



Chris Stacey
presents

***JAMES
BOND,
THE BLINK
OF AN EYE***

JAMES BOND, THE BLINK OF AN EYE

Chris Stacey

**Based on the characters created
by
Ian Fleming**

Also by Chris Stacey

James Bond, On Her Majesty's Secret Service

Details

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This adaptation was originally published on the forum www.CommanderBond.net under the title *The Blink of an Eye*.

Four stories were subsequently available on the website www.fanfiction.net. All have been revised for publication here.

The author acknowledges the reproduction of the cover image from Stanford Medicine News Centre www.med.stanford.edu

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Author's Note

I would like to thank all those who have encouraged me in my writing. In your debt.

I admit to borrowing the title of *Life through a Lens* from the 1997 Robbie Williams' song and album. The spelling is different although some themes may be vaguely similar.

Also in the story *Life through a Lens*, James Bond comes into contact with various celebrities. Any views expressed by and actions of the characters are purely fictional and do not relate to any opinions or incidents.

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This edition 2023

**James Bond,
The Blink of an Eye**

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One:

January:

The Chrysanthemum and the Sword

Bill Tanner hadn't had a particularly good Christmas. As part of the Senior Command Team it had been his turn to run the office. So, although he hadn't missed any social functions, he had been required to be sober and to trundle into London while half the work force at Millennium House stayed at home. Every day, excepting Christmas Day, he'd presented himself before the big white building on the south bank of the Thames, been searched by the ultra-tight security teams and spent eight mostly humdrum hours in control of the British Secret Service. The Christmas season was generally a quiet one. Even espionage seemed to take this traditional holiday. This year things had been slightly less mundane.

M rarely took holidays. Although she was always in Scotland during the festive season, the term 'off duty' could never be reasonably applied to her. Every morning she received important dispatches by twenty-four hour courier and, after reading them, she would telephone Tanner for an update. Her reassurances helped, but essentially Tanner saw himself as a top civil servant, not a power broker or negotiator. He was excellent at day to day routines – it was one of his strengths and the main reason M had requested he be promoted to Chief of Staff – but the troublesome, more diplomatic role, of acting Head of Service, sat uneasily on his shoulders. Top level meetings with government ministers and advisors made him anxious. He'd had to visit the foreign office twice this season; once to explain the department's position after another Russian oligarch suffered uranium poisoning and then again following the death of the aid worker Stephen Bachman. These intense question and answer sessions rarely resolved a situation. Ministers always seemed quick to criticise and Tanner knew he didn't quite have the wit for these confrontations. He left the F.O. each time feeling he'd been present at less of a debriefing and more of a ticking off.

Dealing with dithering members of the cabinet was M's territory. When she sensed reluctance to authorise direct action, she seized the initiative, like a boxer, and forced her point home. M's cut-throat delivery of her department's actions usually left ministers in no mood to interfere or question her decisions. With her astute reasoning, M usually got her way, unless her intentions clearly conflicted with current government policies. Even then she would disguise the service's manoeuvres with terms like 'unavoidable accident', ' cursory observations' or, at worst, 'unintentional incident.' She shouldered a lot of responsibility, both good and bad. Bill Tanner was quite glad she was back on hand this January 4th.

Tanner settled at his desk just before seven. Rosemary brought him coffee and he picked up the sheaf of daily bulletins. Most of these were innocuous communications, dull and trivial. The filtering system used wasn't always as efficient as it claimed. Half way down the pile, Tanner paused and read a communiqué three times before placing it to one side. Once he'd signed off the remaining reports, he returned to this one message. It had grabbed his attention because it was sent via the telex system, not secure high speed email. The telex, while not completely obsolete, certainly wasn't in general use. The machines which did exist used the modern Baudet codes and mostly resided with sleeper agents and retired field officers. A previous Head of Service had famously declared them as being 'only good for the cricket scores' and had one installed in his office precisely for that purpose. Tanner didn't know there was a Swiss model, a portable MUX-B, in use in Singapore. He read the message again. It was headed Universal Exports and was something of a conundrum: DROP DEAD IN SINGAPORE YOU AINT SEEN NOTHING YET SOON.

Tanner spent an hour making telephone calls. Next, he got Rosemary to deliver a brief memorandum to M. Meanwhile three files arrived from the Registrar of Records. The first was a summary of the activities of the military regime in Burma, a country now renamed Myanmar. Tanner, like many British citizens simply refused to use that name, a sort of mental hangover from when half of Malaya was part of Britain's long diminished Empire. The service documents followed a similar unwritten rule. The second file was on chemical weapons manufacture. The third was the service record of the late Stephen Bachman.

Tanner read the files quickly, highlighting points of interest. He received and made more telephone calls. At ten o'clock the foreign office advisor for South East Asia arrived at his office and for half an hour they discussed Tanner's concerns. Afterwards, Tanner called in Rosemary and, using the details he'd garnered that morning, dictated the contents of a new operational dossier. He was ready to meet M just after noon.

M looked refreshed and cheerful, which was unusual even after a Christmas break, and as he took his seat Tanner happened to remark on it.

"Thank you, Tanner," she replied warmly, "Over Christmas I became a grandmother. There's nothing like a new arrival to spark a family celebration. I had a very good holiday. Now," M curtly turned into her businesslike self, "what have you got for me?"

"Stephen Bachman – our undercover man in Malaya. You may recall he was killed in Burma over Christmas. Well, something's come to light, something unexpected, but, if I'm right, very useful in the fight against General Shwe's military regime."

M offered Tanner some coffee. "Remind me why Bachman was in Burma."

"He's an intelligence gatherer. He's also a legitimate representative of the Living Aid Foundation," explained Tanner, accepting the refreshment with a nod of thanks. "He did some good work for us, nothing spectacular, but useful none the less. Recently he's been working in Thailand. He's filed several reports regarding the treatment of the Karenni, a displaced people: half of them live in Thailand and the rest are subjected to persecution in Burma. The Burmese junta seems to want them out or exterminated. Last year Bachman managed to organise some aid convoys, but the last trip was a disaster. The Burmese claim it was the Karen Resistance Army who attacked the convoy and, although officially we haven't commented, the facts don't bear this out. The circumstances of his death suggest the effects of some sort of respiratory agent."

"So Bachman was murdered. Can we prove it – emphatically?"

"We don't think so. But Bachman wants to tell us something from beyond the grave, so to speak." Tanner noted M's look of disapproval at the euphemism. He quickly handed over the telex. "This arrived today."

M read the message once. "Cryptic," was her only comment.

"Yes, Ma'am. The Bachman Turner Overdrive."

"I'm not an ingénue, Tanner," M appeared to be losing patience. "I do remember the seventies. What's this all about? Why's it come on a telex? We haven't used those beastly things for years."

"I made a few discreet calls to the L.A.F. I think it's from his girlfriend."

“Girlfriend? The papers said he was married.”

“One of his colleagues mentioned of an affair between Bachman and an air hostess called Lamai Sun Thorn. He referred to this girl by a pet name, Soon or Soonie. It’s how you pronounce her surname, Ma’am, ‘Soon-Torn’.”

“So she sent the telex?”

“I believe so,” answered Tanner. He saw a perplexing look on M’s face, as if he was pitching a bad marketing idea. He knew the expression; it was time to end his explanation. “It’s only a hunch, but I think she’s asking for a dead drop. Perhaps she has something for us. Something Bachman gave her.”

“Evidence?”

“Possibly.”

“This whole story is something and possibly. It could be absolutely nothing. What do we have on this girl? Anything at all?”

Tanner handed over the dossier he’d compiled. “I’ve summarised the necessary information. If you turn to Appendix – ”

“No, thank you, Tanner,” interrupted M. Her usual frostiness and authoritative tone returned. “Leave it with me. I’ll call you after lunch.”

M didn’t open Tanner’s dossier for some time, choosing instead to complete her own correspondence and then make a single telephone call. The Wilson’s were coming to dinner and she wanted to check with the housekeeper that everything was in hand. Once ready she poured herself another cup of coffee and opened the untitled blue document wallet. The dossier was typed in capital letters with no punctuation except full stops and commas. Like its author, the script wasn’t the most florid, more concise and matter of fact. This was why she appreciated Tanner. He didn’t fuss. The first page was dated and headed: PROSPECTIVE ACTION IN SINGAPORE – REGARDING INTEL FROM OPERATIVE 439 (DECEASED). She read on.

OPERATIVE 439: DR. STEPHEN BACHMAN BSC 39YRS MARRIED WITH TWO CHILDREN. A SPECIALIST IN BLOOD DISEASES INCLUDING ANEMIA, HEOMPHILIA, LYMPHOCYTOPENIA, THROMBOCYTOPENIA AND THE HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS.

BACHMAN CHOSE TO ESCHEW RESEARCH TO WORK FOR THE LIVING AID FOUNDATION. THIS APPEARS TO BE A POLITICALLY MOTIVATED DECISION AS WELL AS A HUMANITARIAN ONE. DURING HIS FIRST POSTING HE HAD A REPUTATION FOR OUTSPOKENNESS, BECOMING A SHORTLIVED MOUTHPIECE AGAINST THE SUDANESE GOVERNMENT. HE WAS SUBSEQUENTLY DEPORTED. HE WAS NEXT APPOINTED TO SOMALIA WHERE HE RAISED AWARENESS OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS.

THE EAST AFRICAN DIVISION CONTACTED BACHMAN OSTENSIBLY TO OBTAIN OBSERVATIONS FROM THE WAR ZONE. HE WAS GIVEN THE FIELD NUMBER 439. HIS GOOD CONTACTS AND RELATIVE FREEDOM ALLOWED HIM TO PROVIDE INTELLIGENCE ON TROOP MOVEMENTS, CORRUPTION AND HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES. DURING THIS PERIOD HE MET AND MARRIED JEAN NEWLEY, A CO-WORKER. IT IS UNCLEAR WHETHER SHE HAS EVER BEEN AWARE OF HIS DUAL FUNCTION.

DURING THE GUBAN OFFENSIVE 439 IDENTIFIED SUDANESE MILITARY ADVISORS, WHO ENCOURAGED THE WIDESPREAD ANARCHY RESULTING IN A SERIES OF MASSACRES. HE ALSO WITNESSED THE DEPLOYMENT OF MILITARY EQUIPMENT AND PERSONEL IN THE REGION, WHICH ALLOWED US TO ISSUE CODE BLUE WARNINGS

TO BRITISH AND INTERNATIONAL WORKERS. THE LACK OF A RELIABLE INTERNET NETWORK IN EAST AFRICA MEANT 439S TRANSCRIPTS CAME VIA MUX-B TELEX, IN CODED SHORTHAND.

AFTER TEN YEARS IN SOMALIA 439 RETURNED HOME WITH HIS FAMILY AND TOOK AN ADMINISTRATIVE POSITION WITH L.A.F. FOUR YEARS AGO HE SET UP THE FEATHER PROJECT IN THAILAND, STUDYING TROPICAL DISEASES SUCH AS YELLOW AND DENGUE FEVER, SCHISTOSOMIASIS AND FILARIASIS. HIS WORK BROUGHT HIM INTO CONTACT WITH THE KARENNI, AN ETHNIC MINORITY, AND 439 BEGAN TO TAKE AN ACTIVE INTEREST IN THEIR PLIGHT. {SEE APPX 1}

439 VISITED RANGOON, SHOWING A SURPRISING GIFT FOR NEGOTIATION, AND WAS ABLE TO ORGANISE AID CONVOYS INTO THE MILITARISED ZONE. WITHOUT PROMPTING 439 CHOSE TO SEND US NEW INTEL FROM BANGKOK. IT APPEARS HE HAD BEEN FORGOTTEN. THE MALAY DIVISION SUBSEQUENTLY PROVIDED ACCESS TO THE SECURE EMAIL SERVICE.

M made a mental note to get Robinson, the Human Resources Supervisor, to chase up the whereabouts of all operatives; she wondered how many more had been 'forgotten' and were still on the department's payroll.

439 REPORTED THE ACTIVITIES OF THE BURMESE MILITARY. THIS INFORMATION REMAINED COVERT AS IT WOULD HAVE COMPROMISED HIS HUMANITARIAN WORK. {SEE APPX.2}

439 WAS ARRESTED BY THE MILITARY INTELLIGENCE SERVICE IN MANERPLAW FOR ATTENDING AN ILLEGAL POLITICAL MEETING, BUT WAS LATER RELEASED. THIS WAS PERCEIVED AS A GOODWILL GESTURE, AS THE AUTHORITIES CAME UNDER STRONG DIPLOMATIC PRESSURE. TRANSMISSIONS BY 439 AFTER THIS TIME DESCRIBE ACTIVITIES AGAINST HIM. {SEE APPX.2}

439 STAYED PERMANENTLY IN BANGKOK, BECOMING ESTRANGED FROM HIS FAMILY. HE BEGAN AN AFFAIR WITH AIR HOSTESS. {SEE APPX.3}

439 ARRANGED MORE AID CONVOYS IN DECEMBER LAST YEAR, BUT THE DELIVERY SCHEDULE SUFFERED INTERFERENCE FROM THE LOCAL MILITIA, INCLUDING BRIBARY AND BLACKMAIL. THERE WERE UNCONFIRMED REPORTS OF FIGHTING AND LOOTING. THE MILITARY BLAMED THE KAREN RESISTANCE. ACCORDING TO THE AUTHORITIES 439S LAST CONVOY WAS ATTACKED BY THE K.R.A. THE 8 L.A.F. WORKERS WERE KILLED AND THE SUPPLIES SEIZED. {SEE APPX. 4}

THE BODIES WERE FLOWN TO BANGKOK AND ON EXAMINATION APPEAR TO HAVE BEEN POSTHUMOUSLY MUTILATED, THE REAL CAUSE OF DEATH BEING A CHOKING AGENT, SIMILAR TO THOSE IDENTIFIED IN 439S OWN REPORTS .{SEE APPX. 5} THE BURMESE FLATLY DENY ANY SUCH CHARGE, ALTHOUGH IT IS WIDELY UNDERSTOOD THEY DO POSSESS CHEMICAL AND BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS.

TODAY GCHQ RECEIVED A TELEX MESSAGE FROM A MUX-B IN SINGAPORE. {SEE APPX. 2} THE MESSAGE WAS ENCRYPTED WITH THE SAME MASKING CODES USED BY 439. RECORDS INDICATE HE WAS STILL IN POSSESSION OF AN MUX-B. WHILE 439 COULD NOT HAVE SENT THE MESSAGE.

M raised her eyebrows at the glaring obvious statement.

IT MAY WELL HAVE BEEN DISPATCHED ON HIS INSTRUCTION.

M poured herself another cup of coffee. Bachman certainly wasn't the most guarded of intelligence gatherers, but he had served a purpose. Despite herself she had a gut feeling about the man's story. She turned to the extract documents Tanner had supplied.

APPENDIX 1 – THE KARENNI

THE KARENNI ARE AN INDIGENOUS ISLAMIC PEOPLE LIVING IN THE NORTH EAST OF BURMA. THROUGHOUT THE 1980S THEY LED OPPOSITION FORCES IN A LONG CIVIL WAR. SINCE THE WAR ENDED THEY HAVE SUFFERED CONSTANT PERSECUTION. MANY KAREN FLED THE COUNTRY AND LIVE IN THAILAND. THE THAI GOVERNMENT HAS LITTLE REGARD FOR THE KAREN EITHER, DESPITE MANY NOW BEING THAI CITIZENS. THERE IS A STEADY INFLUX OF REFUGEES FROM BURMA ENSURING A GROWTH OF SQUALID SHANTY TOWNS STRAGGLING THE BORDER REGIONS. BASIC SANITATION IS LACKING AND FOOD SHORTAGES ARE NORMAL. DISEASE IS RIFE. THE SITUATION IS NO BETTER IN BURMA WHERE GENERAL THAN SHWE RUTHLESSLY SUPPRESSES ANY POTENTIAL BREAKAWAY STATE. IT IS ESTIMATED OVER 200,000 KAREN HAVE BEEN DRIVEN FROM THEIR HOMELANDS INTO THE PA-AN REGION.

BURMA IS STILL CLASSED BY THE UNITED NATIONS AS AN OUTPOST OF TYRANNY. THE PERSECUTION AND HOUSE ARREST OF THE NOBEL PRIZE WINNER AND POLITICAL ACTIVIST AUNG SAN SUUKYI SITS AT ODDS WITH GENERAL SHWES CLAIMS TO RUN A LEGITIMATE DEMOCRATIC ADMINISTRATION. THE NATIONAL LEAGUE FOR DEMOCRACY HAS REPORTED HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES FOR MANY YEARS AND THE TREATMENT OF THE KAREN IS A FURTHER EXAMPLE OF THE REGIMES DISREGARD FOR INTERNATIONAL OPINION.

M was well aware of the totalitarian regime in Burma. She'd had dealings with them in the past; they were suspicious inward looking rulers, content to sit on their accumulated wealth while the rest of the country went to ruin. This attitude was all too prevalent in many parts of the world and it angered M. She considered it born as much out of individual ignorance as contempt for a country's civilian population. She turned to the second set of extracts, a thick sheaf of papers containing all of Bachman's correspondence since his posting to Bangkok. Underneath the heading APPENDIX 2 – TRANSMISSIONS FROM 439, Tanner had listed the most relevant communiqués. M read them quickly, but only two interested her:

28 AUGUST – RETURNED TO PA-AN WITH JOW. DIFFICULT TO OBTAIN TRAVELLING VISA THIS TIME. 6 HOURS OF QUESTIONS. 2 DAYS TRAVEL. VERY BAD CONDITIONS. VILLAGERS DESCRIBE CAMPS, PRISONS AND TORTURE. INDISCRIMINATE EXECUTIONS. JOW AND A LOCAL GUIDE LEAD ME TO THE PRISON CAMP. BARBED WIRE ENCLOSURE DISGUISED AS GRASS AND WOOD FENCING. WOODEN HUTS. ARMED GUARDS. LOCATION UNSUITABLE FOR AN ARMY OUTPOST. TOO REMOTE. TOO HIDDEN. NO COMMUNICATION TOWER. NO REGULAR WATER SUPPLY. AIRSTRIP 4 KM WST. OPEN GROUND 2 KM STH. GROUND BROKEN AND REPLANTED. GUIDES CLAIM THIS HIDES MASS GRAVE. LOCAL VILLAGE RECENTLY DEVASTATED. BODIES DECOMPOSING. HARD TO TELL DIRECT CAUSE. MUCH MUTILATION AND SCAVENGING. BREASTS AND GENITALS REMOVED. HEADS STUCK ON STAKES. SCALPS MISSING. EXPOSED SKIN BLISTERED. BLOOD CLOTTING AROUND THE MOUTH. SIMILAR TO MUSTARD GAS REACTIONS.

12 DECEMBER – SHADOWS FOLLOW US EVERYWHERE. ONLY TIME WE DONT SEE THEM IS IN BED. THEY WORK SHIFTS NOW. WE KNOW THEM LIKE A FAMILY. WE EVEN SAY HELLO. BUT WE ARE TRAPPED. WE MUST BE BUGGED. THEY ARE EVERYWHERE WE GO.

M particularly noted the use of the plural pronoun when 439 reported from Bangkok, but when in the field he reverted to the singular. She shuffled the papers together and turned to the third document, a summary of the woman in the story.

APPENDIX 3 – INTELLIGENCE ON LAMAI SUN THORN

THAI CITIZEN, MID-20S, AIR STEWARDESS WITH THAI AIRWAYS INTERNATIONAL. DETAILS ARE INCOMPLETE. A RELATIONSHIP FORMED BETWEEN 439 AND HER ABOUT 2 YEARS AGO. 439 IS ESTRANGED FROM HIS FAMILY, WHO APPEAR UNAWARE OF THE AFFAIR. ENQUIRIES WITH THE AIRLINE CONFIRM SHE RECENTLY TOOK A POST AT THEIR OFFICES IN SINGAPORE, A BENEFIT OF HER EXCELLENT LANGUAGE SKILLS. CURRENTLY MI6 DOES NOT POSSESS ANY PHOTOGRAPHS.

This was as thin a profile as M had ever seen. She wondered if the girl had taken the post in Singapore because of the 'shadows.' They appeared to be a disturbing presence, while not necessarily an out-and-out hostile one. She carried on reading:

APPENDIX 4 – REPORTS OF THE DEATH OF 439

OFFICIAL BURMESE TRANSCRIPT (MI6 TRANSLATION):

A LIVING AID FOUNDATION CONVOY WAS GRANTED ACCESS TO THE PA-AN REGION. IT COMPRISED FIVE ALL TERRAIN VEHICLES DELIVERING MEDICAL SUPPLIES TO LOCAL VILLAGES. THE AUTHORITIES PLACED AN ARMED ESCORT ON THE CONVOY TO PROTECT IT FROM INSURGENT KAREN GEURILLAS. THE CONVOY SETTLED IN THE VILLAGE OF BWA DER AND ENCOUNTERED RESISTANCE FROM THE LOCAL PEOPLE, RESULTING IN THE DEATH OF ONE OF THE GUARDS. REPARATIVE ACTION WAS INITIATED BY ESCORT MAJOR TIN, WHO PURSUED A PARTY OF GEURILLAS SOME DISTANCE FROM THE VILLAGE. TIN AND HIS FORCE WERE SURROUNDED FOR TWO DAYS BEFORE THE GEURILLAS DISPERSED. TIN RETURNED TO THE VILLAGE TO FIND IT ABANDONED AND MUCH OF THE POPULACE SLAUGHTERED AND MUTILATED. THE EIGHT LIVING AID WORKERS AND THEIR THAI DRIVERS WERE ALSO KILLED. THE SUPPLIES WERE NOT TO BE SEEN. TIN CONTACTED THE MILITARY WHO PROVIDED A RELIEF FORCE ALLOWING THE RETURN OF THE BODIES OF THE FOREIGN NATIONALS. THE ADMINISTRATION GREATLY REGRETS THE LOSS OF LIFE INCURRED DURING THIS HUMANITARIAN MISSION. HOWEVER WE ARE IN A STATE OF CIVIL WAR WITH ALL SEPARATIST TRIBES AND THIS INCIDENT REINFORCES OUR RESOLVE TO RID THE COUNTRY OF THESE INSURGENTS BY ANY MEANS. OUR SYMPATHIES GO TO THE FAMILIES OF...

M stopped reading the report, flicking to the transcript from the Malay Division.

439 TRAVELED TO BURMA ON 26 DECEMBER. THERE WAS NO CONTACT FROM HIM. HIS BODY, THAT OF THE 7 OTHER LIVING AID WORKERS AND THE 5 THAI DRIVERS WERE RETURNED BY THE BURMESE ARMY TO THE THAI BORDER, WHERE THE AUTHORITIES MADE ARRANGEMENTS FOR THEIR TRANSPORTATION TO BANGKOK. THE L.A.F. REPRESENTATIVE WHO IDENTIFIED THE BODIES TALKED OF THEIR MUTILATION, INCLUDING BEHEADING. DURING POSTMORTEM, REFERENCE WAS MADE TO THE EXCESSIVE BLISTERING OF THE SKIN, ESPECIALLY AROUND THE FACE AND HANDS. THERE WAS ALSO EVIDENCE OF THROAT BURNS AND LUNG INFECTIONS. THE EXAMINER MADE REFERENCE TO THE EFFECTS OF PULMONARY AGENTS SUCH AS CHLORINE AND PHOSGENE BUT WOULD NOT DRAW ANY FIRM CONCLUSIONS. THE DEATHS AND CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING THEM ARE SUSPICIOUS. THE EVIDENCE FOR A DELIBERATE ASSASSINATION IS SLIM, BUT CANNOT BE RULED OUT. ARRANGEMENTS ARE BEING MADE BETWEEN LIVING AID AND THE THAI AUTHORITIES FOR THE TRANSPORTATION OF 439S BODY TO THE UK.

M buzzed for fresh coffee and, after a few minutes, her secretary appeared and swapped the empty Pyrex jug for a steaming full one. M continued to read and seemed not to notice the disturbance.

APPENDIX 5 – SUSPECTED PULMONARY AGENTS (BURMA)

MODERN CHEMICAL WEAPONS TAKE THREE BASIC FORMS: NERVE AGENTS, BLISTER AGENTS AND PULONARY AGENTS. PULONARIES ARE THE MOST COMMON BEING THE EASIEST TO PRODUCE.

