alone until their wedding night.

“No conjugal relations?” he queried. “Is this how it’s going to be when we’re married?”

“Don’t be silly, James, we’ll have all the time in the world when we’re married. Just wait for me, please, darling?”

He couldn’t argue. Three weeks sped by. Bond made a trip back to London to hand out invites to selected friends and to his ancient Aunt who lived in a little cottage in Pett Bottom. He even offered one to M, who rather surprised him by accepting and asking if he thought Miss Money Penny might like to accompany him. Bond had to make the enquiry himself. Money Penny declined and Bond detected a note of sadness in her eyes. When he left her office, Bond threw his trilby one last time, but gently and towards her. She caught it. He was certain she was crying.

The evening before the wedding, Tracy tucked herself safely in bed and Draco took Bond to the local cafe, where the proprietor was overjoyed to see his overseer. They ate steaks and drank four bottles of the strongest, earthiest Fitou Bond had ever tasted. After the meal, as they smoked and sipped coffee and copious brandies, Draco suddenly got very serious.

“Now, listen, James, we have not had a proper talk and I believe you have been avoiding meeting me alone because you are afraid of it.”

Bond smiled, amused, and poured out another two shots of brandy.

“I am about to become your father in law and I insist we talk,” continued Draco. “Many months ago I made you a serious offer. You declined it. But in a way you have still full filled my request. Now I want to full fill my part of it.”

He took an envelope out of his jacket pocket and placed it on the table. “I give you good luck and all my best wishes, for the first time, the last time and always, yes?”

Bond picked up the envelope. He knew there would be a cheque inside it, written out and featuring a one and six zeros.

Bond sighed. The wily Capu had been correct. This was a conversation he’d been avoiding. “It’s very kind of you, Draco, but I can’t accept this. Tracy’s had money and it brought her nothing but

unhappiness. I've never had it, not unless I've earned it, and this would simply ruin it for both of us. I can't take it."

"How can you think like this? You're drunk!" accused Draco. "This isn't charity, James. I'm doing it for my daughter, my son in law and my grandchildren."

"In that case, Draco, I'll tell you what. If either one of us ever needs help, I swear we'll come to you. You know, illnesses and things like that, schools for the children, perhaps."

Draco blustered something in French that Bond didn't catch but thought it might have been an exasperated prayer.

"There's an old proverb," said Bond. "'Her price is far above rubies' and that goes for a million pounds too."

Bond handed the cheque back and Draco reluctantly, sadly, took it, shaking his head. "We have just had a fight, you and I, and it is the first fight I have ever lost."

The morning was wonderfully warm and Bond, slightly hung over, studiously avoided Tracy until the appointed moment when the Capu walked her down the short aisle and placed his hand over hers. The ceremony was conducted in French and at its end, Bond tenderly kissed the girl he considered the most wonderful person in his world.

The party was informal, a buffet with good champagne. Everyone seemed to enjoy it. Bond even saw M discussing with Draco the Bullion Job of November 1964, an operation which apparently cost the Union Corse three lives, but pocketed them over half a million francs. Bond didn't know the Admiral had any knowledge of the Capu. Life, he considered as he kissed his bride on the cheek, was full of surprises.

Later Draco gave a speech, during which he urged Teresa to obey her husband in all things and to which the girl replied: "Of course I will, Papa, as I've always obeyed you!"

"I think I am fighting both of you on all sides," he told Bond as he guided the couple towards Bond's Aston Martin.

The car was decorated with pink and white roses along its lines and was surrounded with a crowd of well-wishers, all throwing rice confetti.

"Come on, it is time for you to go," Draco opened the car door. "Come on, be happy, James. Be happy, my darling Teresa."

They settled in the soft bucket seats and Bond started the engine, which purred into life.

"Go on, be off with now! And don't forget to come back for my birthday – both of you or maybe all of you!"

Bond thanked Draco for the hundredth time and eased the DBS into gear and down the wide flower strewn driveway. Within half an hour he was hitting sixty and making good progress along the Cote

D'Azur, heading, as promised, to Monaco for a three day honeymoon. The girl sat humming next to him. Occasionally she would look up at his serious face, laugh and tease him.

"My husband must lighten up a little, James!"

"I'm a bit embarrassed, Tracy. I've just realised, I haven't given you a wedding present," said Bond, breaking his silence.

"I had an idea about that: three girls and three boys. Pleased?"

"Not bad for a start. How long do you think you can wait?"

The girl raised her hand to his mouth, tracing the outline of his lips with her fingers. "Shh, we have all the time in the world, remember."

Coming towards them on the opposite carriageway was a blue Citroen full of youngsters. As the cars crossed, they waved, shouted and offered a chorus of toots on the horn. It was the fourth such incident.

Bond slowed down and pulled over into a lay by.

"Let's lose the roses. We look like an advert for a flower shop. And that reminds me too, I didn't even send you flowers."

He got out of the car and started to unpin the colourful trains. The girl leant on the open window frame and watched him. "It doesn't matter, James, you have given me a wedding present. The best one I could have: a future."

Bond picked the biggest white rose, one whose colour matched her bridal gown, and held it out towards her mouth. She bit down on the stem and Bond gave her a kiss.

"Don't eat it all at once."

While Bond continued to unburden the Aston Martin, the girl took to picking the petals off the rose and tossing them into the sea breeze.

"He loves me, he loves me not," she chimed. "First a boy and then girl..."

Bond had heard the car coming, a Lancia he thought. It was travelling at speed, but he didn't give it any particular attention. As he dropped the last of the flower chains to the roadside the whine of the engine was obliterated by the ominous roar and rattle of a submachine gun. Bond threw himself to the ground. One eye caught sight of a crouched bald figure, his neck wrapped in bandages, brandishing the weapon, the muzzle sprouting flame.

As quickly as the roar had arrived, it abated. The Lancia was speeding away down the highway. Bond jumped up.

"It's Blofeld!"

He rushed to the driver's door, adrenalin pumping, scarcely believing this could happen on today of all the blessed days. The wind screen of the DBS was shattered as if someone had punched a giant fist through it. Glass was everywhere, but Bond's mind was on the disappearing Lancia.

"It's Blo..."

The moment he saw Tracy the world stopped rotating for James Bond. A black void seemed to open up and swallow him.

Her gorgeous bridal dress was covered in a dark spreading slime. One of the bullets had shattered the side of her skull and half her beautiful face was painted in blood red. Her lips were still fixed in the smile she'd had when he'd kissed her through the flower. Bond touched his wife's shoulder and she tenderly flopped into his arms and he cradled her as the tears came and flooded his cheeks.

Tracy had never seen him cry.

Bond didn't know how long he sat like that, how many cars passed him, or how many tears he wept, but eventually a police motorcycle pulled to a stop alongside the Aston Martin.

The Gendarme dismounted. This didn't look like any ordinary accident. There was a man and a woman inside the car. They were both motionless, the man gently embracing the woman. The Gendarme bent over and peered inside the bloody interior.

"It's all right," said the man, who was crying uncontrollably. "It's quite all right really. She's having a rest and we'll be going on soon."

The man was clearly distressed, but the Gendarme noticed he was speaking in a very clear voice as if he was explaining something to a child.

"There's no hurry, you see," Bond whispered as his face sank down and buried itself in the girl's chestnut hair. "We have all the time in the world."

**THE END**

**"WE HAVE ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD"**