PULMONARIES ARE CHOKING AGENTS DESIGNED TO PREVENT BREATHING BY CAUSING A BUILD UP OF FLUID IN THE LUNGS LEADING TO SUFFOCATION. EXPOSURE TO THE SKIN IS CORROSIVE, RESULTING IN SEVERE BURNS. EXPOSURE TO THE EYES RESULTS IN BLURRED VISION AND EVENTUAL BLINDNESS. INHALATION CAUSES THROAT BURNS, VOMITING, CHEST PAINS AND HEADACHES. EVENTUALLY THE VICTIM WILL SUFFER RESPIRATORY OR CIRCULATORY FAILURE.

COMMON ELEMENTS OR COMPOUNDS USED ARE CHLORINE, CHLOROPICRIN, DIPHOSGENE AND PHOSGENE. THE LATTER OF THESE IS THE MOST DANGEROUS.

PHOSGENE IS COLOURLESS AT ROOM TEMPERATURE, BUT HAS A VAPOUR DENSITY OF 3.5 TIMES AIR, ALLOWING IT TO REMAIN LOW-LYING FOR LONG PERIODS OF TIME. IF CONTAMINATED, THOSE AFFECTED WILL SUFFER FROM MASSIVE PULMONARY EDEMA, WITH MAXIMUM SYMPTOMS REACHED IN 12 OR SO HOURS. DEATH USUALLY FOLLOWS IN 24 – 36 HOURS.

COMMON PHOSGENES ARE SULPHUR MUSTARD GAS (HD, H, HT, HL, AND HQ) AND NITROGEN MUSTARD GAS (HN1, HN2, HN3).

THE BURMESE GOVERNMENT DENY THEY POSSESS ANY CHEMICAL WEAPONS, BUT REPORTS SUBMITTED BY ORGANISATIONS SUCH AS THE UNITED NATIONS AND CAMPAIGN FOR HUMAN RIGHTS SUGGEST OTHERWISE. 439 REPORTED THE LIKELY EFFECTS OF CONTAMINATION ON THE KAREN POPULATION. THIS IS PARTLY RATIFIED BY INDEPENDENT SOURCES WHO HAVE WITNESSED THE ATTITUDES OF MILD EXPOSURE FROM THOSE WHO RE-ENTER AFFECTED REGIONS. SYMPTOMS RANGE FROM HEADACHES, LUNG IRRITATION AND BLISTERS TO SEVERE DIARRHOEA AND THE COUGHING UP OF BLOOD.

THE CLOSED BORDERS OF THE COUNTRY SUGGEST THAT THESE WEAPONS ARE NOT IMPORTED, ALTHOUGH THERE IS CURRENTLY NO KNOWN LOCATION FOR THE MANUFACTURE AND DISTRIBUTION OF THESE WEAPONS.

THE UNITED NATIONS LISTS BURMA AS ONE OF THE TEN COUNTRIES MOST LIKELY BUT UNCONFIRMED AS MAKING AND USING PHOSGENES.

M turned the page. Tanner had included a three page summary, but she passed it over in favour of the page marked POTENTIAL ACTION.

REPLY TO THE MESSAGE USING THE CODED TELEX SYSTEM AND ARRANGE (IF REQUESTED) A DEAD DROP. NO DIRECT CONTACT TO BE MADE WITH RECIPIANT OF THE MESSAGE. PUBLIC LOCATION MOST LIKELY. THE SERVICE HAS A GOOD RAPPORT WITH THE MARRIOTT HOTEL AND CAN ARRANGE A RENDEZVOUS THERE OR CLOSE BY. THE OPERATION SHOULD BE SWIFT AND LOW KEY. A STATION AGENT FROM THE MALAY DIVISION SHOULD BE ASSIGNED THE RECOVERY. THE ARTICLES USEFULNESS CAN THEN BE ASSESSED AND SHIPPED ACCORDINGLY. THE PROTECTION OF THE CONTACT MUST REMAIN PROMINENT.

M closed the document and placed it on her desk. She looked out the window towards Westminster Palace. The big iron hands on the white clock face of Big Ben were easing towards three o'clock. It was already beginning to darken, another short grey day.

She turned the matter over in her head. Certainly 439's death was unfortunate, suspicious and, quite possibly, an elaborate murder, but Tanner was fishing for something that wasn't there. He didn't even know who sent the message. Did Bachman prime his girlfriend for this eventuality? Did she change jobs for her own safety? Surely the M.I.S. wouldn't be following this girl to Singapore? But if they had, thought M, she's been found out and wants to get rid of something that will endanger her. Or maybe she's in danger already.

M called Tanner back to the office and he was there in five minutes. She didn't mince her words. "There's nothing at stake here, Tanner."

She paused deliberately for effect. Tanner waited, he'd watched this very routine several times, usually when M talked action with a government minister. Suddenly she was curt, authoritative.

"Yet. Reply back to whoever sent this, see if we can get them to open up a bit and tell us what they've got or what they want. I can't be risking anyone on a whim."

"Of course, Ma'am." Tanner was quite pleased, but tried not to show it. "If we do put this into action, who can we send from Malaya?"

"Let's get the intel first, Tanner," replied M. "If it's worth going after I'll want it done properly." Another pause, shorter this time. "Isn't 007 in Australia at the moment?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I understand he's on vacation in Cairns."

"Cancel it – if you have to," said M gruffly. "If this girl is in any danger and the opposition think she's contacted us, they won't be watching flight arrivals from Down Under. 007 can sneak in unnoticed."

James Bond watched the slim back of the young blonde stewardess retreat up the first class aisle. He smiled cheekily to himself. The flirtation he had carried on with Eve was finally bearing fruit and they had exchanged numbers, in case she ever had a stop-over in London, which was quite likely. Bond wasn't fond of Australian girls, finding their accent too strong, but she was as demure as they come and very pretty with a wide genuine smile.

Bond sipped his sixth champagne cobbler. Eve had shown a remarkable capacity to learn the art of mixing a good cocktail. This was her best effort yet. Bond settled back into his big, deep seat. He'd eaten, drunk, read the *Brisbane Courier-Mail* and listened to jazz on the headphones. Now, his final drink of the flight to hand, he reflected on this minor sortie.

The operation didn't sound like a job for an agent of Bond's calibre. Indeed, Bond wasn't even aware the service still did 'dead drops'; as he told M: "They went out of fashion after the Cold War ended and the internet revolution took off." She didn't respond well to his history lesson. Nonetheless, Bond had never performed a dead drop during his whole career and didn't see why he had to start now. He didn't like the set up either. No description of the girl. No idea what she was handing over. Bond was also unhappy over the choice of venue. The service was well known for conducting business at the Marriott, including, he recalled, a botched defection of a Chinese scientist. The scientist had ended up recaptured by his own people and returned to Beijing to face trial and incarceration. He was never heard of again. Bond didn't want a similar fate to befall Lamai Sun Thorn. Despite these reasonable objections, M insisted Bond was the right man for the task.

Mostly though, Bond was annoyed at having to cut short his vacation on the Great Barrier Reef. He had been planning the trip for months. Douglas Donovan had been one of his best friends in the service. A double 'O' like Bond, he'd been forced to retire after his left lung was shattered by three bullets in Morocco. His brother already lived in Queensland, operating a pleasure boat service across the reef, so Dougie had taken his disability compensation and joined him, setting up his own business, which he called Sail & Swim.

It had been a perfect week. Bond had flown out just before New Year and, once the jet lag had passed, Dougie took ample pleasure in showing him the delights of Cairns. There were inexpensive restaurants, rowdy drinking bars, the opulent casino and, Dougie's speciality, the strip clubs. They got drunk at night and while they recovered during the day the two of them took a small motor launch out to the reef. They sunbathed and snorkelled. Once the alcohol was out of their system, they scuba-dived, exploring the coral beds and the glorious aquatic wildlife. Then they drank some more and reminisced. Bond hadn't been so relaxed in years. Dougie looked refreshed and, despite the gammy shoulder, he seemed to be fitter and more spirited than Bond could ever remember him. Silently, he had a tinge of jealousy for the easy going lifestyle his pal had provided for himself. Half way through the sixth day, Dougie encouraged Bond to follow in his footsteps.

"Look at me, James! I'm fit again. Like a fiddle. I love what I do out here. It's almost as good as sex. Well, maybe not that good, but pretty darn close, I reckon. You've still got some youth on your side and you're not short of talents – hunting, shooting, fishing, swimming. You'd go down a storm with

the ladies here too, mate. You and me, James. We'd set all the pulses racing in North Queensland. Think about it. Sun, sea and Sheilas."

"And horrific accents," mocked Bond. "Come on, Doug, you know my heart's set on that cottage in the country."

Dougie wouldn't let the subject rest until Bond impolitely told him to shove it up his rear end. Later, over a steak dinner, Bond noticed Dougie had sat facing the entrance to the restaurant, as he had every time they went out.

"It doesn't leave you does it, Doug?" he asked.

"What doesn't?"

"The old feelings, the habits, the wariness that's drilled into us," mused Bond. "What's it like to never know you're safe, Doug? Even after being out here for six years, you're still expecting someone to come for you."

"Every day, James. There are people out there who'll want me dead and they haven't died yet," Dougie said with an almost apologetic laugh. "Hell, I miss the thrill too, buddy. I never believed it, but I actually miss pulling that trigger. I always thought I'd be glad not to have that responsibility, but once you've tasted that power it's hard to shake it off. There are days when all I think about is the scrapes I got into and how I got out of them. Sometimes they're nightmares and I wake up in a sweat, like the old days. Other times they're like an adventure and I never want it to end. Sailing and swimming all day, drinking and fucking all night – it just isn't a substitute."

Dougie paused, his eyes closed and he took a deep breath. When he opened them Bond could see the eyes were wet. Dougie dabbed them with his napkin.

"Christ, I wish I hadn't walked out of that restaurant in Rabat. They told me not to. I just didn't believe them. My first big mistake and it finishes me."

Bond nodded in sympathy. The memory was painful for Dougie. It had been a long convalescence for him. Bond had visited him several times and been alarmed by the physical and mental breakdown the man was suffering. His life had almost been torn from him, his career was finished and, as often happened in these situations, there was little compassion from the suits in charge. Bond silently wondered how long it would be before a stray bullet disabled him, before they read him the retirement notice.

"You're better off out of it, Doug," stated Bond blankly. "Believe you me, the world is getting uglier by the year."

This seemed to close the matter and the two old friends set about downing big vodka chasers in O'Brien's and chasing the local ladies.

Bond had woken the next morning, as he had on two of the previous five, with a naked woman lying next to him. Once again, he squinted in the morning sunlight, focussing his tired eyes on the creature next to him, and wished they always looked as good the morning after as they did the night before. Bond recalled this one was high on enthusiasm and very noisy. He idly lifted the sheet to remind himself of her curvy, slightly careworn body. She wasn't a young woman, but she had fine assets where it counted. He struggled to remember her name.

Bond slipped out of bed and walked naked to the bathroom where he took a long revitalising shower and, for once, decided not to shave. Wearing a towel he entered the kitchen and blended together pineapples, mangos and oranges, making two big glasses of smooth juice. He could hear that Dougie was awake and was expending more energy with his once again eager partner. Bond returned to the bedroom and gave the dozing girl a playful slap on the backside.

"Come on, petal, time to get up."

She moaned softly and yawned. "Oh, sweetie, not yet. I'm too tired. You wore me out, you tiger."

"No," said Bond firmly. "Move your ass. It's Sunday and I go to church on Sundays."

This seemed to stir the girl a little and she half sat up.

"Church?" she repeated, incredulous. "You're fucking joking, right?"

"No, I'm deadly serious." Bond handed her the glass of fresh juice. "You want to come?"

The girl most certainly did not and while Bond dressed, she took her own shower. She too could hear the sounds from the next bedroom. Her friend was clearly occupied. She paused by the door as if to knock, then with an indifferent shrug, changed her mind.

She and Bond exchanged a few niceties and she stretched up to kiss him gently on the lips. "Thanks, babe. Any time you want a repeat performance, give me a call."

Bond waited until she had left the bungalow before returning to the bedroom to strip the bottom sheet from the bed. She'd written a number on the telephone pad. Bond looked at it. He still didn't remember her name. Casually he screwed up the paper into a ball and threw it into a waste bin. Finally he left the bungalow, not to go to church, but to stroll down to the beach, as he'd done every morning.

Cairns was a big town, not in terms of population, but in its acreage. Streets were wide, houses big, everything seemed to be spread out, ordered. It didn't offer much in the way of history and architecture. It was a holiday town. Bond enjoyed the sun on his skin as he ambled down Grove Street on his way to the sea front. He lit his first cigarette of the day, red Marlboros, his own special Morland's were finished, and sucked the tobacco deep into his lungs.

Bond mulled over Dougie's worries. Bond was rarely ill-at-ease. He never once considered the enemy would seek him for retribution when he was on his own time. It did not stop him being cautious, but he didn't spend time anticipating death. When working, yes; then Bond was alert and coiled like a tight spring, waiting for the moment when action took over from words. But never at home, never on holiday. Perhaps his relaxed attitude was the sign of a lucid acceptance of his fate or maybe he just didn't care enough about his life. It had often been suggested he didn't care enough about the lives of those around him.

Bond reached the rather muddy beach. It was already humid and clammy. He was glad of the ocean air to cool him. He sat down for several minutes, smoking another cigarette, enjoying the early morning breeze and the soft lap of the waves on the shore line. He wondered: could this be the good life for him? An easy, pampered retirement of great food, water sports and women, not necessarily in that order. He wasn't getting younger. A change of lifestyle might be what he needed, what the doctor never told him, but always implied.

When Bond returned to the bungalow, Dougie was alone and looking quite pleased with himself. Bond went to check his email while Dougie made eggs for breakfast. Bond's slightly sombre mood altered dramatically as soon as he filtered his inbox. There was a message from M. Bond closed the bedroom door and played the recorded message. M's instructions were clear. His vacation was over. He had to reply immediately, confirming his flight and arrival times. It had all been arranged without consulting him. He felt tense and a little sick. His mind wasn't ready for this. His body wasn't either, not after two weeks of the Christmas season and Dougie's infamous pub crawls.

His friend's smile vanished as soon as he saw Bond's attitude at the breakfast table. Bond explained what had happened and Dougie accepted it with bad grace and lots of swearing. Bond, more philosophically, chose to turn down another day on the reef in favour of an intense drying out session. Their final evening was one of mixed emotion and role reversal from the night before; Bond not wanting to abandon his holiday, wary of the mission ahead of him, and Dougie understanding why he had to go, sympathetic to his fears.

And now, with little else to do on board the plane, Bond was drinking again, slowly and methodically. If nothing else comes out of this mission, he considered, at least he'd have the number of the beautiful Eve.

Qantas Flight QF51 from Brisbane touched down at Singapore's Changi Airport a few minutes early. This beautiful airport was one of Bond's favourites, the perfect antidote to any sixteen hour journey. Routinely voted the world's best, Bond loved the open spaces, the multitude of scented green plants, the sedate lighting, the expensive drinks and the pampering suites, where a traveller can be massaged, washed and manicured by immaculate, attentive staff. The wait for his baggage was short and Bond was stamped through immigration with the merest of glances at his diplomatic passport. In the vacuous arrivals foyer a waist-coated porter hurried up to Bond, bowed his head and virtually demanded he take Bond's suitcase and find him a taxi. Bond followed him and the little man loyally beckoned towards a silver Mercedes which didn't appear to be on the taxi rank. The porter asked his destination. On hearing Bond say the Marriott his face blossomed into a smile of silent understanding.

"Oh, you have nice stay there. Very good hotel."

It was already dark. Night time comes quickly this close to the equator, there is hardly any evening and daylight lasts a little over twelve hours. But it never goes cold and Bond gently perspired in the stifling heat. He'd visited Singapore several times and the humidity and unflinching temperature always surpassed his expectations. This evening it felt hotter than he'd ever known it. He was glad to settle into the air conditioned fridge of the taxi.

As the car gently eased its way onto the East Coast Parkway, Bond saw the first smatterings of rain drops on the windscreen. It was the tail end of the monsoon season and the suffocating humidity had been an advance warning of an impending deluge.

The rain storm lasted a little under two hours. Flashes of lightning cut the air, illuminating the rainfall, that shone like sheets of glass being held up to the sky. The roads became covered in a shallow river of water, overflowing the drains and coating the pavements. The journey to the city centre usually took about twenty minutes, but today it was double that as every car slowed down

for safety; the long crawl up Orchard Road to Bond's hotel was even more unbearable today. This isn't a pleasant start, thought Bond. He sat disconsolate, staring out of the window, watching the pedestrians, umbrellas aloft, splashing about as they continued their daily business despite the torrential conditions. They knew it would soon be over and that the streets would dry and the people would come out again and enjoy the delights of their city. Bond knew it too, but weather like this never made him happy. It had all the hallmarks of a bad omen. He shook his head, clearing the cobwebs of superstition that hounded him: things like blackbirds, packing routines, New Year laundry and anything with a '13' in it.

The Singapore Marriott is one of the most distinct buildings on Orchard Road. Sited on the corner of Scott's Road and next door to the famous Tang department store, the hotel's location is good enough, but the pagoda style tower that soars above it sets it apart from its surroundings. Bond ducked through the pouring rain and under the awnings of the hotel's Crossroads cafe, where he saw a scattering of anonymous middle-aged European men. Some were entertaining prostitutes and transvestites who, in a decades old tradition, still walked across the Chinese Cemetery to discreetly ply their trade. This was one of the less salubrious aspects of the hotel and had been implied on the airport porter's farewell grin. Bond passed through the cafe and into the grand reception hall, which was opulently decorated in white marble and gold leaf.

Bond approached the reception. His room was booked under Universal Exports and Bond offered his own passport, as he had no other with him. The clerk was most welcoming and the questions came fast and polite: had Mr Bond stayed before, would he be using the spa, would he require a non-smoking room, what was the purpose of his visit, could the hotel help with anything. Bond's replies were short and non-committal.

The clerk turned to his female assistant and there was an exchange in Malay, which Bond, despite some limited knowledge, couldn't understand. With a little curtesy the girl hurried away to the concierge desk. The clerk turned back to Bond.

"We have a package for you, Mr Bond. It arrived by special courier. Most unusual."

The girl returned with a cardboard wrapped package, about the size of a briefcase. She seemed to be struggling under its weight. Bond took it from her and slung it under his arm as if it were no heavier than a pillow. He said thank you and collected his key card. Bond took his own bags to his room on the sixteenth floor.

It was better than functional, with deep pile carpets that his shoes disappeared into and a huge square bed dominating the room. The decor was in shades of cream and brown that was neither objectionable nor pleasing to the eye. Floor to ceiling windows lined the far side offering Bond a grandstand view of the last of the thunderstorm. Like most visitors however, he appreciated the air conditioning best.

Bond stripped and showered, scrubbing off the grime from his journey, after which he ordered a plate of smoked salmon sandwiches from room service. Bond poured himself a glass of Evian water from the mini-bar, idly wondering how it was that French water followed you around the world, and opened his suitcase, removing only the clothes he expected to use during his stay. The remainder stayed neatly packed ready for a speedy exit.

Once room service had delivered his sandwiches, Bond ripped open the package the assistant had given him. It contained his attaché case. Courtesy of the Armoury Division, a double 'O' would take one on every mission. Sometimes, like today, it wasn't always possible. In these instances the

Quartermaster would extract the relevant weaponry and have the case couriered to where ever in the world an agent was assigned. He hadn't been told, but Bond had expected the case; it was a standard procedure. Inside was a shrink wrapped bundle of documents. Bond put these to one side and removed instead his Walther P99 revolver, several rounds of ammunition and a shoulder holster. He immediately sprung open the chamber, inspecting the barrel, the grip and the firing mechanism. Once satisfied he loaded an eight bullet cartridge into the gun and placed it inside the holster. Later, Bond would dress and practice drawing the loaded gun, ensuring the holster was comfortable under his armpit, that his jacket wasn't too tight and that the offending weapon was deftly hidden.

Bond chewed on one of the delicious sandwiches and unravelled the bundle of documents. There was a slim sealed bag which contained a wad of Singapore Dollars and his Master and Visa cards, both marked 'Universal Exports Ltd Executive' but lacking Bond's name, although one of his eight different signatures was on the security stripe. The top document was headlined PROSPECTIVE ACTION IN SINGAPORE – REGARDING INTEL FROM OPERATIVE 439 (DECEASED). Some light reading for tonight then, thought Bond.

Also packed was a rather expensive looking black neck tie, one which came with a jewelled tie pin. Bond cast a rudimentary eye over the offensive article. It was a tiny camera, the lens disguised as the diamond inserted into the pin head. There was an activation wire the breadth of a cotton thread ending in a tiny squeeze button. Bond would need to insert this down the rear of the neck tie. Not a bad little contraption, considered Bond, if you like to fiddle with the bottom of your tie when you talked to people. These things never gave good results. Finally he checked the two thin stainless steel throwing knives were in place inside the lining of the case and that the small gas canister was primed, ensuring anyone who tried to access the case would be met with a blast of tear gas.

Satisfied, Bond set to reading the documents. After two hours and several cigarettes he was clear on his mission. The exchange was arranged for tomorrow night at nine. It would be done in Bar None, the nightclub in the basement of the hotel. The article for collection would be left in a tall cocktail glass behind one of the palm trees that lined the booths. Bond wouldn't know the girl, but she would know he was there. If possible Bond was to photograph her, just for the record.

Bond poured himself a big glass of whiskey, dropped in some ice and stood by the window of his room. The twinkling lights of the city stretched away from him. Singapore wasn't a big place. It was 240 square miles of teeming lives, five million of them, plus the tourists and businessmen who endlessly swarmed in and out every few days. Its blend of old and new was startling. Glimmering tall buildings, a sparkling metro and cavernous shopping centres rub shoulders with tea houses, twisting back alleys and street hawkers, the bright neon signs and the quiet manicured parks hide the seedy underbelly that still exists in some quarters, while the clean streets, the orderliness and the due deference to authority seemed only to reinforce the Confusion ideals of the past. Those contradictions were part of the city's charm. It was why the fruit trees on Orchard Road became surrounded with shopping malls, why Koi carp swam unmolested in the water features of public parks and why the Bukit nature reserve survived for over one hundred years nestled next to an expanding modern city. And Lamai Sun Thorn was out there in this heady mixture, possibly frightened, possibly in danger. Yet Bond didn't understand why.

He took a hefty swig at the drink. It wasn't his concern, he told himself. He wasn't to worry; someone else would do that for him. He had his orders. He was here. It was time to do carry them out, to do what he did best, to be wary, to be drilled and efficient, if necessary to pull the trigger, to exercise his own power over man. Bond went to bed and had a restless night's sleep.

Bond awoke early. The sun wasn't even up yet. He contacted the concierge office and obtained the address and telephone number for Thai Airways. As an afterthought he asked if the pool terrace was open and was answered yes. Bond slipped into his trunks and pulled on a huge luxurious bath robe. He'd done a lot of recreational swimming on the Barrier Reef, but also a lot of recreational drinking. Although he wasn't out of shape, now he was back on the firm's time, Bond experienced a pang of guilt about his over indulgences. Sportsmen and women who take an extended break from their training routine probably had similar feelings. One morning dip wouldn't change the effects of the past week, but it would ease his conscience. Bond's swim consisted of completing thirty punishingly fast lengths of alternate breast stroke and front crawl, before he relaxed with a few minutes treading water on his back, watching the first rays of sunlight peer between the high rise buildings which surrounded the hotel. Penance done, Bond ordered breakfast and allowed the morning heat to dry him. Then he wrapped himself back up in the bath robe and ate tropical fruits and yoghurt followed by toast and jam with strong black coffee. He staved off the craving for tobacco and returned to his room to dress.

At nine sharp he used his mobile phone to contact the British High Commission. It was a courtesy call more than anything. The service didn't have a Station in Singapore any longer. Instead there was a roaming Division that covered all of the Malay Peninsula, based nominally in Bangkok. Government cutbacks, M had said, but she'd made the best of a bad job and accepted it gracelessly. After passing through the usual security channels, Bond spoke to a man called Allenbury, a secretary to the Commissioner. He seemed to be aware of Bond's purpose already and offered to give any assistance if things got – in his words – nasty. Bond offered the missive sentence that he hoped things wouldn't get disagreeable. Allenbury seemed the cheerful and down-to-earth sort that was unusual in diplomatic circles.

Having got this call out of the way, Bond, dressed in grey cotton slacks and a light blue collarless open necked shirt, left the hotel and took the short walk to Orchard MRT station. Singapore's Mass Rapid Transit system is the envy of most modern cities, a subway service that is smooth, fast and near silent. In a matter of minutes the train had whisked him the six stops to Raffles Place, where Bond disembarked and changed to the East West Line, travelling one stop to Tanjong Pagar.

Bond took the short stroll around the corner that he knew so well and passed through the anonymous grey gates of the Seng Wong Beo Temple. He removed his shoes, leaving them with the other pairs in the elaborately gilded porch way. Bond entered the quiet, pious interior and immediately the rich pungent smell of incense made his nostrils twitch. It was cool and calm, a sanctuary from the hectic life outside. There was no noise aside from the gentle hum of chanting. A small huddle of devout Taoists knelt before the altar piece, dedicated to the Chinese City God. Bond wasn't a religious man, but he found the peacefulness reassuring. There were no seats, so Bond found an embroidered cushion, seemingly abandoned to one side, and sat on it, legs out front and his elbows on his knees with his hands clasped lightly together. He closed his eyes and began taking deep, relaxing breaths, as if tasting the tranquillity. He didn't know how long he sat. The temple elders gave him some inquisitive looks, but no-one disturbed him. Bond was thinking back to a time many years ago, when he'd been an impulsive and impudent young naval officer.

It had happened on Bond's first trip to Singapore. While on a boisterous shore leave, one of Bond's ratings had been involved in a horrific motorcycle accident and, in addition to the sailor, a young unmarried native couple had died. Bond had witnessed the crash; it was his first sight of death. His Captain had insisted on some bridge building in the community and Bond reluctantly attended the funerals, where he had none the less acquitted himself so ably, he received an invite to the couples' ghost marriage. The ceremony had taken place in this temple and the memory of that strange occasion lingered with him. The bereaved families were, to Bond's surprise, as cheerful as if this was

a real wedding. They had made little paper presents for their loved ones, who were also represented by papier-mâché dolls. A temple medium performed the nuptials which ended in the burning of the presents and effigies. Bond had left with the belief that every moment of life was for living, with no regrets; there was no hope in an afterlife, no one to love and marry; it was all here and now for the living. He only had one life, he reminded himself, and the difference between his heaven and hell was the earth.

Bond left the Temple and strolled down Cecil Street, which bordered Chinatown. Bond was looking for number 100, a squat tower mischievously called The Globe. The plaque behind the reception desk said Thai Airways International was on the second floor. Bond took the elevator. Upstairs he found a big black desk with a pretty girl sitting behind it, who assuming Bond spoke English, smiled and said cheerily: "Yes, can I help you?"

Bond looked to the left and right, two pairs of clear double doors led into two open plan offices. "Possibly, I was hoping to speak to Miss Sun Thorn."

"Your name?"

"Stephen Bachman."

"Ah. One moment."

The girl was wearing a tiny headset and without a pause she dialled a number and spoke swiftly into it. Bond wasn't an expert in Thai, but he picked up the word for 'Englishman'. The conversation ended with a cheerful "Can!" and the girl smiled up at him. "She says you may leave a message."

"Certainly." Bond asked for a paper and pen and wrote on it 'Call me soon' followed by his mobile phone number. After a moments consideration he scribbled 'You ain't seen nothing yet.' Bond folded the paper and handed it back. The girl didn't move.

"Could you give it to her?" he prompted. "Now."

Surprised, the girl stood up from her desk and passed through the left hand set of doors. Bond didn't wait and took the elevator downstairs and exited the building. He crossed the street and loitered outside a police station. Bond answered his phone after the second ring. "Is that Soonie?"

The light voice quivered in reply. "Yes."

"I'm from London. I'm here to help you today. You're a sensible girl. You were wise not to meet me."

"Yes. I was told not to."

"Good. If you had I would be walking away." Bond looked up at the windows of The Globe, almost expecting the girl to be watching him. If she was he didn't see her.

"Tonight," he ordered simply. "Don't be late."

He ended the call and without a glance around him, set off down the street. He hailed a taxi and asked to be taken to Raffles. It was time for an early lunch.

Had Bond taken a second glance, he may have noticed the man in an incongruous dark suit standing outside the Comoros Building, exactly as he or one of his partners had done for the past two weeks. The man was used to the heat and he didn't sweat. His eyes were shielded by a pair of IC-Berlin sunglasses he had bought at the airport. He had spoken to his colleagues as soon as Bond had entered The Globe. The discussion was urgent and the man started to give a description of the stranger he had just observed. When Bond had reappeared only a few minutes later, he was still on his mobile, requesting assistance, the description having been confirmed. Luckily, the stranger had paused for a minute or two outside the building, a pause long enough for the assistant to arrive on his motorbike. The man quoted the Smart-Cab registration number and its journey direction. A few seconds later he saw his colleague weave across the traffic from Cross Street. Good; now he knew Bond's activities would be discreetly monitored.

The Raffles Hotel isn't the only great hotel in Singapore. The Fullerton, the Shangri La, the Duxton and the ultra-historic Goodwood Park are all fine hotels, each one offering a luxurious stay amid new or traditional splendour. Bond was certain there were more five star hotels in Singapore than in any other city in the world. They were certainly closer together. And, despite its status as a clichéd institution, Raffles was still the finest and grandest of them all. It is regal, genteel and atmospheric; to sit in any of its bars, to walk through the lobby or take tea in the Tiffin Room was to take a step back to a time of elegance and grace, when just to mention the Raffles Hotel would conjure images of oriental luxury. Bond had never stayed in the hotel, but he was familiar with its bars and restaurants, choosing to drink and eat here when money allowed. Contrary to popular belief, Sir Stanford Raffles has nothing to do with the place; the Sarkies Brothers borrowed his name for their most famous colonial hotel. It made Bond chuckle to think the first Governor of the island colony was more famous as a hotel than as the founder of Singapore. He was dead long before the original ten room bungalow was constructed. Now, the gorgeous colonnaded building was restored and expanded, modernised and beautified, yet it still retained an air of the exotic east.

Bond could have taken a drink outside, but instead he chose to visit the Long Bar, one of the most famous drinking establishments in the world. Usually you need a ticket, a nod to the bar's tourist legacy, but Bond was known to many of the bar tending staff and he was ushered through without a word or any hint of surprise at his long absence. Bond exchanged pleasantries with the waiter as he took a seat in the wood panelled room and ordered a vodka martini, requesting Polish vodka, shaken with a sliver of lemon peel. It would have been easy to order a Singapore Sling, one of the world's great cocktails, but Bond found that combination of cherry liqueur, gin and lime a trifle overpowering, more like cough mixture than a cocktail. His drink came in a traditional 8oz V-shaped glass and the intense flavours fizzed across his tongue, released by the bubbles as the mixture was shaken. It was a martini as good as Bond had remembered.

The bar was almost empty, the comfortable wicker chairs waiting expectantly for the lunchtime drinkers, the fans turning gently in the ceiling and the floor not yet covered by the monkey nut shells. Bond ordered a plate of tempura and picked up a discarded copy of the *Straits Times*. After three hours, three martinis and ten cigarettes, Bond had read his paper and eaten two servings of tempura with chilli sauce. He had to go outside to smoke due to another joyless smoking ban. Meanwhile an assortment of businessmen, curious tourists and hardened drinkers came in, took their seats, drank, ate and moved on, to be replaced by another set of equally captivated punters. Bond paid and, after saying his farewells, left this haven of a bygone era and re-entered the modern world.

Back at the Marriott, Bond rested for three hours, picturing the time in his mind so his body awoke just before the alarm in his mobile pierced his semi-conscious mind. Bond went to one of the hotel's twenty four hour eateries for his dinner. He didn't care which one, this wasn't a meal to enjoy, more of a necessity. He ate a chicken breast with salad. He didn't drink, choosing sparkling water. Bond returned to his room and took a long shower, hot followed by cold, so cold it scolded. Refreshed, he shaved and sprayed a touch of Paul Smith cologne on his cheeks. Wearing a clean bath robe, he packed his bag with everything he didn't require. His Singapore Airways flight was at 9.00am and Bond anticipated checking out of the hotel that evening as soon as this affair was concluded. He would spend the remaining hours in the exclusive passenger clubs at Changi airport.

Carefully he checked over his Walther P99, exactly as he had the previous night. Bond dressed and finally slipped on his shoulder holster. It felt loose and he tightened the straps, before attempting two or three practise draws in front of the mirror, like a little boy playing at cowboys. Satisfied, he checked the time. Bond didn't want to enter the club just before the appointed time; a public dead drop should look natural. He thought it would take about an hour for an average single European male to get bored by the expensive drinks and the lack of hospitable female company. Bond would give it an hour and a quarter before making an exit. That gave him fifteen minutes to reach the club. There was just time for a smoke. Bond drew the tobacco deep into his lungs, composing himself, letting the familiarity of his habit calm his nerves. He extinguished the cigarette half-way, left his room and took the elevator to the lobby.

Outside, he ordered a taxi. The door-keep hailed one off the rank and the driver eased to the kerb. As Bond settled into the airconditioned interior, he was unaware of the inconspicuous man inside the lobby who watched his every move. As the taxi departed, the man approached the door-keep, spoke to him and extracted some notes from his wallet. The door-keep looked shocked, then accepted the offered notes. The man listened to the answers, took out his mobile and made a phone call.

Bar None wasn't anything special, Bond realised. Firstly it was established in the basement of a hotel, which is usually a recipe for hookers and their hangers on. Secondly, and a consequence of the first problem, it had obnoxious door staff who seemed hell bent on admitting nobody into the club. Lastly, it had just seen better days. If Bond didn't like it already, he hated it from the moment he stepped down the stairs into the glass panelled, heavily upholstered interior. If it wasn't red leather, don't sit on it, screamed the decor. The polished wood floor was designed for dancing, not walking, and there wasn't much of either at the moment. A lonely looking stage was set to one side, an assortment of instruments waiting for their musicians. The bar itself snaked around the back and one side of the floor space. All the relevant bottles were on display, but the youthfulness of the bar staff gave Bond little comfort. There was an awful noise coming from the loud speakers. It took Bond a few moments to realise it was Indonesian hip-hop music. The realisation didn't help his disenchantment. The whole place was bathed in a red tinged half-light and Bond felt the proprietor was trying to hide more shortcomings. He didn't remark on the fingerprints on his glass of ABC stout.

The place was half empty and most of those there were locals. The tourists didn't seem to come here, though Bond spotted one or two looking slightly bemused by the place the guide books called 'one of the must-see nightspots on Orchard Road.' Perhaps the guide books needed updating.

Bond leant backwards against the bar, one hand cocked over his trouser belt. This allowed him to touch the camera button, which he had managed to fix onto his belt by ensuring the neck tie was a little loose and hung past his waist. The slim data pack slipped inside his wallet and received up to ninety nine images. It still wasn't easy to look natural and he used it out of duty. Bond surveyed the room three times, moving from place to place, watching different tables and smiling cordially at each small gathering, all the time taking the minute images which later on the Armoury would blow up in size. Hopefully Lamai Sun Thorn would be among the faces. Bond thought it a dumb exercise. The girl wasn't of any further use to the service, her lover had died and she was merely disposing of something at his request. Bond read it how Tanner had described it; he just didn't understand why 439 would have entrusted her with something of value. All this cloak-and-dagger stuff was yesterday's world. Everything was supposed to be more transparent now, more open. Sometimes he felt his role as a double 'O' was becoming less relevant, in which case so was the role of the service itself, being dominated by the latest technology, gadgets and computers and the forecasters, efficiency experts and geeks that used them, groups of people as impersonal as the equipment they introduced.

It was beginning to get busy and some of the younger crowd were quite boisterous. Bond returned to the bar, nursing his way to the bottom of his drink. There were fourteen booths surrounding the walls in clusters of three or four. The booths were overwhelmed with indoor palms, the big leathery leaves hanging across the ceiling lights, darkening the tables and providing some intimacy for the more romantic couples. Bond hadn't spotted anyone who looked remotely like a girl he was looking for. Bond didn't expect her to be alone. He was looking for clutches of young women, probably all in their early twenties, fairly casual, and, most likely, all of Thai or Malaysian descent. There were several groups of this ilk, but as time passed Bond crossed each one off his list. One party left the club early, another bumped into a gang of men with whom they had arranged to meet, a third group also exited and a fourth split up with a rash of giggles and kisses.

Bond walked the floor again. This time he was slower and more careful, not taking indiscriminate photos, but assessing the people he passed. Two or three girls seemed to be possible candidates, as they were sitting in the booths. One was with a respectable businessman. She had her hair cut short into a bob and wore a pastel coloured blouse with a small black skirt. As Bond watched the man flirted with her, his hand reaching under the table to stroke her thigh. Not such a respectable businessman then – and not his girl either.

Another was a flighty young thing, drinking a fair bit, but in control of herself. She was with a large group of men and being the only girl, seemed to be in constant demand. Bond excluded her because he she drew too much attention to herself. There was also a trio of quiet girls, who appeared out of place and distracted. Every so often one of them would get up and visit the toilet or go to the bar. Two of the girls were rather plain, but the third, the smallest of the three, had a touch of the exotic about her. She had long straight hair, surrounding an unfussy, glowing face illuminated by a smile that rarely left her lips. Unlike her friends she wore a pair of comfortable cotton trousers. Once or twice, Bond caught her looking in his direction, but he couldn't tell if it was out of curiosity, design or accident. She was worth keeping an eye on, for more than one reason.

Bond retreated back to the bar and ordered a second ABC. The music was louder now and there was an announcement that Energy, the house band, would be playing tonight from nine o'clock. Bond casually checked his watch. Fifteen minutes. This girl was more intelligent than he had expected. The distraction caused by the appearance of Energy would be a perfect cover for the drop. With luck he would have enough time to walk the booths and spot the cocktail glass.

While Bond waited, choosing to move his way slowly back towards the first of the booths, he saw the arrival of another girl, this one alone. She had an athletic body. Her skin was quite dark and although she had some Malay blood, she appeared to be more Indian. She wore a deep blue wrap-around mini dress, held together by a rainbow coloured belt that clung to her hips. There must have been buttons, but Bond couldn't see any. Without looking at her stiletto clad feet, she trod down the stairs in a practised, careful manner, so as not to topple over. Her long toned legs led up to a tantalisingly pert backside, that was almost exposed so short was her attire. The deep open V created by the wrap-around exposed her cleavage, although her breasts were disappointingly small, almost adolescent, and didn't require the support of a brassiere. Nonetheless their shape was visible under the thin material of the dress and her hard nipples poked invitingly through the fabric. Underneath the shock of unkempt black hair which fell about her shoulders, she had a calm, expressionless face, her lips pursed together in what Bond took to be disapproval. Despite this she had a magnetism about her which made people stare. Bond wondered what would happen when she smiled at something she liked.

The girl paused on the bottom step of the staircase and cast her eyes around the bar. Bond took the opportunity to reel off several photographs. The girl moved like a catwalk model through the crowd to the far side of the bar, her hips swaying and the hem of the dress fluttering about her, offering a tantalising glimpse of a naked derriere and the outline of a tiny thong. She ordered a drink and paid with money from a clutch bag that matched the colour of her dress.

Bond tore his eyes away from her and once again browsed the melee in front of him. From the corner of his vision, he saw the new girl moving along the bar, glancing about the location as if she too was looking for someone. Gradually the girl moved closer to Bond, sipping at her drink, until she was standing next to him. They exchanged smiles, but not a word. Bond had been right; her face lit up with the smile, warming the cool exterior, changing her demeanour for a second. It was a beautiful second. As she walked by he smelled jasmine and yellow citrus. Bond noticed she was drinking vodka and ice from a tall straight cocktail tumbler.

He stopped looking around Bar None. Suddenly, no one else interested him. This had to be Lamai Sun Thorn. Perhaps she had seen Bond outside The Globe building. Perhaps she was daring to make the closest of contacts. Bond held himself back from following her. It was almost nine. There was no point in pursuit, the instructions forbade it.

Bond took another glance around the room. Was anybody watching him? Was any one of a hundred or more women making a sudden movement? Which booths were empty? There was a sudden commotion at the far end of the bar as four youths climbed onto the stage and took to their instruments. One of them took up position behind a pair of turntables and started to spin record discs, his hand automatically pressing one half of a pair of headphones to his ear. People started to crush forward. The announcement came over the loudspeakers, in English: "Ladies and gentlemen, it's time for the best house band in Singapore – bar none! En-er-gy!"

Bond wasn't sure that he understood the meaning of the word 'house' in this context. The music was loud, pumping disco beats and thrashing guitars. The lead singer started chanting and rapping. The audience started to jump, not dance, to the sound of the beat.

Bond had been distracted. It was past nine o'clock. He put down his own drink and made his move. The first booth was empty and there was nothing behind the palm tree. The second was equally empty, except for the drinks and coats and bags of its occupiers, now jumping at the front. Out of the corner of his eye, Bond saw the swish of a dark blue skirt; the girl was on the move. Quickly he peered into the next booth, offering a smile to the businessman and his floozy. No glass here. Next

one, no glass. Bond took the short walk to the second batch of booths. Nothing. Nothing. People and nothing. And then it was there. Bond saw it, a long tumbler, just like the one the girl in blue had held. He saw it perched in the decorative pebbles, leaning against the trunk of the palm tree. There was a group of people in the booth and some of their acquaintances outside. They were shouting at each other, enjoying the start of the show, the boys begging the girls to dance. Bond made a few curt excuses and barged his way past them, snatching at the glass as he went. He upended it and something light fell into his palm.

Bond placed the empty glass on a table, any table, and headed towards the exit. He turned the article over in his hand. It wasn't what he was expecting. It was a folded business card for a floating restaurant called The Chrysanthemum and The Sword. The club's elaborate logo decorated the front, a picture of the flower being cut at the stem by a samurai sword. On the back was a picture of a pleasure boat and its address, Fullerton Quay. Bond turned it over. Written inside in black ink was the message: '9.30pm. Don't be late.'

The bitch. What the hell was this all about? Bond had a good mind not to bother going. He wasn't in the mood for playing silly games. And if he did maybe he'd take that beautiful ass and give it a good spanking. Did the stupid girl think she knew better than Bond, a trained double 'O'? Was she getting back at him for surprising her this morning? Had Bachman told her to act like this? Perhaps that was how he behaved and the girl had witnessed it too often; he hadn't suffered much truck with authority.

At the foot of the stairs, Bond took a quick look back towards the bar. There was no sign of the blue dress. Where the hell was she now? She must have slipped past him while he checked the booths.

Damn it! Annoyed, Bond put the card into his pocket and ascended the stairs two at a time. He didn't alter pace as he walked out onto Orchard Road. The girl was nowhere to be seen.

Bond had twenty minutes. This time he took the MRT, going just four stops. He wasn't familiar with the address, but understood it was a new development behind One Fullerton, a modern appendage to the original luxury hotel, which overlooked the bay. Bond took the short walk to Fullerton Square and descended the steps to the quayside. A series of bustling and lively restaurants and bars lined the waterfront. There was a wide esplanade with some outside tables, but mostly this seemed an excuse for promenading. Across the bay to the north Bond could see the high rise buildings that lined Raffles Avenue and the bright spread of lights from the Chinese fair in the Marina Park.

The elaborately decorated boat was at the far end of the quay, moored permanently next to some expensive yachts. Bond could already hear Western pop music blaring out from the top deck. The outside seemed full of people, enjoying the hot, dry night. Inside, Bond hoped it was cool for, despite wearing his lightest suit and tie, the stifling heat made the sweat gather on his forehead and between his shoulder blades. His palms were clammy. Deliberately, Bond slowed. If the girl was in any genuine danger, it wouldn't do to go scaring her. Bond took a few deep breaths and walked up the gang plank. The bouncers gave him scant attention.

First, Bond perused the crush on the upper deck, checking carefully each area, scanning the faces and the clothes, looking for the girl's distinctive hair, dress and legs. He didn't see her aft, so he went forward. There was a splash of blue on someone, but as Bond eased through the throng, he realised it was a girl's blouse, not a dress. Having no success outside, Bond went downstairs into the lounge area. It was still warm. The sides of the lounge were open to the air, making smoking permissible. The wispy pall of smoke reduced the already minimal lighting that came from the lanterns hung above each table. Bond moved among the tables, looking casually at their occupants. The

hopelessness of the situation made him seethe. Other than the girl, Bond didn't know what he was looking for. There were no potted palm trees on the boat and lots of empty glasses.

Bond reached the back of the lounge. Inspection over he turned to leave, when he saw her, casually walking towards an empty table. She fixed Bond with an inviting stare as she sat down. Her eyes locked onto his while her lids half closed in deference. There was something curiously familiar about the look. Bond wasn't supposed to be making contact, but he was drawn to the girl's emotionally static beauty. He approached the table and without asking took a seat opposite her. The girl looked at him as if his appearance was the most natural thing in the world.

"Hello and good evening," she said.

The voice was delicious, sensual, and up close she was even more startling to look at. She wore the merest hint of makeup. Her black eyes penetrated the low light. Her mouth begged to be kissed, hard and cruel. Bond could see why 439 fell for such a girl. She would not be compliant, more a fighter, like Bachman himself. She exuded sexual menace and unobtainability in equal measure. She would surely be a challenge in bed.

A waiter approached the table and Bond swiftly ordered two glasses of iced water. He wasn't in the mood for drinking any more. When he spoke to the girl, he tried not to sound irritable.

"Is this a stupid question, but exactly who is following who here?"

"That depends on who you are."

"I'm the man you spoke to on the phone this morning. You are Lamai Sun Thorn?"

The girl made no comment. She gave Bond the same smouldering look through half hooded eyes. Bond shifted uneasily. He knew where he'd seen her before. A little over twenty four hours ago, briefly, behind a curtain of rain, as he walked towards the Crossroads cafe, he'd seen the girl being propositioned by a lonely old man. Bond had assumed she was a good time girl.

The girl gave a strained smile. "And you are James Bond."

"We aren't supposed to meet," he continued. "That's for your safety and security."

"But I am scared," the girl protested, awkwardly. "It was bad in Bangkok. Now they are here. They follow me everywhere."

There was a curious lilt to her voice, as though she was singing the words. It sounded less like a Thai accent the more Bond heard it.

"Who?" he questioned, urgently. "The M.I.S.?"

"That is who Stephen said they were. I do not know. I am just an air hostess."

Bond sat back and cast a long glance around the room. There was an odd addition to the normal drinkers. To his left sat two men, wearing suits too smart and well cut to be out for a night on the town. They were not drinking or smoking, but watching – watching Bond and the girl.

Idly Bond slipped a hand onto the belt of his trousers, activating the secret camera. She seemed to notice the move, but made no comment.

“No, you’re not just an air hostess,” said Bond. “You’re something else entirely.”

For the first time the girl became a little agitated, shaking her head a little.

“You mean an adulteress,” she accused, “a kept woman or a whore? I loved Stephen. We were good together.”

She offered a wry smile and fished into her small bag, producing a packet of Esse Lights. She removed a cigarette and Bond politely proffered his Ronson lighter.

“If you were together at all,” he alluded sternly, holding out the flame for her. The girl stretched forward and Bond’s other hand came up hard onto her wrist, taking hold and twisting, making her drop the cigarette. Bond dropped the lighter and caught her other hand as it swung out to slap him. Bond wrestled both her wrists onto the table. The girl grimaced, but Bond felt the muscles tensing underneath his palms. He wasn’t hurting her that much. She struggled, making a show for anyone who wanted to watch.

“No! Stop it!” insisted Bond. She didn’t desist, but her struggles lessened. “I want answers now. How do you know my name? Who are the two men in suits behind you? Why were you in the Crossroads cafe? Who, for god’s sake, are you?”

“I told you. I’m Lamai.”

No, thought Bond, she would call herself Soonie. “That’s bullshit and you know it.”

The girl’s face took on a concentrated air. Focussed, Bond thought, on how to escape. She wriggled in her seat, flexing her arms, testing the strength of her wrists against Bond’s hands. They were disturbed by the return of the waiter, who carried a small tray and two glasses of iced water. Confronted with such a discordant scene, he appeared confused, before addressing the girl in Slingish, the island’s unique patois of a language.

“Wah! This man bother you, no? He kena drunk?”

Bond smiled up at the man. “It’s all right. She’s a bit of a tiger.” He relaxed his grip and the girl pulled herself free of his hands. She emitted a shriek of annoyance which ended in her ejecting a stream of saliva across Bond’s face. Carefully he wiped his cheek with a napkin. “Or maybe that’s a spitting cobra.”

Despite the confrontation, the girl did not move from her seat. Nervously, the waiter placed the tray on the table. Bond took out his wallet and, without asking, slapped a dollar note into his hand. The waiter was grateful to disappear.

Bond started to rise from his seat. “You’d best be careful. Next time I’ll fight back.”

The girl scowled at him. It didn’t suit her exquisite face. Bond was past caring. Whatever it was the M.I.S. wanted, it wasn’t Lamai Sun Thorn. They wanted whatever she was trying to off load. Which meant she was still somewhere on the boat. Bond saw the two suited men start towards him. He checked the exits, measuring distances, and as he did so a pretty, small and very nervous girl,

dressed in black cotton trousers and a floral printed silk blouse appeared in the right hand doorway. It was the other girl from Bar None, the one with the permanent smile. She was holding a tall cocktail tumbler in her hand.

Without hesitation, Bond strode confidently across the floor towards her, confusing the men in suits.

"Soonie, darling, you made it" he said loudly, and then, bending down to kiss her cheek, he hissed in her ear: "You said 'Don't be late'."

"What?" was all she had time to say before Bond guided her through the entrance and down the corridor. He led her upstairs to the forward deck. Behind them the heavies were looking to the girl in blue for instructions.

"What the hell took you so long?" asked Bond urgently, pulling the girl into the masses on the upper deck.

She scuttled after him, a little confused. "My friends. They no wanna come. They still here. Somewhere."

"Tough. We're leaving."

Bond propelled the girl towards the gang plank. He took a quick look behind him. One of the suited heavies had made it to the prow of the boat and was balancing on the bottom rail, surveying the faces on the open deck. Bond wondered how long it would be before he turned to look at the quayside. He linked his arm with the girl's and walked with her down onto the esplanade, where they joined the other couples, groups and dog walkers strolling back and forth. Bond headed back towards one of the busy nightspots. The clientele spilled across the promenade. Once there, he glanced backwards. They'd been located and the other heavy and the girl in blue were already crossing the gangway. The girl was talking into a mobile phone.

"Come on." Bond pulled his new companion through the crush and towards the stone stairs leading up to the main road. He knew they would be spotted, but they wouldn't be seen once they were at street level.

Lamai Sun Thorn panted beside Bond as she took more steps to his big strides. He'd not realised quite how small she was. The top of her head did not even reach his shoulder. Bond noted she was wearing sensible flat shoes. Once on the street Bond headed south. He wanted to cross the road, but the traffic was moving fast. The two of them half walked, half ran along the pavement, dodging people who got in their way. At last they reached a crossing point at the next junction with Cecil Street. Suddenly the girl stopped, pulling Bond back. She nodded her head at something across the road. "Look!"

A man dressed in a familiar dark suit was making his way purposefully towards them. His hand was already dialling digits on his phone. Bond's intention had been to reach the nearest MRT station, but the man would report their escape route.

"I see him. He is always by my work," explained the girl, realisation creeping into her voice.

Dragging the girl with him, Bond took a chance and stepped into the road. The nearest car swerved, squealing to a halt as it did so. The second car behind swerved the opposite direction, avoiding a collision, but mounting the pavement. Horns blared in annoyance and Bond heard shouts of anger as

he and the girl skirted the cars and continued to run along the white line in the middle of the one way street. The other lane of traffic had already slowed, drivers having seen the near miss. Bond saw a sizeable gap open between two taxis and, gambling that they were better drivers, yanked the girl into the space, completing the crossing diagonally. As Bond had anticipated, they and the man were now on a collision course.

The man was trying to do too many things at once. He couldn't talk on his phone, watch his quarry and the pedestrians. Bond's crossing startled him. Initially he had stopped dead, expecting the pair to be run over. As Bond and the girl ran for those few seconds in the middle of the road, the two parties had passed each other, the man almost open mouthed in surprise. He spun around as Bond and the girl reached the pavement. He was unprepared when they chose to turn towards him and, before he had taken three paces, Bond's elbow crashed into the side of his face, sending the phone spiralling out of his hand. The man grunted in pain and, aided by Bond's trip-kick at his ankles, he pirouetted sideways, landing in the gutter. The last thing he would remember was the sight and smell of black tarmac before the tyre of an oncoming car sank sickeningly into his skull.

Bond hadn't waited to view the result of his work. He and Lamai were already on Robinson Road. Bond refused to let go of her hand and she struggled to keep up. The pavement started to get busy with people and they had to walk to avoid the proliferation of hawkers with their tiny stalls selling trinkets or street food. There were more tourists here, guide books open and cameras in hands. Bond could smell fresh cooking. There was an abundance of spicy flavours in the air. Of course, he realised, ahead of them was the huge food court, Lau Pa Sat. It was a big, cathedral-like, open-sided iron building. The Victorians had erected it in the late 1800s and it had been a market place to rival some of London's, but once the traders had moved away, the hawkers moved in and now the place was a massive, vibrant eatery.

Bond and the girl crossed the road and passed under one of the great iron arches. Although there were street lamps outside, they provided nothing like the illumination here. It was almost painfully bright. The stalls followed the line of the iron arches, often backing onto one another. The open spaces were all taken up with masses of tables and chairs. Everywhere people were haggling over the price of meals. Almost all of the tables were occupied and people were eating and drinking and laughing. Bond smelt biryani sauce from an Indian stall. He could smell the fresh piquant of roasted chillies from the counter next to it. Further on fried onions and peppers were spitting on an open griddle. The cook threw on a handful of fresh calamari and the squid rings fizzed with the heat. Moving into the next hall, the waft of soto ayam soup hit Bond's nostrils, followed by the satisfying zing of fresh ginger and the aroma of basted duck. Every corner and every stall presented another delicious flavour. It was a gastronomic delight. Any other time, Bond would have sat down and maybe eaten spicy pork filets, noodles or won ton soup. But not now.

He found an empty table and motioned for the girl to sit. They were in the central court, its wrought iron arches stretching upwards to a point high above them. The halls stretched away from them in four directions, like four church naves, uniform and pillared, the metal vaulting white washed, reflecting the fluorescent light across the hallways. Now he wasn't running, Bond realised he was sweating profusely, droplets of moisture had formed in his hair and on his forehead and were running down his face. His back was sticky and he knew there were damp patches under his arms. He wiped his hands with his handkerchief while casting a practiced eye around the court. Their pursuers, if they were still in tow, would approach from much the same direction. Bond chose to sit facing the hall he and the girl had walked up. He had a clear view over the girl's shoulders. Annoyingly, she did not appear to be perspiring in the slightest.

"Why we running?" she asked, breathlessly. "What happened to that man?"

"I'm afraid he's dead," replied Bond. "An accident. You changed the rendezvous. Why?"

"You see that girl. I see her before. In Bangkok."

"They certainly know who you are. But they don't know what you've got," explained Bond. "It's me they're following now. And that puts us both in danger."

The girl's hands were shaking nervously on the table top. There was a lot she was taking in. A dead man. A vicious spy. Her own life in danger. Bond reached forward and lightly touched her hand. She looked up at him and, for the first time, Bond took in those deep hazel eyes. She was extremely pretty with unblemished smooth skin. She had slightly plump cheeks that added an innocent quality to her features and, if her nose was slightly broad, it only served to exaggerate her full lips which were always parted in a half smile, showing tiny flashes of her teeth. Her black hair was lustrous and hung a long way down her back. Her blouse was made of expensive silk, patterned with gold, red and silver feathers, and fastened at her midriff with a single button. A black bikini top kept her decent, although she had no shame about her body, which was, considered Bond, an excellent figure; small and perfectly formed, as they say.

The girl fished into her tiny black purse and pulled out a key with an aluminium fob numbered 3711 attached to it. "Stephen – he want me to give you this."

Bond took the object. "What is it?"

"Left luggage key. Bangkok airport."

"That's it?"

The girl shrugged and slumped back in her seat. In doing so, she allowed Bond an uninterrupted view of the hall. One of the heavies was making his way slowly through the mass of tables, checking to his left and right. Bond guessed there were not too many tall white men sitting with pretty Asian girls. He checked the other two approaches, but didn't see the other heavy or the girl in blue.

Bond leaned forward. "Soonie, it's time to be on the move again, okay?"

The girl nodded nervously. Bond told her to crouch down. He took a last look at the heavy, who was still a fair way off, and did likewise. Bent over, he led the girl in a low flight through the tables. They drew some curious glances as they gradually manoeuvred themselves down the east wing of the building, towards the quayside exit. Bond felt they had gone far enough and paused to check for any pursuers, raising his head above the level of the tables. Bond couldn't see any of the distinctive charcoal grey suits. He pulled the girl upright. They had hardly gone more than a few yards when there was a shout from the left hand side of the court. Startled, Lamai stopped and Bond bumped into her, knocking both of them into a table full of diners and spilling their beer. The protests were loud and animated. Through the waving arms, they both saw the girl in blue rushing towards them, her speed not impeded by high heels. Instinctively Bond took hold of the edge of the table and upended it, sending food, beer, trays, plates and cutlery into the air and across the floor and the diners. The girl slithered to a halt as the table spun towards her. It was followed by a stool that Bond threw underarm, aiming for her head. She ducked, slipping over onto her side with a single cry of pain.

Bond didn't wait to apologise to the livid diners, running instead towards the exit, Lamai at his side, keeping pace this time. Outside, Bond turned back towards the quays and they pushed their way

through the bustle of pedestrians. Bond took another glance behind. No sign of the blue dress. No dark suits. No, wait. She was on the other side of the road, keeping them in view above the traffic. She didn't seem to be impaired by her fall. Bond urged Lamai to move faster, breaking into a run every time some space opened up before them. He wanted a taxi, but this was part of the Chinatown one way system and a taxi from here would only circle the enemy. They had to get back to One Fullerton, where the street became two-way. Bond hoped a heavy wasn't posted by the hotel.

They pressed on, Bond taking glances over his shoulder, seeing the blue dress making steady uninterrupted progress on the opposite pavement. She was using her phone again. Damn, thought Bond, how many more of these goons could she call on? They were almost at the two-way street. Bond was inhaling big gulps of air, the humidity playing with his natural rhythmic breathing. The car fumes didn't help. It was a sweaty, dirty chase. Suddenly, gratefully, the two contrary streams of traffic came together at a junction. Bond deliberately glanced across the road. The bitch was still on her mobile, talking urgently. She stared directly at Bond, her expression one of resentment and controlled aggression. She made no attempt to cross the street. It occurred to Bond she was probably unarmed.

A pedestrian signal was beeping and Bond stepped into the road. He glanced up the street. There were plenty of Smart-Cabs, their lights illuminated. Bond hailed one and it pulled over. He bundled Lamai inside, taking a final hasty view of the girl in blue. She seemed to be gazing past Bond at something further down the street. Bond turned his head to look. Some way down the road, weaving through the traffic, were two motorcycles, their riders decked in dark suits and black crash helmets.

"Shit!" he exclaimed and got into the cab. "Tanglin," he ordered the driver. "Quick as you can."

It was unlikely to be quick at all. Singapore had a notoriously circuitous one way system and they were at the wrong end of it for the British High Commission. The taxi pulled away, Bond staring through the rear window. He could see one of the motorcycles had stopped, allowing the girl to hop on and ride pillion. Saving time, she flaunted the law by refusing to wear a helmet.

"What the matter?" asked the girl.

"Our friends don't give up easily," replied Bond. This was a very active pursuit. Bond's fingers played with the key in his jacket pocket. All this for a key.

There was a roar of an accelerating motorbike outside his window. One of the cyclists came alongside the taxi, matching it for speed. It was a Phantom 200, a common hire model. Bond could see the Honda logo and the hire plate. Suddenly the taxi driver shouted something unintelligible. The cyclist had veered even closer to the car, so close he could touch it – which was exactly what he did, reaching out with his foot and stamping on the door. More abuse from the cabbie. Lamai grabbed Bond's arm, gesturing. He twisted in his seat. The other motorcycle, an identical model, was approaching on the driver's side. The cabbie saw it too. He slowed down, trying to take evasive action, but both cyclists stuck close. Once again the first rider kicked out at the taxi.

They were now on Esplanade Bridge heading into the colonial district. Bond was trying to look through all the windows at once, tense and agitated. What he would have given to be driving. The cabbie was going too slow. He had to accelerate out of the problem, overtake the cars in front. Bond could see the gap. But the poor man was too scared. Bond saw the first bike closing in again.

Another thump, this time to the rear of the taxi. Bond was more interested in the second bike. The girl was pulling something out of the rider's jacket. She steadied herself, one hand on the saddle frame behind her. The other hand was now holding a big grey automatic. It looked like a 9mm KBP, the one that fires armour piercing bullets. As Bond watched, the girl took aim at the car. The wind rush was whipping at her dress and hair, creating a strangely erotic, heroic sight. She fired three times.

Instinctively, Bond threw himself across Lamai. The gun shots sounded as if they were inside the cab. There were loud smacks of metal on metal followed by a powerful bang and the driver lost control of the taxi. It skidded across the road, scraped the side of another vehicle and then, the steering wheel spinning furiously as the cabbie stupidly let go, it careered towards the pedestrian footway. The car thudded into the protecting barriers, dislodging two or three blocks of stone and came to rest, a crumpled mess at the front end. Bond opened his door and almost fell out of the taxi onto the road. He could hear Lamai sobbing behind him. Poor bitch, he thought.

Cars had screeched about them, but with the taxi effectively off the carriageway, the traffic was moving again. Bond saw the two motorcycles completing U-turns in the road. Bond pulled out his Walther, removing the safety. He used the door as a brace and without hesitation, he let off several rounds. The tyre on the first motorbike exploded and the wheel collapsed, the rider catapulted over the handle bars, the bike turning in the air above him. Bond heard the man's neck break on impact, an awful crunching sound that penetrated even the traffic noise. The second bike swerved to avoid the accident. More of Bond's bullets zipped about them. They drove on several yards, slowing down and mingling with the traffic to escape Bond's fire, the girl looking behind her at the chaos. She couldn't shoot. There were too many cars in the way now, too many of them stopping.

Bond pulled Lamai out of the taxi, shaking her violently as he did so, snapping her out of her misery, pushing her ahead of him. "Come on, Soonie," he urged. "Move!"

They ran, crouching still, Bond listening out for the whip crack of bullets. When they reached the end of the bridge, she sensibly vaulted the barriers. Suddenly there were more bangs and a chunk of masonry flew into the air next to Bond. He ducked, his gun arm extended, turning at the same time, searching for his target. They weren't close. The shots had been lucky. Bond's view of the motorbike was partially obscured by the passing cars. They were changing position again, moving closer and then, just for a second, they appeared in full view. Bond fired off more shots, but his target had moved too fast and the bullets cannoned into the side of a car. The Walther clicked empty. Cursing, Bond decided not to hesitate any longer and followed Lamai over the barrier.

The girl ran like a sprinter now, fear making her legs move faster than she had ever known. She ran past the gaudy, conical auditoriums of the Bay Theatres, the lights blurring through her tears. She ignored everyone and everything. She ran through the gates of the Marina Park, decorated with dragons for the Lunar New Year Fair. The sudden crush of people made her slow down. This was where Bond caught up with her. When he grabbed her arm, she screamed. Bond pulled her close, squeezing her tight against his chest, until her struggles ceased. But her tears didn't stop and her bosom heaved as the huge uncontrollable sobs overtook her. Bond whispered soothing words and sounds in her hair. She clung to him like a child. It was a delay Bond could do without, but the girl would be a complete encumbrance if he didn't calm her down. They could have been standing like this, wrapped in each other, for minutes. Bond knew it was a lot less. Even so, he knew that bitch and her goons would be after them.

Bond relaxed his hold. He brushed Lamai's hair from her face. She was more controlled, although her face was a frightened one. Her beautiful eyes were puffy and bloodshot.

"Listen to me, Soonie," began Bond, grasping her shoulders and giving her constant eye contact. "We'll be okay. You have to trust me. But you must do as I say. Do you understand?"

Lamai nodded.

"Good," he continued. "I want you to walk ahead of me. Do not run. Walk. Go straight through the park. Do not stop. When you get to the exit, wait there. I will be with you in a few seconds."

She nodded again. Bond turned her around and gave her a little push to set her on her way. When she had taken a few faltering steps, Bond followed.

As he walked he quickly reloaded his weapon. He wasn't bothered if anybody saw him, but he didn't think anyone would notice in the hubbub of the crowds. He tucked the Walther into the waistband of his trousers, keeping it covered with his jacket, and leaving his hand resting on the butt of the gun. The walk seemed to take forever. It wasn't even half a mile, but the sounds of the fairground hawkers, the rollercoasters, the whirligigs, and the ringing ding-a-ling music seemed to go on and on. Bond watched every corner, every stall. He looked first ahead, then over his shoulder, then to the right, next ahead, his shoulder, his left and then he repeated the series, each time watching for that blue dress or those dark suits. The sweat that poured off him wasn't just from the running; it was from tension, apprehension, dread.

It was time to call in the cavalry. With his left hand, Bond took out his mobile phone. Thank God for voice recognition! Bond called Allenbury's private number. The attaché listened to Bond's succinct story. To Bond's relief, he was decisive.

"We'll get a car out to you. I'll come myself. Where are you?"

"The Marina Park."

"Are you being followed now?"

"I can't see them. They won't have given up. Things have been getting nasty."

"Quite. Go to the Pan Pacific Hotel. The police station is just around the corner. I'll speak to them on my way."

Where was the girl? He blinked to clear his vision. She was still there, moving faster now, steadily. His legs were tired and his chest ached. His head pounded. Bond had a vague recollection of hitting something during the car crash. He could see the gateway ahead. Bond's grip tightened on the gun. They could be waiting there. Bond had to catch up with Lamai. The girl reached the gateway and, exactly as instructed, she waited, turning around. Bond was with her in an instant, linking her arm.

"Good girl," he praised. There was a controlled crossing point and they took it. The hotel wasn't far. Bond kept looking about him, ushering Lamai forward. They made it and entered the spectacular atrium bathed in rich red, rising forty storeys to the top of the pinnacle tower. Illuminated lanterns of crimson hung the full distance. Glinting indoor balconies surrounded the walls on all sides. Bond headed for the elevator. He punched a button for the Hai Tien Lo Cantonese Restaurant. The lift started its smooth ascent. Bond took hold of the rail and watched the atrium floor retreat from them.

Lamai watched him warily. "Who are you?" she asked. "What is your name?"

“James Bond.”

“Thank you, James Bond.”

Bond doffed his head towards her. She was an exceptionally pretty girl. She was more composed now. She clearly felt safe here. Bond smiled.

“It’s all part of the service. When we get out of this mess, you can thank me again. I’ll buy you dinner. That isn’t part of the service.”

The flippant remark drew the trace of a smile across her lips. The lift stopped and the girl got out. Bond took one last look down and immediately regretted it. On the atrium floor he could see two suited characters looking about themselves. Next to them a figure in a blue dress was staring up at the elevator. Even at this distance, Bond sensed her cold, magnetic stare.

Bond asked if they could sit at the bar. Of course they could. The Hai Tien Lo restaurant occupied one half of the 37th floor. Every table had a spectacular view across the city or the East Coast Park, the floor to ceiling windows revealing the glittering avenues of life below them. The navy blue carpets complimented the night sky, which was clear bar the twinkling of stars. The restaurant was about half full. Waiters and waitress, all immaculately attired, hurried around offering coffees and clearing tables. Bond hadn’t realised how late it was. The clocks were well past eleven.

Bond took a position at the bar where he could see the entrance. He ordered Coca-Cola’s for them both. He wiped his soaking hands on a napkin, thankful for the icy cold air conditioning that would keep them dry. Lamai detected his unease. She gently touched his arm. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s going to be more shooting,” admitted Bond. “When it starts, get on the floor and stay there.”

Bond placed his hand on his gun, pulling it free from his trousers. Three against one: not good odds. In his favour was the slimness of the entrance; a pair of smoked glass doors were held in the open position and two people could not quite pass side by side. Anyone turning the corner into the big half-circular room would be directly in Bond’s view. He heard the chime of the lift coming to rest. It would be seconds now. Bond’s grip tightened. He could feel the power of the gun in his hand. His muscles began to relax. He had been in this moment many times before. It was a moment of fate and he accepted it. He didn’t concern himself with his life. He only knew he wanted to live. But he did care about people like Lamai Sun Thorn, people caught up in a game they were not born to play. And now her life rested on Bond’s skill. He wasn’t afraid. He had been close to death. It didn’t frighten him any longer. He didn’t have any ghosts to concern himself with.

The sounds of commotion from the foyer outside alerted Lamai to the sudden danger. The first man came rushing through the entrance and Bond stood up, his gun arm rising to the firing position. Lamai threw herself on the floor as he pulled the trigger.

Bond hadn’t missed, but the man’s momentum still carried him forward. He hadn’t seen them, but as he twisted, the man fired wild shots in their direction. Lamai heard the shattering of glass as the bullets ripped holes in the windows behind them. Bond had dived sideways, blood spurting from a wound on his arm. He was now aiming along the floor and as soon as the man’s head hit the carpet, he fired again. The man’s face disappeared into a mass of blood and bone.

Bond grimaced. The recoil from firing along the floor had jarred his elbow. He'd been winged too, the stray slug having passed straight through the outside of his upper left arm. The wound would look nastier than it was. There was confusion in the restaurant. Screams and cries of fear were mixed with shouts of alarm. Most people were on the floor or under the tables. Let them stay there. The two broken window panes continued to crack and fall, increasing the size of the holes. Hot scything blasts of wind whipped into the restaurant, blowing cloths and napkins into the air. Absurdly a Singapore fifty dollar note whistled past Bond's face.

Bond crawled to the end of the bar. The dead man's body was opposite him; the carpet splattered with a green and crimson gunk. The other heavy and the girl would be in the foyer. Bond peered upwards and was just able to make out the reflection of the other man in the glass. Bond watched the reflection for a few seconds. The man was edgy, nervous; this probably wasn't his normal line of work. Bond detected the worry on the man's face; all he needed was a diversion. Bond fished in his pocket, searching. He still had the business card for The Chrysanthemum and The Sword. Casually, he flicked it across the entrance way and a gust of wind caught it, spiralling it around in the air. The man's nerves betrayed him. Bond saw his head turn, startled, forgetting the location of his target. Instantly, Bond rolled across the entrance way, rising to a kneeling position, his gun arm thrust forward to shoot. The man saw him too late and the Walther P99 spat flame. The bullets hit the man in the shoulder and the chest, propelling him backwards into the foyer. It was only his bulk that kept him upright. He staggered towards the balcony railings, waving the revolver.

Bond stood up, his gun arm fully extended, braced with his left hand. The man's revolver swung his way and Bond delivered the coup de grace. He took no chances and the Walther cracked time after time, the shots reverberating in the small space, adding echo to echo. The man's chest exploded into a bloody eruption and he stumbled backwards, propping himself up on the rail. His trigger finger tightened and bullets ripped aimlessly into the floor and walls. Bond kept firing until finally the man dropped the weapon and allowed his sagging, heavy body to tumble over the rail. He fell without a scream, but there was a distant crash as he landed on something far beneath them.

The girl in blue had pinned herself against the elevator doors, her dress and face now splashed with garish red blood. She was unarmed. There was no room for a weapon on her skimpy outfit and nothing in her hands. Bond fitted a new cartridge into his gun. Menacingly, step-by-step he approached her, the gun loose at his side, until they stood face to face. She still smelt of jasmine.

For the first time, she seemed vulnerable. She took on a feminine, sensual posture, her lips parting into that tempting pout that ached to be kissed. The girl's beautiful face, long legs and firm body was still intoxicating, whether she was a tiger, a cobra or a killer. Bond pressed the call button and the doors slid open. The girl stepped backwards into the lift and some of her old demeanour returned. She cast Bond a look of equal contempt and desire. He pressed for the ground floor and the doors slid shut between them.

The girl didn't get away. Allenbury and the police apprehended her in the atrium. She wasn't alone either, there was another man waiting outside the hotel. All the heavies worked for Burma's Military Intelligence Service and, after some questioning, diplomacy came to play and the two surviving culprits were deported. Relationships between Burma and Singapore were likely to be frosty for some time.

Bond had learnt this as he recovered in Mount Elizabeth Hospital. M had been quietly pleased with his work. They had sent a man from the Malay Division, along with a Thai police escort, to empty the contents of the luggage locker. The M.I.S. had been watching Lamai so close, she'd not chanced removing Bachman's evidence herself. All in all, M summarised, with typical understatement, a good job done, if a slightly messy conclusion. Bond smiled ruefully. He'd caused a big stir and Allenbury had to do a lot of work to smooth things over with the Singapore authorities.

Best of all, Bond was signed off until his wound healed. He chose to spend it under mild police observation on Sentosa Island. He set himself up in the Rasa Hotel, where he swam in the pool and the sea, played golf on the championship course, ate fabulously, drank extravagantly and slept in a beautiful terrace suite overlooking the South China Sea.

Lamai Sun Thorn did join him for dinner as he promised and they enjoyed a huge platter of lobsters and lemon scented rice. She was a delicate dinner companion, clearly still in love with Stephen Bachman and deeply affected by her recent experiences. Her company had also given her time off, and she had decided to go home to Bangkok as soon as a suitable position arose. She thanked him with a large bouquet of roses and a very dainty kiss on the lips. Bond reflected sadly that she resembled a flower cut from its stem; beautiful, but now, bitterly, lifeless.

After ten days, he had to reluctantly return to London. It had been a long Christmas holiday, although not exactly what he'd expected when setting off from a chilly Heathrow in late December.

James Bond settled back into his big first class seat on Qantas Flight 319, moaning to himself about the cold English weather. A pretty blonde stewardess, whose name he recalled was Eve, said hello and beamed her big sunny smile at him. Bond replied with an equally cheerful hello and asked if she remembered how to make a champagne cobbler. Perhaps, he considered, things wouldn't be quite so chilly in London after all.

Two:

February:

Death Has Many Faces

James Bond lifted two glasses of Codorniu from the tray carried by the nearest waiter and made his way casually across the side of the ballroom, carefully avoiding the tables with their starched cloths and elaborate centrepieces that surrounded the packed dance floor. He kept the tall girl in eyesight all the time. She was long legged and slender. She wore the deep jade green evening gown like a second skin. The thin taffeta stretched over her generous upright bosom, the deep V cut enticingly through her cleavage and the pale braless back promised excitement. The two halves of the dress split as she walked, exposing her long strong legs to the hip. She strode atop dangerously steep heels. The headdress she wore stood another foot above her high forehead, a mass of peacock feathers at the front and a glittering skull cap to the rear. She was making deliberately slow, but unhindered progress towards the exit. Bond moved quickly to intercept her as she made the last few strides for the door.

He held out the champagne flute and addressed her in English.

"Hello, I don't think we've met."

The girl stopped. She didn't look around, but stared blankly, her expression not shifting from Bond's face. He noticed her eyes were a deep shade of brown, matching the dark hair that tousled down her back. They squinted behind the emerald and gold face mask, flickering rapidly right and left, searching for opportunities to escape this unwanted intrusion.

Bond stepped forward closer, almost forcing her to take the drink. Her hand came up and she clutched the glass, but did not bring it up to her lips.

"My name's James. James Bond."

"I'm Calista."

"That's a beautiful name, for a very beautiful girl."

"How can you tell under this mask?"

Her voice had a thick accent. Eastern European, definitely, possibly as far as Russia. Bond couldn't quite pick it. The years outside her native land had shaved away the rough corners, he decided.

"I can tell by your eyes."

"Now you are trying to flatter me, Mr Bond."

"Of course I am." Bond sipped his drink. "I was disappointed to see you leaving so soon. I was hoping we might share a dance later on. You do dance, don't you, Calista?"

"Yes," she replied, stretching the vowel sound. "I dance very well. But you stand too stiff to be a dancer."

"We all have our hidden talents," said Bond. "I want to uncover the secret woman behind your mask."

The girl laughed. It was a low giggle, a hearty lilting sound, which was pleasant and infectious. "You make it sound like you are trying to seduce me, Mr Bond."

"The thought never crossed my mind."

"What do you know about drone aircraft, 007?" asked M.

It had been a cool morning. Overnight the frost had settled on the lawns of the Royal Parks and the street lamps had stayed on until eight sending oval pools of light through the mists of dew that mingled with exhaust and chewed up the London atmosphere. The sun had spread its wonder from behind heavy clouds on only the shortest of occasions and it had remained a dull hangover of a day.

Bond's eyes had shown the signs also. His secretary scolded him as he strode into the office twenty minutes late, humming a Dean Martin tune and pulling off his leather gloves and thick paisley scarf. He threw them onto the seat of the spare chair and discarded his overcoat in an equally disdainful manner.

"Road works at Sloane Square, Penny," he said.

"Too many drinks at Lotts, I'd say."

"Bollocks. I was at the Athenaeum last night."

Bond went into his office and shuffled the day's memorandums. There was a communiqué from the service representative with NATO regarding the latest reports of genocide creeping back into Bosnia and Kosovo. There was equally worrying feedback from Chechnya about Muslim insurgents and suggestions of more Russian infringements in South Ossetia. Bond tossed it all to one side.

"Coffee, Penny?"

"Coming, James."

Two minutes later Penelope came in and presented him with a large mug of black Jamaican Blue Mountains, from Fortnum's – Bond insisted on nothing else – and two paracetamol tablets. She placed a small beaker of water next to them.

"What's this?" he asked.

"M wants you. Ten o'clock."

"Bloody hell," grumbled Bond and took the medicine with bad grace. The empty desk opposite mocked him. 009 usually sat there, but Tariq had been gone a long while.

Bond had found the young man hard to get on with at first, but his enthusiasm for golf and women had swayed the day. Tariq was about as far removed from the Sikh religion as it was possible to be. His language skills, and the cultural knowledge he brought to the double 'O' section, had begun to prove invaluable in the modern era. Spies were no longer judged by the colour of their skin, the cut of their suit or the place of their education. It was all qualifications based. Even the more practical elements of fitness, armed and unarmed combat skills were being supplanted. Linguistics, technological and analytical expertise, communication skills, organisational capabilities, management and delegation, time allocation, influence and what the human resources people called 'service focus'; all now played a valuable part in the makeup of twenty-first century espionage. Bond wondered what it would have been like in the old days, before computers, satellites, email and Google-Earth. Those guys had taken the rough with the smooth. It had been a dirty, grimy business then. It certainly wasn't the exotic life portrayed in those 1960s movies. Times had changed even in Bond's era. There was more first class travel. They had smart offices and good expense accounts. Now though, so much work was done by the INTEL brigades MI6 hardly required the use of the double 'O' section. But then something would come up: a nasty little job, an assassination or an entrapment, a little coup or a covert surveillance operation. Sometimes it was still kill or be killed and death came unexpectedly. He wondered if it had reached out and smiled and touched the face of Tariq Nijjar.

"No word of OO9?"

Penelope shook her pretty head. She looked genuinely worried. "It's been three weeks since the last report from Afghanistan. Still, no news is... well, you know."

Bond knew Penelope cared deeply about Tariq. Indeed she fussed over them both. She wasn't old, hardly mid-twenties, but she mothered them and they enjoyed her schoolgirlish attentions and lusted after her heavenly body, although both men knew she was far off-limits. Penelope would never have an office romance; she had declared it when she arrived and after a fruitless few months of trying both men decided instead to tease their gorgeous secretary about her 'dinner dates' and 'salsa classes.' She enjoyed the banter, responding with a cheeky grin and a sway of her pert backside as she departed the office to a wolf whistle.

Bond was on time for his appointment with the Head of the MI6., the care worn, greying, slightly plump lady addressed as M. He didn't know her real name, but he always suspected she might be called Judith or Harriet. Frankly, Bond didn't care much. M took her role extremely seriously. No decision was trivial to her. Toying with the lives of others was not a game; she knew it and acted on that fundamental principal. Yet, she could be as vicious and cruel as any man. Her tongue could spit the worst acid barbs when she wanted it to. Bond respected her as he would the Captain of a ship or Admiral of the fleet. His naval training insisted on it and M gave him no cause to doubt it.

She was dressed in a beige suit, the cream blouse outside her trousers, falling as long as the jacket. As usual her face bore the tiniest hint of makeup. The grey eyes were cool, like pools of ice, as she waited for Bond's answer.

"Drones are fully automated unmanned aircraft," he explained. "They have a range of several thousand miles and can stay airborne for thirty hours without refuelling. Primarily they were designed as surveillance craft, but recent models can take large payloads and even weaponry. The American MQ-1 Predator is a good example. The MOD and BAE Systems have recently tested the Mantis in Woomera South Australia; the Mantis can carry GBU laser guided missiles and air-to-ground Brimstone tank destructors. It's the RAF's largest and best autonomous aircraft, yet apparently Mantis-2 is already in development."

M seemed satisfied, if a curt nod passed for satisfaction.

"Quite right, Bond. The most worrying thing for the government is their production and cost. A single drone costs millions and the investment program is huge. It's over budget, of course. Some of the firms involved are unreliable. There has been talk of mismanagement."

"Perhaps it would be cheaper and quicker to purchase American Predators."

"This isn't a political forum, 007."

"No, Ma'am. Sorry."

She dismissed his apology with a gentle wave of her wrist. I must have caught her on one of her good moods, thought Bond casually.

"Hindsight doesn't count for anything when it comes to government policy, 007. Nevertheless, there are problems with the subsidiary companies. We're interested in Reflex Galileo Systems. They design the drone's sensors and mission diagnostics. Unfortunately, they're sprouting leaks, big ones."

"Do we know from where?"

"We do. A man called Stafford Myerson."

"I've never heard of him."

"No reason why you should. He sits on the board of directors; one of those 'captains of industry' the government likes to hear from when accepting a tender from private development companies."

It was M's turn to sound cynical about modern politics. Bond let it pass but grinned inwardly. Sometimes he and M saw more things eye-to-eye than they both thought.

"Turns out he's something of a fraud," continued M, opening a green document wallet that sat atop her in-tray. "Nothing he's been convicted of, naturally. He used to own an electronics business, supplying intricate circuits for RAF aeroplanes. He sold up about ten years ago and took on a series of advisory roles, one of which was with Reflex. It's standard procedure for the Yard to vet people in these prominent, security focused roles, and they got interested in some of his financial activities, taxes first, then assets, the usual things. The Fraud Office uncovered some undeclared shares and there was a lot of bowing and scraping and apologies. But the Yard wouldn't let it lie and kept digging, on the quiet. Myerson spends most of his working time in Europe, which was where we came in, keeping a discreet tab on the man. He's supposedly scoring deals for Reflex, but it's interesting to note how little success he has. Then we caught him speaking with this man."

M handed over a colour photograph of a white man in his early fifties, grey hair slicked back, dressed in a taupe suit and extravagant tie, with a pair of expensive sunglasses hiding his eyes. His skin was an over the top spray tan orange. He was half rising from his seat outside a Parisian bistro, his thin hand held out to shake the paw of the big bear of a man who loomed large over the table. This man looked uncomfortable in the surroundings. He was wrapped in a big overcoat, despite the sun being out. He too had grey hair, but less of it, wisps flaying about his head. The brow was creased into a furrow of lines and the sockets of his hooded eyes glared obliquely. Even from the distance the picture was taken, it was clear the left eye was looking in a totally different direction to the right.

The man was half blind. Bond recognised him instantly.

"Boris Obukhov," he said. "Head of the FSB in France. Unofficially."

"The very same. Of course we had to do a little more digging before we figured out what was happening, but Myerson's too caught up in his little world to notice. Since he sold his firm there's been a succession of mistresses, parties, yachts, jaunts to Monaco for the Grand Prix, extravagant holidays. Quite the playboy is our Myerson."

"Sounds like a bit of a spendthrift."

"Exactly. He's running out of money, 007. He can't maintain the lifestyle he's bought himself and he's taking big money in return for official secrets."

"Why don't we just pull him in?"

"That would be the easy thing to do," declared M, "But we don't want the Russians to think they can get away with this sort activity in the twenty-first century. If they'd have asked us nicely, we could have shared knowledge. This stinks of everything NATO is worried about: more expansion by stealth, unnecessary counter espionage measures, a bigger, stronger Russian army, repression of smaller states, protectionism, especially of Russia's mineral wealth. The list of top level concerns is a long one – you've read the documents?"

Bond almost squirmed, thinking about the memos he'd abandoned that morning. M continued oblivious.

"No, I want to teach our friend Boris and his little accomplice a lesson in good manners. ELINT has been monitoring Myerson's phones, offices and email. They even used bugging devices at his house and holiday villas. We finally got a breakthrough. We were never sure how Myerson handed over the information he steals, but we've finally got a chance. He's been contacted, by proxy, and the exchange is happening in Barcelona. Myerson's booked into the new W Hotel for a long weekend. I want you to go out there and watch him like a hawk, without being too conspicuous, from above as it were. I'm not interested in him, 007; I want the Russian agent he's dealing with."

"Even if it's Boris?" queried Bond.

"Even if it's Boris." M closed the document and pushed it towards Bond. "Alive, I hope."

"When do I start?"

"Tomorrow."

Bond paused before stretching out a hand for the green file that spelled danger. "Do I get any help on this? Tailing isn't always easy."

"We've spoken to Madrid. The Defensa Civil are co-operating and we've sent Tony de Vargas to Barcelona to co-ordinate a small team for you."

"He's reliable I take it?"

“Perfectly; I expect the two of you will get along very well.”

Bond’s flight landed just after two o’clock on Wednesday. He retrieved his luggage and was ushered through the security checks at Aeroport del Prat with a merest wave of his diplomatic visa. Bond slowed as he walked through the exit, funnelled down towards the arrivals lounge. He was looking for a single spark of recognition on a strange face. He didn’t see it. Unusual, he considered, and proceeded to the taxi rank outside.

The sun was shining in Catalonia this year, as, Bond supposed, it did every February. The air was a warm, balmy pillow that welcomed and hugged you. The Mediterranean climate was, thought Bond, on a par with his beloved Jamaica; not quite as hot all year, but with a lovely temperate salubrity that soothed the aches of the body. Already Bond’s mouth was watering at the thought of a glass of cool cava and a dish of carpaccio, sprinkled with fine extra virgin oil and a few parmesan shavings. Delicious.

Bond was staying at the Regente. The taxi swept him into the city centre and along the Rambla Catalunya. Within fifteen minutes, Bond was stepping up to the modernista facade of the renovated Casa Juncosa, a Vinals mansion of stained glass and seventy nine immaculate rooms. One of Barcelona’s better kept secrets, Bond believed. He carried his own cases. There was a young attentive woman behind the counter in the sleek shiny lobby. Bond wondered when it was that women had taken over this role. In years gone by it would always have been a man at the main reception of the best hotels, but of late willowy smiley flashy girls had become the fashion. Whatever his objections, Bond couldn’t fault her smile or her impeccable English.

“Senor Bond. How nice to see you. Your associate has already checked in.”

“My associate?” he repeated, trying not to sound surprised.

“Yes, Senor; we upgraded you both to an interconnecting suite this morning. You were very lucky we had a cancellation.”

“Thank you very much.”

Bond accepted the pass key and took the lift, ignoring the bellboy who was hovering nearby. Outside the room he inserted the card and waited for the green light to flicker on. He opened the door slowly and entered. It was a functional suite. The double bed was already turned down and the brief furnishings were scrupulously positioned in a gentle arc between the balcony doors and the television, which was already greeting him with the message: ‘Welcome to the HCC Regente Senor Bond.’

Silently Bond put down his cases and made his way to the connecting door. It was open, so he passed through. The room beyond looked identical. Bond could see clothes scattered on the bed. The balcony doors were open and the sound of street traffic echoed into the room. There were two comfortable sun chairs on the balcony and someone was sitting on one of them. He could make out a tidy bob of dark, almost ebony hair, and beyond it a pair of immaculate ladies legs stretched out and up, delicate feet perched on the wrought iron fencing. Bond stopped at the threshold and looked over the girl’s head. She was wearing a plain black bikini slip tied at the sides and nothing

else. She was a slim, toned, athletic girl. There was hardly a trace of fat on her bones and her stomach was a fine curve, gently rising and falling as she breathed. Young, firm breasts jutted, perfectly shaped, from her chest and were topped with tiny hard brown nipples. The smooth tawny Latin skin was covered with a sheen of fine moisture as it baked in the midday sun. The girl's eyes were closed and an expensive pair of Miu Miu sunglasses rested on her forehead. The nails of her hands and feet were painted black to match her hair and panties. Her mouth was full, the lips slightly apart. Bond thought he could detect the sigh of her shallow breaths.

The girl's head inclined gently towards him.

"Hola, Senor Bond. I'm sorry I could not meet you at the airport. The weather was so beautiful today."

The accent was thick, gorgeously attractive, rolling all the vowels, hissing the 's' and clipping the 'c' and when she said 'so' she extended the 'o' far into the next word.

Bond sat down on the other chair. The girl made no attempt to cover herself and did not even open her eyes to view him.

"I must say I am very pleased to meet you, Miss... ah..."

"Antonia Pilar de Vargas. My friends call me Toni."

"Ah," said Bond, with understanding. "I think my superiors are playing games with me. I was expecting a man."

The eyes opened. They were a fiery golden hazel, tinged with an ounce of olive green. Bond felt instantly attracted to this beautiful creature. Already he wanted to caress and kiss the seductive hue of her face and body. The twin orbs scanned Bond's face in a second, understood his arousal and closed.

"Do I disappoint you, Senor Bond?"

"No."

"Good," the girl said firmly. "You will find I am efficient, resourceful, reliable and tough. I make decisions, Senor Bond. Hard ones. You are on my territory here. Don't forget it."

"I'm sure I won't." Bond stood up. "Do you drink, Toni? It feels like the cocktail hour."

"Something non-alcoholic, Senor Bond. I don't mix business with pleasure."

Bond cast a long look up and down her stretched almost naked form. "Are you sure about that?"

"This is my siesta, Senor Bond."

"That wasn't what I meant."

The beautiful eyes opened again and this time the lips formed a half smile, a teasing glimpse of what the girl would look like when her guard was down. "I know what you meant, Senor Bond. The answer remains the same."

He replied with a nod. "Call me James. I can't bear formalities." He retreated back into the suite and peered into the mini-bar. "And neither do you, Antonia Pilar de Vargas," he muttered under his breath.

Bond mixed a gin and tonic, a strong one, and concocted a long drink of orange and pineapple juice for Toni. He carried them back to the balcony and set them on the low wicker work table. He took off his jacket, slung it over the back of the chair and sat down.

"What's the story, Toni?" he asked. "How do we proceed from here?"

"I've read your orders, James. Your superior – M, I believe? – copied me in," she replied. "But it won't be practical to have you following Myerson everywhere. It's helpful we can pose as a couple, but it would appear odd if we kept meeting the target. We don't want to take unnecessary risks."

As she talked, Toni's eyes periodically opened and closed and she offered glances in Bond's direction but no more.

"I've brought a small team with me, three men from the Guardia Civil, three from my department. We'll try and run shifts, though you and I will do the majority of the shadowing. The Intelligence and Information Command have obtained the co-operation of the W Hotel. We've already fitted infinity listening devices in Myerson's suite and telephone taps through the digital exchange, so we'll hear everything that goes on in his room."

"Everything?" repeated Bond.

"Yes. I expect there will be a lot of that. Apparently he's bringing some escort girl with him, a woman he meets in London. Myerson's checking in tomorrow, just in time for El Carnestoltes."

"El what?"

"The Carnival. We have one every year at this time. You might enjoy it, James. Many scantily clad women."

Bond detected a sly laugh.

"I might have my hands full with the one I have here," he said. "You certainly mean what you say, Toni. You seem very efficient."

Toni said nothing. She reached for the juice and took a sip. "You mix a good drink, James. Thank you."

"When can I meet your team?"

"Four o'clock. We're briefing at Boadas on La Rambla. It's a good place. I know it well."

Bond checked his watch. "Good. I've time for a shower."

"Don't forget to use your own bathroom."

Bond smiled and stood up. He swallowed his drink and once more inspected the beautiful tanned

body that lay before him. Steady, James, he told himself, Toni is right; business should always come before pleasure. As Bond showered he wished, just for a moment, that life really could be like those 1960s spy films.

Toni didn't drink at the famous venue on La Rambla either. Boadas is something of an institution in Barcelona, an art deco cocktail bar lined with wood panels and manned by excellent polite barmen. It was all smoke stains and whispered memories of Hemingway and Ava Gardner. Toni had arranged a secluded booth to the rear of the crowded edifice and the eight of them snuggled tightly in the space, including Toni who remained the only woman. Bond detected signs of resentment in a few of the men, but none of them made any verbal objections to being bossed by the so-called gentle sex. The faces of the three Intelligence men switched suspiciously between Toni and Bond. For them, he thought, it was like being caught between two evils, the Woman and the Englishman. It transpired they sided nowhere and were content to do their job as required.

Toni's briefing lasted a little over forty minutes. There were a few questions from the team mostly regarding mobile numbers and point of contacts should anything go wrong. Details were exchanged. Toni remained the first line of call, followed by Bond and then, if necessary, Alfonso, one of Toni's department. The group gradually split up and dispersed. Bond stayed behind with Toni and they ordered a selection of tapas.

"Do you trust them?" Bond asked between mouthfuls. They were sharing a platter of assorted calamari and some glasses of Priorat, a blend of Carinena and Garnacha, whose intense blackberry and oak flavours soured and revitalised the tongue in equally measure.

"Alfonso, Juan and Pepe are my men," she answered, "and I trust them. The others will do as they are told. Remember, James, this is not Great Britain. We do things differently here."

"Then I'll trust them too," reassured Bond.

Only the occasional question separated them from their food and drink. Bond saw that Toni ate daintily, small morsels of food entered her mouth and she nibbled rather than ground her teeth. She drank hardly at all and asked most of the questions, all concerning the operation. Did he think it would last the weekend? Would Myerson be armed or dangerous? Was Boris Obukhov going to appear? How were they going to retrieve the documents? Would they be in paper form or a microchip, a disc or a memory stick? Bond did not have the answers.

He suddenly felt very foolish. He was so used to working alone that having another agent, even a very proficient one, running the circus left him feeling like a ringmaster without a show. Hell, he'd even let Toni remain first point of contact! What was he thinking? Who was the senior partner in this operation? But a single sweep of her lashes and Bond felt his heart judder. It was a giddy childlike reaction. Her insistence on her unobtainability only made him desire her more. In an attempt to develop a more intimate relationship, Bond persuaded her to walk down La Rambla.

He linked her arm and she was happy to let him lead her through the thin crowds. They passed half empty cafes and bars and hotel lounges. They watched the living statues and waited for them to move an inch or a foot. Around the entrance to the Boqueria Market, street sellers were still peddling flora and fauna from an array of wooden and canvas stalls. Bond bought Toni a single rose,

which she put in her hair, though she was more taken with the yellow and blue budgerigars. She pointed out the umbrellas on the Bruno Quadros building and the lanes that led into the historical Barrie Gothic. They circled Miro's pavement mosaic and admired the restored Liceu Opera House. She felt warm and cosy next to him. The red sweater pulled tight over the firm body and Bond got a tingling thrill when her breasts brushed against his arm. He wanted to smooth the backside that inhabited the tight denim jeans, but dare not spoil the moment. Further down were the museums and the big restaurants. The clowns and buskers and puppeteers all jostled for position with one another, raising smiles on the faces of the rambles. Bond smiled too, because he thought the prettiest girl on the street was definitely on his arm.

They stopped by the Monument a Colom, looking out into the harbour and then back up the busy street. Bond pulled her closer, but she resisted, unlocking their arms.

"Thank you for the rose, James," she said. "I won't forget it."

Bond lit a cigarette. The girl didn't smoke, so he'd politely refrained from doing so until now. The rich coarse taste made him pine for more wine and romance.

"It's a very beautiful city," he said, "And a very beautiful street. I haven't been here for years. Now I'm back I wonder why I took so long to return."

"Sometimes things are worth waiting for, James." Toni smiled at him and walked away, twirling around the base of the two hundred foot column, hands clasped behind her. When Bond finished his smoke and moved forward, she gestured to him as if he was her puppy. "Let's go back to the hotel, James. I'm tired. I've been awake since five-thirty."

Bond accepted the snub with sadness, but pondered he would have several more attempts to get under this girl's skin before the operation was through. The walk back seemed to take longer than the stroll down. They carried on to the Placa de Catalunya, where the tall fountains glistened white against the deep blue of the night sky.

Toni took Bond to the right hand side of the street. There stood an ornate drinking fountain crowned by a single white lamp. She told him to drink from it. Bond sipped some of clear water. It was slightly warm but sweet.

"There you are, James," she pronounced. "Now you have drunk from the Font de Canaletes, you will always return to Barcelona."

"I can think of better reasons to return."

Toni looked at him in the dusky evening glow and pressed her palm against his face. "Poor, James," she teased, "All alone in one of the most beautiful cities of the world. Put on a happy face for me, James. Please. I can't promise anything. I told you."

Bond nodded heart heavy with disappointment and they returned to the Regente. He slept restlessly in the big hollow bed, wondering what Antonia Pilar de Vargas looked like asleep in her own nest next door.

When Bond woke, he knocked on the connecting door, but got no reply. He completed his morning exercises and took a cold shower. Toni appeared half an hour later, dripping sweat. She'd been out for a run.

"I should have told you, James," she laughed. "You could have accompanied me."

"How far do you run?"

"Ten miles every day."

Bond let it pass. He dressed in a light blue Sea Island shirt, grey slacks and a pair of Todd Barnes slippers and went to breakfast alone. He ate the continental buffet and had three refills of coffee before Toni made an entrance. She wore an identical pullover to the day before, only blue not red, and sensible low shoes and white cotton culottes. She looked immaculate and informal, but her expression was serious. She ate nothing but juice, toast and cappuccino, in silence.

After breakfast they headed to the airport, where Pepe was waiting for them. The flight was due late morning. They watched the businessman from afar. Stafford Myerson displayed all the habits of the self-made millionaire, Henk suitcases, Ralph Lauren sunglasses and suit to match, a big dazzling smile and a manner that exuded confidence and power. It bordered on arrogance. If he got close enough to see, Bond expected the man's finger nails would be manicured.

The girl with him was tall, almost a whole head taller than Myerson even without heels. She had a full womanly figure. Her breasts strained to stay inside the blouse and leather jacket combination she wore. Her curvy hips, ensnared in skin tight Lycra trousers, snaked as she walked, the posterior almost begged to be smacked. She had auburn hair, but it was dyed a deeper brown. The dye was beginning to fade and tinges of flaming garnet showed through. Her face was shallow, with small but high cheek bones and a slightly too prominent nose, which set her wide eyes far apart. Her hot crimson lips were fixed in a delicious alluring pout. The passenger list said her name was Alicia Lundstedt, but when she worked she called herself Calista. She said very little and looked, Bond considered, every inch the whore she was.

Pepe tailed them discreetly along the C246 and onto the port road that circled the inner harbour. They passed shore-side restaurants and hotels, while set seaward were salsa bars and millionaire yachts. La Barceloneta was an area built specifically to allow easy access to the sea from a long dismantled castle. The organised military grid of low rise streets stretched from the marina, and the spit of sand that sheltered it, to the Olympic Quarter further inland.

The wind sail structure of the W Hotel sat below the tip of La Barceloneta, on the crook of rock that faced east. If you headed straight out across the Mediterranean you would pass between Corsica and Sardinia and reach Rome. Standing twenty six stories high and topped by a rooftop bar the distinctive modern masterpiece shone like a beacon, silver and sapphire against the clear sky and the flat ocean. Bond was jealous of the obvious luxury.

Toni and Bond held back a few moments while the two targets checked in. Myerson was still effusive and loud. As they watched he grasped the girl's behind on the way to the lift. Toni raised her eyebrows at the effrontery. She made one call to Alfonso. The recording equipment would be activated.

"What do we do now?" asked Bond.

“We wait. Let’s get a drink.”

They sat in the pine panelled bar, reclining on the wide low seats and reading magazines and papers. Occasionally Toni’s mobile phone would ring. The updates generally consisted of a running history of Myerson’s sexual exploits. Toni was clearly bored by the reports. Bond was equally bored by the newspapers. He bought himself a heavy gin and the girl a lime and soda.

“What’s all this carnival stuff about, Toni?”

“El Carnestoltes, James,” replied Toni. “The city drops everything for one last hurrah of over eating, over drinking and under dressing before Lent. We don’t, of course, do any of that during the forty days.”

She winked and Bond couldn’t help but smile. He imagined what fun it would be to find out how Toni broke with Lenten tradition.

“The best carnival is in Stiges, but there’s still plenty to do in the city. Stiges is a big gay destination for Europe; you might not like the atmosphere there, it is very camp. I can’t see Myerson enjoying it either. The celebration starts when El Rei Carnestoles leads the procession through the streets. He’s usually a big pot-bellied man, the masked embodiment of the carnival spirit or king. There’s plenty of drinking and dancing, floats and fancy dress. The children love it. Don’t be surprised if you come across a band of school kids dressed up as bees or frogs, or teenage girls like Marie Antoinette. That’s the sort of thing I did at their age. At the weekend there is another much grander parade, masked balls, fartaneres in every district, food fights and the botifarrada on La Rambla. That’s a sausage barbecue. It’s all over by Ash Wednesday, when we bury a single sardine, a representation of new life. I think they are interring the poor thing on the beach this year.”

“Sounds a lot of fun.”

“It is. If it wasn’t for this operation, I would be partying too.”

Bond had difficulty imagining it. She didn’t strike him as so much the party animal. But life was full of surprises and people had many different faces. He thought of Toni dancing to a samba on a slow moving parade float, her lithe body pulsating to the heavy sensual rhythm, the drips of sweat forming on her brow, running between the valley of her breasts across the taut stomach.

The ring on the girl’s phone brought him back to the real world.

“They’re off. They seem to be having an early dinner. Shall we join them?”

“Why not?”

Myerson and his companion walked down the harbour front and took a seat at one of the port side restaurants. He didn’t seem particularly bothered about which restaurant he visited, which rather surprised Bond, it didn’t sit with his extravagant manner. Bond and Toni entered no more than two minutes later, having faked studying the menu on display outside. They sat across the room, Bond in the observer’s position, and ate a careful, light meal, a shared seafood platter with paella. Bond watched the Englishman paw at the girl unashamedly, feeding her food and touching her through the flimsy material of her dress. It was an ungallant display. She didn’t seem to mind. Bond visually checked every person who entered, watched where they sat, whether they used the cloakroom at the same time as Myerson, when they left. It was a quiet, early evening.

Afterwards, as the sun dipped below Montjuic and the lights flickered on along the promenade, the two unlovely birds, tottered out, both it appeared a little tipsy on wine. Bond paid, while Toni ensured they stayed in eyesight. The figures walked up the Via Laietana, wrapped in each other's arms, heading towards the Old Town. Bond and Toni kept a good distance, walking apart, one on each side of the broad avenue, alternately moving faster and closer, then holding back. When the two targets turned into the Barrie Gothic, Bond followed. He heard the sound of music.

There were crowds here and Bond's senses sharpened. The music and the singing were another unwelcome distraction. The streets were close together, the tall straight walls pitted with windows turned every alley into a man-made siq packed with tight bodies. Toni grabbed Bond's hand. He'd taken a wrong turn. She'd seen Myerson moving left into the Placa de la Seu. The tall girl and the shorter man stood in the crush outside the Cathedral of Santa Eulalia, whose west face rose triple peaked and bathed in an orange light. People had candles out, singing hymns. Bond watched the back of the two heads, one grey in a black suit and the other a reddish jumble above ivory satin and cotton. He looked to see who jostled them, who they spoke to, if any one, and what they did. They did not stay long before sneaking through the crowd and into Calle Arcs. A party was already starting here. Traders had put up stalls and were selling cups of wine and hot flaky pastries. There were oysters and eels, small crayfish and prawns, and grilled peppers and spicy meats. The medley of flavours was matched by the assortment of merrymakers. Drinking from bottles or pitchers or large beakers and holding food in a free hand, some were dancing to the salsa, others set off firecrackers that fizzed and jumped through the air. The acrid zing of cordite hung in the alley. Myerson bought some beer as he and Calista shuffled through the melee. Bond and Toni hung back a little as the crowds thinned. There wasn't any method to the route being taken. Bond wasn't sure who was taking the lead. The black and white backs meandered around the little streets, stopping to drink and laugh, to kiss and fondle. Bond caught a glimpse of Toni. She remained steadfastly concentrated. In the evening light her complexion took on a deeper, mysterious pallor. Her movements were sharp, quick, gazelle-like. She seemed unperturbed by the cool breeze that fluffed her hair and rosied her cheeks. Bond buttoned his suit jacket. They crossed La Rambla heading into the Chinese Quarter.

Myerson stopped outside the big blue neon sign advertising in English 'Bagdad, Live, Erotic Show.' The two figures went inside the old building. Bond looked at Toni inquisitively. The girl spread her hands and shrugged. Bond paid at the small booth.

The interior of the club was designed like a theatre. There were tables and chairs on the high level where the bar was, and descending on three sides were rows of sparsely occupied seats facing a square stage. The curtains were pulled back and a beautiful woman was performing a strip tease. She was already topless and was teasing the few members of the audience that dared sit in the front row. She was fun and vivacious, cavorting around a plush leather couch that revolved in the centre of the stage. Myerson and his companion sat a few rows further back. Bond and Toni occupied two places on another side, sheltered by the shadows. Bond thought the atmosphere was stale, with a seedy, cloying tepid air. The appropriately erotic seventies soul music hardly helped. Meanwhile the dancer removed her sparkly g-string and spun it about her head. Totally nude she sat on the couch and began to pleasure herself, first with her fingers and then with a toy, until the toy had worked magic inside her. On its reappearance, the act ended to a smattering of applause.

A waiter approached them, offering free drinks for their ticket. Bond balked at a cocktail and ordered a beer for him and orange juice for Toni. The curtains swished down and up. There was a new lighting scheme. The floor was now a mass of deep blue. The next girl was a giant, over six foot two in height, but perfectly proportioned. She wore a corset and stockings, with lacy underpants, all

in navy. She cracked a riding crop on her bottom. A man from the audience was tempted on stage, where she proceeded to spank his backside with the coarse whip. During this, an angry dwarf appeared from the wings and called the humiliation to a halt. The show became kinkier still. The midget tore away the girl's panties and pushed her onto the couch. Bond sucked in air. The glistening pink flower blossomed as the dancer offered herself to the dwarf, who brandished the whip, using it expertly on her open sex. Toni nudged Bond to make sure he was concentrating on their quarry and not the flagrant display. It was a difficult choice.

Myerson and his mate were not going anywhere. He was touching her breasts, perhaps even a hand was under her skirt, and kissing her. Her face suggested she enjoyed the attention. She did nothing to stop it. Another act followed, this one a lesbian two-some, and then another stripper. Finally a well-built man and a tiny attractive blonde woman, both dressed in Roman togas, performed a dumb show, eventually removing their robes until they were nude. The woman got on her knees and played with the man, his muscle rising. The audience sat in rapt attention.

Toni emitted a low gasp. From the corner of his eye Bond saw her, sitting forward, as the blonde, now on all fours, accepted the huge man with a satisfied groan. Underneath the sweater Toni's breasts rose and fell, her nipples hardened and stuck out like pebbles, the twin points of passion. Idly Bond's hand dropped to her knee. Urgently she grasped it and squeezed in time to the blonde's vigour. Her breathing became heavy. When the act finished Toni sat back and gave a long sigh.

There was another scene, but it lacked the dynamic of the earlier shows, being a curtain call for each dancer, a time for a cheerful revue and some mischief from the dwarf. Bond wanted Toni even more, but she let go his hand. Her barrier had come down a little and now she was re-establishing it. Bond had seen a side to her he enjoyed, the unashamed voyeur, the watcher, the latent sexual beast within. Yet he dare not make a move on her, to touch her or kiss her; inexplicably he held back. She wasn't looking at him, but across the stage at Myerson and Calista who having completed their heavy petting were preparing to leave. The moment had passed.

Bond and Toni followed at a distance, tracing the couple back down to the seafront and all the way along the harbour to the W Hotel. Once inside they took the lift to the Eclipse bar. Bond and Toni followed. They hadn't exchanged a word since the scene at Bagdad. They didn't now.

The elevator ascended the full twenty six stories. The lift landing itself had a spectacular view, but they were ushered immediately down the long nearly pitch black arrival hall. At the other end, and the other side of the hotel, the panoramic wrap around windows faced the city and the sea. The arc of the coast, all twinkling coloured lights, stretched away from them to the north and to the south the miles of empty calm turquoise ocean blended in the distance with the indigo sky. There was no sign of their two targets. While Toni sought Myerson, Bond ordered drinks, a vodka martini and another lime and soda. The two suspects were conspicuously seated in the VIP lounge; it was empty other than a clutch of Spanish businessmen. There was no threat. Bond and Toni opted to sit in the more populous bar outside, picking out one of the low futons far from the arrivals hall.

"Are you all right?" asked Bond.

"Yes, why?"

"Just curious. You seem distracted."

Toni's head dipped an inch or two. Bond could see the blush rising at her cheeks, but she shook her head, ignoring the shame and snapped: "And you weren't?"

Bond said nothing. It had been an awkward afternoon and evening all round, and this stunted conversation wasn't going to help. He hated tailing. They always felt like a wild, pointless goose chase and often did not provide the expected result. Bond wanted to stroke Toni's hair, tell her he understood and it was okay, but he didn't know if she wanted to hear that. She was an independent, organised young woman. The patter he used with the good time girls in London wouldn't cut ice here. He thought about Myerson and Calista instead. She was the type Bond often ended up with after a night out playing the casinos of London or France, a girl who saw the money, wanted the quick thrill and then off. You wouldn't need to chase Calista, she was built for the art of love; she knew it and she used it. Bond thought of Myerson's grubby rich hands on her soft, womanly body, the large full breasts and long slim legs, the tight behind, and his insulting mouth kissing her voluptuous lips. Calista wouldn't argue. She wouldn't stop the advances of a man, rich or poor. She revelled in the attention, lived for the moment when chemistry and tension overcame her. Small wonder Myerson paid so extravagantly for her services.

"Wait here, Toni," he said. "I'm going to check on the surveillance guys."

"Okay."

"Don't talk to any strange men."

The comment went un-noted. Bond took the elevator to the lobby and headed for the concierge desk. Bond flashed his passport and explained he was with the Guardia Civil. The assistant was well aware of the operation and the people involved. He showed Bond to an access door marked 'Privado: provea solo.' Behind it was a staircase leading downstairs to a long service corridor. Outside a bare door, Bond halted and knocked with a swift rat-tat-rat-tat.

"Si?"

"Bond."

The door opened and revealed a half empty storage room. One of the intelligence men had answered. Juan sat in front of a series of lap top computers.

Communication cables hung from the back of them, linked to junction boxes on the walls. The screens showed blank windows surrounded by empty graphs and a host of menu bars.

"They're in the Eclipse bar," said Bond. "Has it been quiet?"

"Like death."

Bond smiled. There was a dank smell of laundry in the room. He quickly examined a package on one of the shelves. It contained bed sheets.

"Are you two down here all night?"

"Yes," replied Juan. "We listen and they...hehe." He made a motion with his hips to imply copulation, "Very boring for us without pictures."

"Sorry, Juan. It's not that sort of operation."

There was a handset on the desk and it bleeped. Juan picked it up. "Hola, Toni." He listened to the

message and nodded. "Si, si, gracias."

Juan gave his comrade a playful slap on the shoulder and they talked in a jabber of Spanish. The intelligence man prepared the recording equipment. Bond knew the routine. Every word spoken would be recorded and redirected through the computers. They in turn would scan the sentences for trigger words and phrases. Anything highly sensitive, any industrial or government secrets relating to the Mantis-2, was monitored, automatically logged and fed back to the two patient surveillance men. The system also contained names of European FSB operatives, other Reflex Galileo Systems programs, known Russian code words and their translated equivalents, as well as performing a voice recognition program. Should Boris Obukhov contact the suite direct, the computers would recognise him in seconds. Bond was aware another of the laptops was on a constant feed to the airports and harbours, tracking all incoming flights, searching for anyone who appeared on those FSB lists.

After a few minutes, Bond heard the sound of a door opening and two voices laughed. One was a warm, deep feminine chuckle, the other a harsh grating bay. The door slammed shut. Someone went to the toilet. It must have been the girl because Myerson could be heard grumbling to himself. Calista must have reappeared because he next told her what he was going to do with her. It made lewd listening. Bond detected the sounds of kissing and undressing.

"Oh, baby, yes, take me. Take me now, you're so horny..."

"Get stripped, you dirty bitch..."

"Yes, baby, come on..."

"You want this? Yeah, that's it, suck it, you dumb..."

Bond shook his head ruefully. The girl's accent was heavy. Definitely from Eastern Europe, he reckoned. Her working profile laughingly said she was Swedish; Bond was inclined to think further East. He picked up a clip board stuffed full of paper and checked the passenger lists again. "Run a check on this girl again, Juan. See if she's Russian by birth."

"You want me to go through Interpol again?"

"Yes; and my people back in London, we don't know enough about this girl, however long she's supposed to be living in the U.K."

Juan nodded and Bond retreated to the door. "I'll leave you to it then. Have a good listen. Call us for anything, okay?"

When he reappeared in the lobby, Toni was waiting for him, looking impatient. "Is everything in hand?"

Bond explained his fears about Calista. Toni objected. The traces had been put out. The girl was clear. She was born and raised in Stockholm and travelled to London five years ago, on a student visa. Officially she was studying modern languages, but she'd started escorting almost immediately she arrived and rented a smart little two-room in Bayswater.

Bond wasn't satisfied. Something was wrong, he felt it. Toni didn't appear to give much credence to his senses. As they walked outside she took on the air of a child who has had her favourite toy taken

away. Bond started to get angry. He couldn't take much more of this however bloody gorgeous she was. Phenomenally desirable, maybe, yet Toni had started to resemble a stuck up little cow. God what he would give to spend a night with Calista; there was an uncomplicated minx.

"Is Pepe waiting?" he asked irritably.

"Yes, of course," Toni retorted.

"Good. Let's get out of here. I want to get drunk."

"Well, I don't, James," she said fiercely.

"That's okay, I'm not inviting you."

Bond sat on the balcony of his room smoking his precious Morlands and drinking Plymouth gin until four in the morning, the lime and ginger sharp on his tongue and the juniper zest hot on his throat. Sod the girl. If she wasn't interested in his hunches, he'd have to keep pulling rank on her. Bugger it, James, finish the operation and get home quick, no second thoughts. It was maddening, but practical. Bond rarely found himself rejected; he didn't take it well. It was made worse by Toni's obvious charms, but the girl wasn't for him, not this time. He felt it and saw it. At last, pleasantly sated, he fell into a deep unburdened sleep.

Bond woke with his combative edge restored. He ignored Toni's brooding and left her to the surveillance work, choosing instead to re-read the operations files. By midday he was restless. It was the third time he'd digested the information and there was nothing to find. Frustrated, and wanting fresh air to clear his head, he went out, taking the FFCC to Tibidabo, the summit of the Collserola hills that hang behind the city. It was a bright, clear afternoon and to one side Bond could see the thin humps of the Balearics resting on the horizon, while to the other the snowy peaks of the Pyrenees' pulled at his love for winter sports. He visited the ornate Sagrat Cor, avoided the funfair and lunched in a smart, unpretentious cafeteria.

When he returned, Toni frostily handed him the reports on Alicia Lundstedt, a.k.a. Calista. Negative. He saw the triumph in her eyes. Bond read the documents carefully, still not convinced.

"Okay, I'll leave it for now, Toni, but I swear we're missing something. I can feel it. Intuition is a powerful thing."

The minor victory and Bond's retraction, thawed her demeanour and they were cordial and civil as they spent almost all of Friday evening together, chasing Myerson and Calista along the sea front salsa bars, drinking long cocktails and staying out of sight but close by. The morning shift had been taken by Alfonso and Manu, who followed them on an expensive shopping expedition to the fashion houses of Passeig de Gracia. The afternoon was a quiet affair, not even punctuated by Myerson's incessant libido.

There was also a distinct change in the behaviour between the Englishman and his companion. She spent time dancing alone, while he drank at tables, inventing conversations with unimpressed locals. Every so often he got annoyed with the girl, but a sweet smile and a kiss on his lips, a little squeeze of his hand, seemed to pacify Myerson and they would continue onto the next, almost identical bar and an equally repetitive scenario. As Bond was the smoker, it was he who surreptitiously followed the girl to the smoking areas. He watched her, considering what he would do with such a woman at those moments, the love he would talk and act, the stolen moments and the whispered tomes of

desire.

Bond's evening was frustratingly chaste and despite his best efforts, he found his mind constantly returning to the few delightful memories of Antonia Pilar de Vargas: the night on La Rambla and the touch of her hand and her little winsome smile, that first afternoon when he'd found her on the sun bed, the thrust of her upturned breasts and the expanse of bare sun-spoilt skin that led to the scrap of bikini which begged to be torn away and expose the delights beneath it. The knowledge of her unobtainability made him tense, even resentful, and he tried to cover it with playful, non-sexual banter. If Toni detected Bond's darker mood, she ignored it, staying professional and slightly distant for the whole evening. Bond managed to stay sober. In terms of the operation, they saw no one of interest to them and Bond was relieved when the suspects retired reasonably early. The feedback from the monitoring station was equally bleak.

Before bed, Bond again reviewed his perfunctory notes about the case background. Even discounting his suspicions over the girl, he kept thinking they'd missed a clue somewhere. The two suspects acted as if this truly was a jolly, sexy little weekend away. Where had the ELINT boys got this information from? He checked again.

The initial contact had been a phone call to Myerson's London apartment, suggesting a weekend trip to Barcelona. The call had been traced to Paris. Station F had been asked to mount a discreet surveillance on Obukhov and there had been a curious exchange with an underling during his weekly briefing. 'The objective is to complete the subterfuge in Barcelona...Yes; the operation is already in hand...' But there was no date or detail. This could all be a coincidental red herring. Bond's mood blackened further. Complete the subterfuge: to finish it. What was Obukhov talking about? Mantis-2 was still in the planning phase; there would be reams more material to poach from Reflex. It didn't add up.

On the Saturday, Toni and Bond followed the couple to the Olympic Park on Montjuic. There were more festival events happening here, tumblers, jugglers and human towers competed for the attention of curious tourists and excited locals. There was a group of children, just like Toni had described, all wearing headdresses and helmets representing fish and lambs, shepherds and kings, they were playing silly games and their parents watched with detached glee, sipping wine and eating fried blood sausage on hunks of bread.

There was another, more impromptu market, and Bond bought two bollos, filled with slices of pungent Tou de Tillers, the great Catalan brie which Bond considered an equal of many in France, and a plastic garrafa of cheap vino tinto. Toni diluted the wine with Vichy Catalan water. They ate and drank on a bench along the Miramar, watching their prey stroll towards the Transbordador Aeri. Bond took the half empty carafe with him and they jogged to catch up. The cable car took several minutes to cross the harbour. Passengers had to change gondolas mid-way and Bond didn't want to get too far behind. Other than the restaurant, this was the closest they'd physically got to the couple.

Bond and Toni squeezed onto the carriage, Bond facing the back window, not looking at the two people who interested him. The cable car jerked and shuddered, then smoothly began its descent along its thick wire. It was another beautiful clear day and the whole of the city spread away from Bond, the red tiles of the suburbs poking through the cement and glass of the centre. Along La Rambla, Bond could see the excited crowds watching another parade, the Gegants and the Capgrossos clearly visible lumbering through the human train. By the Colom, another castell was being mounted, a ring of eight men at its base over-handing fellow acrobats who perched on their shoulders. The construction looked flimsy but as Bond watched, it grew to its full height as the

spectators' cheered encouragement. Far across the rooftops, the spires of Gaudi's Sagrada Familia prayed to the sky and the mountains hovered God-like over everything. Would Bond return one day? He didn't know, but he wasn't praying for it.

Toni's mobile pinged. It was Alfonso. The hotel had taken a delivery for Myerson's suite. The concierge was certain it would be masks from one of the boutiques. Alfonso had checked and Myerson had tickets for the W Hotel's Masque Ball. Toni relayed the information to Bond in a whisper. Silently, he cursed.

"We'd better get costumes then," he replied.

Toni spoke to Alfonso in Spanish. Call done, she turned to Bond. "The concierge will help us. Don't worry."

"I'm not, but time is running short, Toni." Bond kept his voice low. "He's only here one more night. The switch has to happen at this masked ball. We need to know what garb those two are wearing tonight. I don't want to lose it now."

"I understand, James."

She said it like she meant it. And, Bond reflected, she probably did. Toni wouldn't be harried by anyone, she was calm and collected. A good foil to have, he mused. If only he wasn't distracted by other things.

The gondola clanged to a halt and the passengers disembarked, gingerly stepping onto the platform above the Trade Centre that sat on the oldest of Barcelona's piers. Bond and Toni kept a distance from the others. When the second gondola pulled in, they intentionally held back again. Myerson was engaging the girl in some discreet nuzzling. His appetites appeared to have returned. The car swung out and the red oblong box made its gradual way to the other side of the Port Vell. The overhead sights of the city became consumed by the lumpen edifices of the harbour side, the stark bare walls and windows, the peeling, cracking salt battered paint and the incongruous, expensive boats that lined the piers.

Bond and Toni followed the two figures back to the W and then checked in with the men below. The storage room was hot from the computers and the fustiness of another balmy day. There was no air conditioning in the room. Bond wondered what the linen would smell like and was glad he had fresher sheets at the Regente. Alfonso elaborated on his phone call. Bond listened politely to the conversation before interjecting.

"I want four masks," he declared. "We need four people in that ballroom. If Obukhov puts in an appearance we need to cover all angles. We can't do it with two. We'll take Pepe and Juan. Alfonso can be the call point. The remaining two must be ready with cars in case anyone leaves the hotel."

Without waiting for agreement, he continued: "Now, what about communications? I don't want to use a mobile. Can we have some hands-free kits? Something we can hide behind a button hole or a corsage."

Alfonso nodded, excited by the sudden turn of authority in Bond's voice.

"Si, Senor."

“Manu,” Bond addressed the intelligence officer who was listening distractedly to the infinity sensor. The sounds of spurious sex wafted under the conversation. “I want you to listen in extra carefully. We don’t have time for the computer to pick out the clues.”

The policeman nodded.

“Excellent,” Bond turned to Toni before heading for the door, “The guys need to put on their best, all right? I hope you have an evening dress. I wouldn’t want you to let the team down.”

The three men looked like triplets, dressed in dinner suits and with identical crimson half- masks resembling the eyes and beak of an eagle. The nose piece was two inches long and pointed. Bond could see it at the bottom of his eye line and found it distracting. He didn’t ask how Pepe and Juan were coping, but their eyes looked equally crossed.

Toni meanwhile was in a slinky sleeveless half-length black cocktail dress, respectable and unflashy. Her face mask was a more elaborate affair, with curls around the eye sockets leading to winged brows. With her short hair, it gave her a faintly Chinese look.

Pepe was to be positioned in the passage outside Myerson’s suite and would report what the two conspirators were wearing. He would then join the others in the ballroom, an extra pair of eyes and hands they might need later. Juan was to keep close to the entrance of the ballroom. He had particular instructions to pick out the physical bulk and half-blind stare of Boris Obukhov, though even Bond admitted the latter might prove difficult behind everyone’s disguises. Bond and Toni would do most of the shadow work in the ballroom.

Before the event, Bond and Toni checked in at the surveillance room. Everything had been as expected during the afternoon siesta upstairs. Showers were taken, there was an argument about clothes which the girl won and another when they ordered sandwiches from room service. Bond smirked. So it wasn’t all bright and breezy for the over sexed couple. None-the-less they had made up with an active and noisy copulation before dressing.

The Great Room was decorated in the colours of Barcelona Football Club, deep metallic reds and blues, off set by the polished pine walls. The lighting was low. There were no table decorations except a single high candelabrum at the centre of each white circle. Waiters with trays of canapés patrolled the floor. The free drink was Codorniu Reina Maria Cristina cava. Bond enjoyed the unfussy slightly lemony fizz. Most people were standing, exchanging the something-and-nothing small talk you got at these functions. They were predominantly older or richer. The men all wore dinner jackets, the women diamonds and pearls. There would be better gatherings elsewhere in the city, away from the moneyed elite. Bond and Toni took up residency on a table to the right of the huge dance floor. A middle aged couple already sat there and Toni was courteous enough to launch into a half-hearted conversation, the polite ones to break the proverbial ice. There was a big band on the stage playing assorted standards with a jazz feel. Bond was indifferent to the tunes, but not the noise. It would make communication harder, though he accepted it being easier than with a discotheque.

The hands-free unit shook and he simply said “Yes?”

It was Alfonso. "They are coming down. Myerson wears a red dragon mask and helmet. Pepe says you can't miss the girl. She's a strutting peacock."

"I can imagine."

Calista did look amazing. Her entrance was noticeable because the feathers on the peacock helmet stretched so far above her head. It wasn't the most elaborate headdress, there were several with bigger, wider and longer masks, decorated with silk trains and veils, in gold and precious stones, but the girl's was certainly one of the most striking. Bond thought back to when he had first seen her at the airport, how he had judged her in a second. The peacock's head suited her ostentatious pretensions. Pepe was right, she certainly strutted as she walked, her long legs exposed with every step, the front of her dress slashed open to the navel and the back a barely existent few strands of cloth.

Bond hardly noticed Myerson by her side. The authority figure had disappeared inside the mask, his natural flair trapped within it. He still grinned and barked his greetings, but without the creases on his face and the wave of grey hair to help him, he'd lost all his former dominance, for tonight it seemed the girl was in charge. Curious, thought Bond, why would a man as powerful and self-centred as Stafford Myerson allow an escort girl to coax him to a party where he would look so out of place?

Around an hour in, the night had begun to flag. Then the emcee took the microphone and orchestrated a charity auction of ornamental mosaics, all in the Modernista style of Antoni Gaudi. Bond glanced at Toni; could this be the pay off? Myerson made some half-hearted bidding, encouraged by the people at his table, but he didn't buy any of the artworks, the prices never reached the sort of heights needed to fund his lifestyle. The girl seemed distracted through it all. There was something wrong. Bond had detected it last night at those salsa bars. The girl was bored by her older partner. It appeared there was only so much good food and wine and hard sex a woman could take. Yet it was unusual behaviour for a regular escort. The reports indicated these weekends were not unusual, an extension of the parties and dinner dates Myerson already used her for. There had to be some attraction or he would tire of her. He'd certainly done so last night and they argued again today. Tonight their role reversal seemed even more apparent. Who was the senior partner now? Bond looked across at Toni, with whom he'd had his own arguments and who looked equally as bored as Calista. Two reversals of fortune, he mused, and it was getting him no closer to resolving the operation.

The emcee introduced a dance troupe and the floor was suddenly filled with immaculately attired dancers, who performed stylized tangos and rumbas. The demonstration roused the audience to some dancing of their own and the band ran through a selection of waltzes and quicksteps.

Calista took Myerson for a spin on the dance floor and she easily outshone his faltering footwork. The businessman looked a bit foolish and sat back down, drinking, while the girl continued to perform extravagantly with a stranger. Bond felt certain he could detect her throaty laugh even above the music. Her body moved wonderfully well, supple and graceful, with a hint towards tawdriness. Her enthusiasm rubbed off onto others nearby and soon the floor was covered with dancing bodies. It became difficult for Bond to see the two suspects. They had to get closer. He turned to Toni.

"This is getting us nowhere fast," he said. "We need to force the pace a bit, Toni. Myerson looks very bored. Why don't you try to distract him? I'll talk to the girl."

Bond didn't give her an opportunity to argue. He spoke downwards, towards the button hole. "Did you hear that, Alfonso? We'll both be off the hands-free for a while."

"Si, Senor."

"Keep in contact with Pepe and Juan. Tell them what's occurring."

"Okay. No problem, Senor."

Bond stood up. Toni looked disapprovingly at him. He pulled her to her feet and onto the dance floor. He wasn't planning on dancing. They only made a few tentative steps into the melee, before Bond dragged the girl across the boards and closer to Myerson's table. Bond could hear the man's laugh, but it sounded weary and uninterested.

Covering her grimace, Toni moved forward. There was a spare chair next to Myerson and she sat on it, decorously crossing her legs, so he couldn't fail to see. A smile crossed her lips and it got the man's attention. He turned to her and they began to talk. Good. Bond spied for Calista. She was still engaged in a whirl with the stranger. Bond edged further around the hall, watching for an opening. The music came to an end and, after a brief exchange of cheek-to-cheek kisses with her dance partner, the girl was off, heading for the exit.

"Fuck!" muttered Bond and made after her. He took two flutes of Codorniu from a passing waiter and traversed the edge of the dance floor, keeping the girl in sight. The headress stood out and the quick pursuit was easy. He met her close to the exit and held out one of the champagne flutes.

"Hello, I don't think we've met."

The girl stopped still, staring at him. Her expression didn't shift from Bond's face. He finally saw her deep brown eyes, which squinted at him behind the emerald and gold mask. They flickered rapidly right and left. Was she looking to escape, wondered Bond. He stepped up, proffering the drink again. She took it.

"My name's James. James Bond," he said cheerfully.

"I'm Calista." The voice was uncertain, wavering a little.

"That's a beautiful name, for a very beautiful girl."

"How can you tell under this mask?"

"I can tell by your eyes."

"Now you are trying to flatter me, Mr Bond."

"Of course I am. I was disappointed to see you leaving so soon, Calista. I was hoping we might share a dance later on. You do dance, don't you?"

"Yes," she replied, stretching the vowel sound, some of her poise had returned. It was as though she had reached a decision. "I dance very well. But you stand too stiff to be a dancer."

"We all have our hidden talents," said Bond. "I want to uncover the secret woman behind your

mask.”

The girl laughed. It was a low giggle, a hearty lilting sound, which was pleasant and infectious. “You make it sound like you are trying to seduce me, Mr Bond.”

“The thought never crossed my mind.”

“Well, at the moment I want some fresh air and a cigarette. You do smoke don’t you, Mister Bond?”

“Better than I dance,” he replied, “Please, call me, James.”

They walked through the cocktail lounge and onto the smoking veranda. It was a chilly evening. He offered his Ronson to the girl and they both inhaled deeply. Over the tobacco smell Bond caught her scent, the spicy aroma of Coco Chanel, all peaches, vanilla and Bulgarian rose. It reminded him of women long gone.

“Well, James,” she said, “What brings you to Barcelona?”

“The Carnestoles. What about you?”

“The same,” replied Calista, “but I think you are teasing me, James. This is not the first time you have seen me.”

“Really; where have we met before?”

“On the cable car. In the restaurant. You and your companion seem most interested in Stafford Myerson and me.”

Bond wondered if both businessman and escort had noticed their tails.

“Let’s just say it’s a professional interest,” he countered, allowing him the briefest of seconds to concoct a story. He took a swig of cava before continuing.

“We’re journalists. Scandal rags. You know the sort of thing. Stafford Myerson has... Well, he’s popped up on our radar. I rather hoped I might get an exclusive interview with the girl he’s paying to take him to bed.”

The peacock looked at him with curiosity. Her brown eyes glinted beneath the emerald and gold of her mask. The feathers that thrust out of her head-dress waved gently in the cool breeze. She raised the cigarette to her lips and her eyes watched him all the time.

Bond’s own expression didn’t waver. “There would be plenty of money in it, Calista.”

“I don’t talk. It would be bad for my reputation.”

“But you wouldn’t have to work. The money could set you up for life, if you were clever with it. Perhaps you could return home. A hundred thousand would stretch further in St Petersburg, wouldn’t it?”

“I don’t live in St Petersburg,” she said slowly.

"I'm sorry. I must be mistaken. Your accent..."

"Is Swedish."

"Is it? I knew a man in Sweden once. Rolf Larsen."

"Who?"

"A friend," Bond lied. "Perhaps you read about him in the newspapers."

"I did not."

"He was a spy."

The beautiful lips pursed into a smile.

"I don't know any spies."

"Don't you?"

"If you interrogate me anymore, James, I might become suspicious."

"Of what?"

"You talk riddles, James."

"And you know who Rolf Larsen is."

"How can I?" she replied casually. "He is a dead man."

"How did you know that?"

"You just told me. You said he was a spy."

Bond stubbed out his cigarette. Yes he was, mused Bond; ten years ago before I killed him. The little play with her lips was all there had been. A minor slip, but he wasn't certain. It might just have been a reaction to his 'riddles.' They didn't teach you these subtleties in the service. You learnt them over years of watching people, tracing them, tracking, observing, reading movement and reaction. What was the reason Stafford Myerson had become stropky and Calista had become bored? Perhaps the relationship had reached its natural conclusion. Or perhaps the exchange had been made or was about to be made and the Englishman knew his usefulness was expedient and his time with this lovely, sensual woman was about to finish forever. It was a minor slip, that smile. But then she'd caught him out and he had slipped. A single misplaced word which she had picked up on. Was she merely a clever, intelligent girl, who listened to her client's needs and wants and fulfilled them, or was she something else entirely? If she was, she was working completely alone. As he stubbed out the cigarette, he saw a quizzical smile cross Calista's face. Suddenly Bond was keen to get back inside the ballroom and get close to Myerson.

"Let's not talk, Calista. We can dance instead."

They re-entered the Great Room to the hum of a salsa. They put down their glasses. Bond took

Calista's hand and guided the glittering girl towards the ballroom floor. The band was playing a sultry spicy tune, a cocktail of Cuban rhythms and American jazz. Bond wasn't any great dancer, and certainly not of this hybrid, sexy, close dance. A waltz or a foxtrot would have suited him better. Bond remembered that the movement of the salsa was all in the body, that the shoulders and head should remain still, while the hips and feet provided the fluidity. He took the girl in the Latin open hold, his right palm resting gently under her left shoulder blade, almost on her side. Calista caressed his upper arm with her left hand, but did not move too near. Body contact was frowned on by the best salsa dancers.

Feet inches apart, knees relaxed, Bond and the girl both started to move, taking the weight on opposing feet, allowing the hips to settle and then pushing sideways; for Bond, first to the left, a small step and then a straight leg and his hip swung. They switched steps, Bond's right moving over, swaying his hip again; he shifted onto the balls of his feet, keeping time, and his right toes tapped his left shoe. The shimmy was mirrored by the girl, whose body vibrated with the movement. They performed a similar right-hand move, each time hitting the second beat.

Bond set his hips and took a forward pace, dipping slightly, so the girl followed him backwards then forwards. Her stilettos did not even restrict her. She perched on them as if they were born to her. Bond smiled, trying to catch her eyes, but they were far away, as if this was normal to her and the event had no meaning. Bond wanted to move closer, but the unwritten rules forbade it.

They performed an outside break, Calista turning to allow the pass. When it came to the Lady Twirl, Bond let her go. He couldn't stretch over the high feathers, but she came back to him, her left hand across her stomach. For an instant their chests touched and he felt the firmness of her proud breasts, then it was over, they parted and she spun. Then it was back to the hip sway, the motion moving them across the floor. Hips shaking they skirted the other dancers with a florid, effortless glee. The girl's infections rubbed off on Bond he came out smiling and slightly breathless. Forwards and back again, an outside turn, a twirl and then repeat and repeat again.

The Latin melody and the slightly hot air, the cava and the beautiful woman before him made Bond temporarily forget that there was a mission at hand, that secrets were in danger and people were going to be exposed. For a minute or so, his whole world was caught up in the dancing peacock girl and the heady rolling rhythm. If Calista was a spy, she was supremely good at her work, for he couldn't detect a single flaw in her armour. It was only as the music came to a trumpeting close and they gave a little bow to each other, that his senses prickled again. The girl looked anxiously over his shoulder at the table where Toni sat with Myerson.

"Thank you, James," Calista said simply, a little out of breath, but with a warm smile passing across her lips. "Now, we must return to our own companions."

Bond could see sour faces. He gave an encouraging smile to Toni, but it wasn't returned. The tall peacock retreated to the waiting Myerson. Unusually he said nothing as Calista bent over the businessman's arm, offering a revealing view of her cleavage. Myerson contemptuously dismissed Calista's words with a wave of his hand and took up his drink. The girl sat down next to him and gave a last parting nod in Bond's direction.

Toni stood up without a word. She walked a few tables away, where Bond met her.

"I see you enjoyed yourself," she remarked, with a hint of jealousy.

Bond resisted the temptation to bait her further. The ounce of envious green in her eyes was

spreading. "What about Myerson?" he asked.

"Nothing. He isn't very bright. I think he's drunk."

"Pity. The girl isn't up to much either. It looks like you were right about her, Toni. This operation's going nowhere. The INTEL must have been wrong. I can't see anything happening here. We've got a bored prostitute, no industrial secrets and no sign of Boris Obukhov."

Toni sighed. "It's going to be a long night."

"Indeed."

They pretended to be enjoying themselves, for the benefit of show, but as soon as the two suspects made their way upstairs, Bond and Toni turned serious. They stood by the elevator, watching the floor numbers tick away. It was only half past eleven and Bond expected Myerson would want to go to the Eclipse bar. The counter stopped at the floor of his suite. Pepe and Juan were still in position in the lounge. Bond removed his face mask. They had no one upstairs. The switch could be happening as they waited in the lobby.

"Alfonso?"

"Si, Senor?"

"They're on their way back to the suite. Can you hear anything?"

"Wait."

The pause was long one. "They are inside now. He sounds very drunk. Worse than before."

Bond nodded. "Okay. We're coming down."

The surveillance room was crowded with all eight of them present. There were no voices from the suite now. They heard water running from the shower and a rustle of clothes. The tell-tale sounds of bedtime preparations.

"It looks all over, James," said Toni, "Alfonso will be fine here. We can stake out the airport tomorrow morning."

She half reached for his hand, but withdrew the gesture nervously. Bond saw it and Toni flushed. "If you want, James, we can forget business for an hour or two."

Bond smiled. Yes, he did want: a drink or three in Bar Pastis down the road, with Piaf and Montand in the background and a few words of regret and apology. Perhaps tonight he might uncover the real woman behind the face of Antonia Pilar de Vargas and find a better reason than a fountain to return to Barcelona.

"All right," he said and was about to say he'd buy the first round, when the sensors picked up the zip and snap of cases being opened and closed. Everyone in the room stopped. They heard the door click. Bond tensed. He looked across at Toni. She had become instantly alert too.

Bond didn't wait. He was out of the door, Toni following and shouting instructions to Pepe and Juan.

Upstairs, the startled concierge shook his head. He hadn't seen the girl, but he hadn't been looking for her. Bond crossed the lobby to the reception desk. No, Senor Myerson's bill was still unpaid. Bond got the suite number and a pass key.

The elevator hissed open. Bond and Toni stepped onto thick carpet and half ran up the corridor. Bond swiped the card down hard and pushed the handle. The lights automatically flickered on. The suite was enormous. Floor to ceiling windows painted one side of the room. The decor was the same light wood and neutral cream and beige that inhabited most of the hotel. Bond passed through the living room, observing two very cold cups of coffee resting on a square smoked glass table. The bedroom was equally huge. The windows yawned out towards the illuminations of the city. Explosions of silver and gold, magenta and beryl, peppered the sky. The starbursts shivered on both sides of the room. The looking glass walls glinted with colour, seeming to laugh at Bond's helplessness. The sound of the fireworks hardly touched them. The room was in darkness, but it smelt occupied. Bond flipped a hand across the light sensor and the bedroom glowed into brightness.

Stafford Myerson lay naked on the massive bed. His legs were slightly apart and his arms over his head. Here was the smell of human faeces and the mess splattered the mattress. His face was contorted in the painful agonies of an unexpected paralysis. It didn't look shocked or surprised, simply twisted and torn, as his blood suffocated with the poison. One small single hole trickled with blood from his neck. Curled in his hand was a solitary peacock feather. The tip was made of metal and covered in a mixture of blood and a slimy liquid, a deadly drug of some sort. Toni hopelessly checked for a pulse. She shook her head. Bond crossed to the dressing table, where the big cardboard boxes sat. He was not surprised to find the masks had been delivered by courier from Paris. The dragon mask was still in its wrapper.

"That's odd," remarked Toni. "He's had his nails manicured."

"I wouldn't say so," said Bond. "I half expected it."

"But the man I met downstairs had disgusting fingers."

Bond understood. The body had been dead some time. It had not been Myerson in the Grand Room, just another pin in the wheel of conspiracy. So that was what Boris Obukhov had meant by completing the subterfuge. There would be no more leaks from Reflex Galileo Systems. Someone had outlived his usefulness. And Calista had known who Rolf Larsen was. Because she'd read about it in Russian dispatches, historical documents, training manuals, perhaps. They trained them well these days. He'd not seen any clue in her face, her movements, her demeanour. But he had missed it in the paperwork. The image of her passport pages flashed through his mind. It had only been issued a month before she'd first travelled to London. Not impossible, but unlikely. A small slip and he'd missed it. The Russian operation had been in good practiced hands. The hands of an angel of death. You would never have known it from Calista's painted, fervent face. Stafford Myerson hadn't seen it. He'd been sucked in by the twin promise of youth and beauty, the excitement and thrill of illicit love and lust. But the passion hadn't been stronger than death.

Bond looked at the pitiful empty husk before him. It told no secrets and hid no lies. Myerson was nothing now but a certificate on a coroner's desk. Finished. Concluded. Stamped and authorised for dispatch. A flight home in a bald coffin. A lonely burial. An obituary in *The Times*. Had he known his fate when the devil took him to bed that final time? When she straddled him and teased him and tickled him with the feather, had he known what awaited him in that single fateful moment? Was it painful or was it a moment of ecstasy, buried under the waves of a delirious vice? Was it now a

tranquil rest or did he suffer the arrows of a bitter spite?

Suddenly Bond couldn't look at the corpse any longer. He left Toni issuing orders via mobile phone, desperate to catch the assassin. It was too late now. Bond knew Calista wouldn't be found. She would vanish into the diplomatic channels and return to St Petersburg, or wherever she originated from. Not Stockholm, of that he was certain. You poor bastard, Myerson, he thought. You never knew her real game and you paid the ultimate price for ignorance.

Bond went into the lounge and lit a cigarette.

You never knew where death would come from; a bullet, a pill, a failure of the heart or lung, an absurd accident of life, or a spurned lover, in any number of fashions and from strangers or familiar faces. And even in death, thought Bond, you could never decipher the real, underlying cause from the barren soulless mask that remained. It was just another face among many lost to the world, to be interred and forgotten as death smiled and touched the living, tendered its sweet sting and walked away.

Three:

July:

Life Through A Lens

The life of a double 'O' agent of Her Majesty's Secret Service can hardly be called dull. It certainly has its mundane months, but the compensations of good pay, conditions and benefits are a reward that once tasted is rarely relinquished. Most agents have interests and hobbies outside their field of work. Some men have quiet unassuming past times; they are artists, writers, philatelists, lepidopterists, anglers, all manner of calm, solitary occupations. Others have families, although this is frowned upon as the life expectancy of a field agent is notoriously low. They will return from a weekend or holiday with tales of their children or the latest DIY disaster. Most agents, however, thrive on living near the edge and test themselves to their limit even during their private lives. With these men, dangerous sports are popular, while late night gambling, drinking, fast women and even faster cars are often considered a necessary extravagance. Successive heads of the service have often tried to curtail the excesses of these agents, but they also understood that these men frequented mortal danger as a duty. If their self-indulgence seemed a little over the top, their need to relax their minds and recuperate their bodies while not on duty was perceived as a necessary evil, as long as their sharpness and focus did not slip while working.

James Bond fell somewhere between the third and the first variety. He certainly drank hard and drove fast and was not unfamiliar with the charms of available ladies, but he also spent days reading the papers, tending to his beloved sports car, playing golf and, when abroad, indulging in his passion for water sports. Today was one of those in-between moments, a relaxing day's golf on the beautiful old links at Deal.

Bond liked the Royal Cinque Port Club and Course. He had played there a few times, despite his first visit being an unsatisfactory one; in his youth Blacking, the seasoned pro at St. Marks, had entered him in the Halford Hewitt Public Schools Championship. Bond had finished a creditable seventeenth after two days and seventy two holes of hard toil during which he found the rough more than the fairways. He had been sitting in an even more respectable fourth, but in escaping from the deep greenside bunker on the par four twelfth he'd hit a despicable ten. That disaster lost him all impetuous, he never recovered and his final round was a bitter disappointment. Blacking had been philosophical in defeat; Bond was still a young man and with practice he could easily make a scratch professional or better. Bond felt it too, but his heart wasn't in it. A year later he enlisted in the Navy and embarked on a very different career.

Now Bond played his golf at weekends, work and weather permitting. His handicap was a good nine. It had to be to win a few-score pounds off the businessmen at Sunningdale and Walton Heath. Recently Bond had noticed his game going a little stale. The walk and the fresh air were always welcome after the stuffiness of the London office, but Bond found he was enjoying the camaraderie of the nineteenth hole more. The test of a course no longer held him enthralled and he looked forward to the expensive malt whisky, the smoked salmon sandwiches and the occasional long drinking bout with the members.

But Deal was a different challenge. Bond wasn't playing the uniform tree-lined inland courses he usually frequented, but a true seaside links. He recognised the artistry it took to negotiate the undulating barren fairways, the hazards, the unforgiving greens and the treacherous rough cut into

the grasses on the sand dunes. The blustery wind and the changeable weather, sometimes all four seasons in a round, provided the icing on a testing cake. Today would provide a thorough examination of his skill and patience.

Although Bond was looking forward to playing the grand old course, his trip there wasn't all about golf. There was a social element to the occasion: Calum O'Shea, a member of the board at Bond's preferred club – the New Zealand, near Woking – was involved. He was a good natured, big drinking Irishman and during one of Bond's lazy sessions at the bar, he had sparked some interest while buying them a few strong vodka martinis. Initially Bond had rejected the invitation because, as he put it, "I don't really do charity." But Calum O'Shea, a self-made millionaire and something of a philanthropist, wasn't used to the answer 'no' and he had insisted Bond attend the charity day.

"It's all a bit of fun, James," he explained with a florid, exaggerated arm gesture. "We'll be playing nine holes before and after lunch with a bunch of celebrities and a few pros. There'll be spectators too, paying a pretty good whack for the privilege of seeing all these famous names. It's a good business opportunity. They can look generous while indulging in some flattery of the stars."

"It doesn't sound like there is anything in it for me, Calum," countered Bond.

Ever the astute businessman, Calum chuckled. "Come on, James, think about it. Those celebs expect to be fed and watered, you know. Even the pros like a good spread. They get it for free of course, but it's good value for £250."

"That's a lot of money, Calum. Even for charity."

"So I'll stand you the two-fifty. I can afford it."

"Golf and a free lunch. I must say I'm tempted."

"Be tempted. And be careful. Most of my chums can't hold their liquor and it'll be embarrassing if none of us hits a shot after lunch – even you." Calum had a twinkle in his eye. "After all you wouldn't want to make an ass of yourself in front of Tom Watson would you?"

Bond almost kissed Calum's ruddy face. Trust the old devil to save the best until last, reeling him in before getting him hooked. Bond had admired Tom Watson for many years, a classic golfer who had been an unchallenged world number one before he succumbed to a horrid case of the 'putting yips.' Bond still remembered Watson's epic battle with Nicklaus on the final afternoon of The Open at Turnberry which was only resolved at the seventy second hole. He'd been lucky enough to witness it first hand and still remembered with a childish passion that enthralling contest and the gracious conduct of the two Americans as they chased golf's greatest prize. There had been other great sporting moments of course; Bond always recalled the ferocious championship fights of Hagler, Hearns, Leonard and Duran, the Grand Prix victories of Lauda and Hunt, the flamboyant tennis of Federer and the cruel, exhausting triumphs of Redgrave and Pinsent. All glorious occasions. Yet none captured his heart like those three heady hours of intense golfing rivalry, so hot it matched the baking summer sun.

It wasn't quite so hot the Friday morning in August that Bond raced his reconditioned Aston Martin D.B.III along the fast lane of the M20, recklessly ignoring the speed limit and undertaking the drivers who steadfastly stuck to the law. He'd passed the Maidstone exit by eight-thirty and made such good progress he was able to stop at Annie's Tea Rooms for a strong mug of coffee and a cinnamon tea cake, before the descent towards Folkestone and the coastal road that would take him to Deal.

Soon, Bond saw the squat grey drum-shape of the Castle on the horizon, jutting out above the roofs of the terraced cottages that lined the short sea front drive through the town. Bond passed this Tudor landmark and headed through Deal and onto the aptly named Golf Road.

The white washed walls of the clubhouse were visible almost as soon as Bond left the town. The building sat majestically isolated at the tip of the golf course, overlooking the first tee and the eighteenth green. The course itself straddled two miles or so of dunes along the coast, so low and close to the beach that the sea had been known to flood the fairways.

The clubhouse, while large, wasn't a grand affair, functional at best, and Bond entered the mahogany panelled reception room with a sense of acute *déjà vu*. It was as though nothing had changed since his first visit here for the Hewitt Trophy. There was still a starchy Clubhouse Manager who raised eyebrows at him, but said nothing until Bond approached his polished, empty desk. The man never smiled once as Bond explained he was here for the charity event and gave his name. There was the smallest hint of a sigh as the man ticked his name on a list, stood up and asked Bond to follow him. They walked up the wood panelled staircase, covered with photographic memories, and Bond was ushered into the Jack Aisner Room, a formal lounge with hefty leather seats, a long bar and huge windows offering stunning views across the course and out towards the English Channel. Rumour had it that on a clear day you could see the French coast and the older members would raise a glass of Veuve Clicquot to the continent.

Calum O'Shea was already conducting introductions with his usual effervescent style. He caught Bond's eye and immediately beckoned him over.

"James! Great to see you. Give Denning your keys and he'll get your clubs up to the driving range. We're tipping up for some practice before the hoards arrive."

Bond didn't know who Denning was, but turned to see the disconsolate manager holding out his hand. Bond dropped his car keys into the man's palm and was about to say "It's the Aston Martin" when the man turned swiftly about and exited the lounge, as if it was somewhere he didn't want to be.

"Come on, James," enthused Calum. "Let me introduce you."

Bond did not consider himself to be easily star struck, but even he was impressed by the names that rolled past him. Of the professional golfers, Bond only recognised the Spaniard Canizarez; Watson and another American, the less well revered John Cook, had not yet arrived. The celebrities were an assorted crop of actors, entertainers and sports stars including the football pundit Alan Hansen, the ex-tennis player Tim Henman and the comedian Ronnie Corbett, who was entertaining a clutch of somebodies with anecdotes from his career. A boorish reality star called Clifton Something-or-Other hung on the periphery drinking lager from a bottle. Bond seized a complimentary glass of chilled champagne, that exact yellow labelled Veuve Clicquot of the story, and tagged onto the fringe of this group before joining the slow exodus to the sanctuary of the driving range.

Bond hit a few impressive drives and attracted the attention of one of the lesser pros, a young man called Graham Wright. They shook hands and Bond introduced himself. Wright was a club professional who played the Challenger circuit, mostly in Britain and Ireland. He was aiming to get his full time tour card, having won two minor events. Pro-Am provided him with some regular income.

“These charity dos are always a bit hit and miss,” said the young man. “Most of the amateurs are pretty poor. But you look good. What do you play off?”

“Nine. I used to be a three, but I don’t play so often now,” replied Bond, glad to find someone sensible to talk to. “Work commitments, you know. You’ve played these things before, how do they pair us up?”

“We just draw lots. We’ll probably play in fours; a pro, a celeb and two of you guys. So if you’re hoping to draw Tom Watson, sit and pray.”

Bond smiled. He liked Graham, but the lad didn’t seem ruthless enough for a professional golfer. The two of them shared some drives before everyone got distracted by the arrival of the star attraction. Even in retirement, Tom Watson still cut a commanding figure. He was all smiles, handshakes and politeness. Bond held back from the melee and watched as the great man gradually withdrew from the throng and hit a few practice strokes of his own. Graham whispered to Bond that Watson’s follow through and shoulder turn was still as smooth as in his pomp. Bond could see that; the strike of the ball was true; it was the distance and direction that failed him now. There is nothing so agonising as the fall of the mighty, Bond mused.

That morning, Bond shared the company of a dull ex-Walker Cup player, an even duller rugby union forward and a cheerful but incompetent investment banker. After the outward nine, Bond was comfortably placed at three-over-par. He enjoyed playing in front of a crowd again, small as it was, even if only for the drive off at the first tee. The smattering of spectators was all there, cameras at the ready, to follow Tom Watson.

Lunch was a stand up buffet in the Dining Room, with lots of champagne on offer. The reality star had too much to drink, became more obnoxious by the moment and, having retreated to the lounge, he was advised not to make it out for the second round.

Bond was paired with Graham in the afternoon, which made the second set of holes – the inward nine – much more enjoyable. The foursome’s nominal celebrity, the local MP who was taking advantage of the parliamentary recess to press some palms, was also a keen golfer and the three happily swapped sporting stories as they played. Completing the quartet was a much older man, bearded, grey, thin and withered. His golf game was unsteady. He said it spoiled a good walk. At his best he was cumbersome. He winced when hitting his drives and frequently stopped to take a lungful of air as they walked the course. He was polite, but aloof, as if he found the company stagnant. He introduced himself as Robert and clearly disliked being called anything else, failing to reply whenever Graham addressed him as ‘Robbie’ or ‘Rob.’ Bond detected the trace of a lost accent underneath his rounded vowels.

At the 15th hole Bond executed an excellent recovery shot, hitting out of the rough with a little right hand draw, allowing the ball to dodge the big protecting bunker and run to the edge of the green.

The old man nodded, complimenting him. “You clearly play a lot, James.”

“In my spare time. When I’m not at work. That sort of thing.”

“And what sort of work do you do?”

The question sounded slightly loaded. Bond looked at the shallow features closely, quickly. For a moment he thought they looked familiar, but he couldn't remember the time or place when he'd met this man. Bond replied, in an uncommitted off hand manner.

"I work for the government."

The old man nodded. "Official secrets and all that?"

"Something like it, yes."

"I see," was the only reply, which seemed to close the matter.

Later on after Bond sank his final putt for another three-over-par, the old man patted his back in congratulations. He seemed genuinely pleased for Bond's success.

"Well done, my boy. That's put you top of the board. I'm sure Calum's got a case of something for the winner in the lounge."

"I should hope so."

"Yes. And when we get back there, let me buy you a drink."

"There's no need," replied Bond. "I can have some more of that free champagne."

"No. I want to buy you a proper drink. Man to man."

Bond looked straight at the grey haired, slack skinned face. The tired eyes didn't plead, they ordered him to accept. It was the look of a man used to giving instructions, a man of authority. It reminded Bond of one of his superiors, the first person he knew as M, an irascible old Admiral who always had a place in Bond's affections, despite their contrary views.

Bond washed up in the player's changing rooms and presented himself in the lounge, where Calum O'Shea proceeded to thank everyone involved, golfers, celebrities, amateurs, the club and so on, before announcing they had managed to raise five thousand much needed pounds. As the old man had suggested, for his winning efforts Bond received a case of the club's house wine, Chinon, an inexpensive, but tasty cabernet franc. More satisfying to Bond, he got to shake the hand of Tom Watson, who also handed him a signed golf ball and congratulated him on his score.

"Thank you," Bond said. "Perhaps we could share a round next time."

He said it in jest and the old pro's face lit up with the understanding. "The next time's the Senior's Open. I'm not sure you're old enough to qualify yet. Well done anyway."

Bond smiled and watched the now slightly hunched shoulders retreat through the lounge door and head towards the stairs. Bond turned back to the bar and ordered a double Balvennie over ice. The old man appeared at his side.

"Make that two. On my tab, Stevens. Bring it to my table"

"Certainly, Mr Van Rennsburg."

Bond followed the man to a corner of the lounge and they sat on a big leather sofa that faced into the room, allowing the old man to view everyone and everything. Even in old age, Robert Van Rennsburg, the diamond industrialist whose personal fortune had been amassed through both legitimate and dubious means, was not going to be surprised by anyone. This conversation, Bond reflected, was private and if it was to be interrupted, the old man wanted to know about it in advance.

"You didn't look surprised when you heard my name," opened the old man.

"I've heard many names. And met many people. I have a feeling we've met before, Mr Van Rennsburg."

"Keep calling me Robert. It's shorter," said Van Rennsburg, "and yes, we have met before. I knew Admiral Sir Miles Meservy and occasionally he invited me for drinks at his club, Blades. You were there. Twice."

Bond nodded. The recollection was very slight. Sir Miles, the ex-Head of Service Bond had earlier thought of, used Blades to discuss an operative's private life or his health. There was usually dinner and a few hands of bridge. Sir Miles had retired and died some time back, so any meeting with Van Rennsburg would have been many years ago.

"I used to work for Sir Miles. He invited me there a few times."

"I know that, James. And I also know what kind of work you did for him. For the government. Not all the details of course, Miles would never be so indiscreet. But I can read between the lines. I knew where he worked and have some idea of the workings of Her Majesty's Secret Service." He paused while their drinks arrived. "Indeed, I had some use for them myself when I pulled A.M.C. out of Rhodesia."

Bond recalled the affair. The Africa-Matopo Corporation had been one of Rhodesia's biggest industrial companies, a diamond mining and manufacturing conglomerate. The president of the new state of Zimbabwe had used government funds to buy millions of shares, enough to install his own puppet executive director. The puppet was assassinated while on safari in Botswana, allowing Van Rennsburg to seize executive control. He promptly withdrew the manufacturing side of the business to Britain, under his control, naturally.

"I remember the incident."

This was the only comment Bond felt inclined to make. He hadn't been involved in the operation – it had occurred at the very beginnings of his service – but the facts left a nasty taste in his mouth. He didn't consider Britain had received any long term benefit from the relocation of Africa-Matopo gem cutting business. Zimbabwe certainly hadn't. The only winner had appeared to be the tired old man sitting next to him, Robert Van Rennsburg.

"I can see you look a little disappointed, James. It is often forgotten that my family had owned the vast part of A.M.C. for over eighty years. I wasn't going to let it be swallowed by an upstart general with designs of grandeur."

"I try not to let politics and big businesses bother me, Robert," Bond said matter-of-factly. "I work for the government, but the whys don't concern my department much. The hows do. I can't afford to have any allegiances. Except, perhaps, to friends."

Van Rennsburg sipped his whiskey and peered at Bond with those hard eyes. "And family?"

"I don't have any."

"I do. In fact, it's my family I want to talk to you about," explained Van Rennsburg. "I may sound like a bitter old man, but life wasn't always like this. Things used to be very different. I'd married in middle age. My wife was young and beautiful, artistic. She was a well-regarded photographer and we were the talk of the society columns." Van Rennsburg chuckled at the memory and took another sip from his glass. "I invested in a thousand acre estate outside Bulawayo; my servants were well paid and cared for. But everything changed so quickly. The order of my life, the sanctity of it, was disturbed fundamentally by the upheaval in Rhodesia. People consider me a racist, a bigot. But it wasn't their livelihood that was being destroyed. The greed of a small band of individuals would eventually take away everything my father and grandfather had built up. I knew at the beginning this was inevitable. If you take a look at my country now, you can see I was right. I am good judge of a situation and I saw no future in my country, only despair."

Despite himself, Bond had a pang of sympathy for this tired old man. Robert Van Rennsburg was a man in need of redemption. Something was eating away at his soul, something he needed to be purged of. Perhaps a misdemeanour far back in his life, a wrong he needed to right. It would be intriguing to find out.

"What about your family?"

Van Rennsburg ignored the question and looked at his watch. "Are you busy this evening?"

"Not particularly. Why?"

"Come to my house for dinner. Seven o'clock."

Bond was about to object, but the old man raised his hand. "No, I insist. Anyway, it's too public here. I also have rather excellent claret."

Van Rennsburg attempted to get to his feet and visibly strained with the effort. His face creased into a scowl of annoyance. Bond stood up first, offering his arm to the old man, which was accepted. The old man put down his unfinished drink and fished in his jacket pocket. The hand re-emerged with an old fashioned calling card in it. He gave it to Bond.

"No need to dress. I live alone. Mrs Van Rennsburg died a few years ago."

Bond nodded. The old man winced again as he set off towards the exit, pausing only to shake the hand of Calum O'Shea, who was still orchestrating the social entertainment.

Bond looked at the address on the card. He had half planned to play the tables this evening, but as the Van Rennsburg residence was on his way home, Bond decided he could have dinner with the old man and still make the gaming tables by midnight.

He shared a few words and one drink with Calum O'Shea, who tried to persuade him to stay for more drams of whiskey, but Bond's mind was elsewhere now, preoccupied with this curious old man. Bond drove steadily through the late afternoon traffic. He reached Tunbridge Wells in good time and switched on his Garmin Nuvi 250, the glitzy free satellite navigation system he had recently

invested in. Its maps were a little confusing, but the directions led him faultlessly to the Van Rennsburg residence, Old Parsonage House.

There was a long drive down an avenue of trees before the large white washed country house came into view. The building wasn't an original, that had been lost to time, although Bond wondered if the very front portico was from an old lodge, as it seemed incongruous amongst the very 1930s facade. The house was square; the only addition Bond could see being a conservatory that ran along one side and around the rear. The general standard of the upkeep, the exterior paintwork and such, was poor. Someone needed to show a little tender loving care to this country pile. There was a lot of money resting here, thought Bond, but no-one wants to spend it.

He presented himself at the door and a tall, thin black man, dressed in smart white trousers and shirt, but jacketless, answered the door. The butler's skin was stretched tight over his frame, making him look hawkish and mean. What remained of his hair was grey, almost white, and the tired brown eyes seemed to have the worry of the world about them. Once Bond gave his name, the butler smiled a big wide grin, changing his appearance and demeanour in an instant. He opened the door wide and ushered Bond inside.

"Oh, yes, sir. Hello, sir, Mr Bond," the butler almost tripped over his words in his enthusiasm. "Mr Robert is very pleased to have you here. Very pleased. We all are. Well, me and Mrs Satchel, of course. We don't do so much entertaining now Mrs Amy is gone."

"Amy?"

"Mrs Van Rennsburg," said the butler, with a little hooded look. "You are an old friend of the family, Mr Bond?"

"A friend, yes." Bond smiled. "Not so old."

The butler grinned again and let out a low laugh. "Oh, I see. Well, Mrs Satchel and I will still be pleased to have you. You go through to the lounge and I'll help Mr Robert to dress. He's not so capable these days."

The butler walked off, shaking his head a little, and still chuckling, Bond heard him mimic his reply: "Not so old!"

Bond wondered which door led to the lounge. The entrance hall was vast, with several doors on each side and a central stairway that turned to the right, doubling back on itself to reach the first floor landing. Everything was dark and wood panelled even the ceiling and floor. There was one door ajar and Bond took it, entering a plush sitting room, bedecked with Queen Anne furniture, all reupholstered in shades of green that matched the lawns outside the window. There was a beautiful photograph hanging on the far wall. Bond admired it at a distance. It was a safari-scape of lush grasslands and trees, framed under an eternal blue sky and punctuated at a distance by the grey domes of elephants. Bond stood closer and could see the detail in shadows, the reeds of grass so fine and close. The signature read A.V.R. and there was a serial number next it.

The sound of footsteps on the floorboards in the hall drew Bond back and he cast a shallow glance over his shoulder in time to see Robert Van Rennsburg enter the room. He was dressed in corduroy trousers and a spotless white shirt. An old patterned cardigan hung loosely from his shoulders, his left hand was thrust deep into one of the pockets.

"Hello, James. So, Satchel put you in here. Sometimes I wonder about that man. But you can't get rid of him after fifty years' service. He's worked for my family since he was six. He almost is my family." The last remark was said with a wistful air, as if it could be true.

Bond made a small gesture to the painting. "Your wife's work, Robert?"

"Yes. Do you like it?"

"Very much. The elephant walk crosses the plains of Zimbabwe, doesn't it?"

"Yes. When there were elephants. Amy adored the nature of Africa. She saw beauty in every creature. I saw them more as a challenge. Come on; let me show you my room."

Van Rennsburg's room was a trophy cabinet on a huge scale. Probably the biggest room in the house, its walls were lined with Van Rennsburg's kills. Bond wasn't an animal lover by any means, but there was a sombre beauty to African wildlife that touched a nerve. For all his ability to kill, Bond took no pleasure in man's extermination of other creatures. It saddened him to see the elephant tusks, the gorilla hands, the zebra and cheetah skins, the slightly creepy stuffed eagles and the photographs of gentlemen toasting the bloodlust they called sport. More to his taste were the individual gun cabinets each containing a rifle of a different age and styles, the pistol cabinets, polished swords, daggers and an array of traditional Zulu weaponry.

Van Rennsburg was already at an ornate battered tall boy, once used for travelling, but now doubling as a cocktail cabinet. "A drink, James? Caol Ila?"

"Yes, that'd be fine."

They shared the powerful tonic, a little sweet for Bond's pallet. He preferred the more robust, younger twelve year malt. Bond raised his glass towards the huge elephant tusks.

"Did you kill that beast?"

Van Rennsburg sighed. "I sense disapproval, James. Like most people my life is full of regrets. These are old memories, from a different era. One not so long ago, but different all the same. Even in the '50s and '60s there was a feeling that hunting was never going to end, that the bush concealed more than it gave up. Alas..." He shook his head, the sentence falling away with the movement. "We kill all the things that make us happy. All the beautiful, wild things."

Bond downed the whisky. "I've hunted myself, but mostly in the West Indies. Scuba diving and such, you know."

"Really? I had no idea," Van Rennsburg's face seemed to light up, all the concern drifted away as easily as it arrived; the good memories came flooding back. "Do you fish? I once caught a huge marlin off Madagascar..."

The two men had found some common ground. Bond too had caught marlin and shark, and they swapped tales of sweat and success. Satchel announced dinner and they ate in the conservatory, which had the benefit of the evening sun to warm it. They ate slices of cold honey cured ham with pickles followed by a deliciously tender lamb shank cooked in red wine and peppers. As promised, Van Rennsburg offered an excellent Ausone '75, a rich, intense St Emillion that complimented the hefty flavours of the meat. For desert there was vanilla sorbet and forest fruits. Bond asked if he

could smoke and like two Victorian gentlemen they settled into big arm chairs by the windows, smoking and taking glasses of port, a rare '63 Forrester.

Van Rennsburg had once owned a yacht and through dinner he had described how he and his crew sailed the Horn of Africa. Bond told amusing anecdotes of life on board a navy frigate and Van Rennsburg listened with a child's ear for a story, laughing at the tales of bored sailor's high-jinx or rapt by the thrill of combat. Bond had warmed to his host. He was good company, even if they didn't share similar views on everything. Occasionally Bond saw Van Rennsburg grimace or had to wait while he gathered breath. During a lull in the conversation, Bond asked him about it.

Van Rennsburg took a deep breath, seeming to shrink his chest into a tidy knot before exhaling long and hard.

"I'm dying, James," he said simply. "I've got a pancreatic cancer. I'm not expected to see out the New Year and I've given up the treatments. My time is spent."

Van Rennsburg paused. He took a sip of port and placed the glass on the table beside him. He looked Bond straight in the face, those determined eyes checking for a hint of mischief. Bond was stoic.

"What I'm going to tell you, James, involves my private life. My very private life. I want you to find somebody for me. My daughter."

Bond was about to interject, but Van Rennsburg silenced him with a small movement of his hand.

"We never had children. Amy and I were the happiest couple, but, soon after we married she had a car accident which resulted in a miscarriage. I don't know if the accident affected her physically in some way, or if her nervousness made her body reject a foetus, but over the next few years she miscarried three more times and after the last time, just before we moved to London, well, she decided we wouldn't try any more. She started to pour her energies into her photographs, her charity work. Our relationship, while it never became uncivil, was functional. Of course London was not the best place for a rich, physically lonely, late middle aged man. Let's just say the temptations were many. Amy was aware of my failings. She never said anything, but I knew it hurt. I think she may have seen it as a kind of punishment. Anyway, there was one woman, a young society sort called Annabel Constantine. We were together for a few years, on and off, but she wasn't really my type of girl, much too dominant. In the bedroom it was exciting, wild. Outside I found her tough and outspoken exterior unsuitable. Unfortunately this woman was as careless with her birth control as she was with her tongue. Some months after I ended our relationship she informed me she was pregnant with my child. I was at once shocked and elated. Imagine! Me, an old colonial misfit, fathering a child with a young wicked thing. It was both thrilling and frightening. At last I had the child I had craved, but with a person I had grown to loathe. Of course I offered to support her. She was gracious enough to accept the one off payment and the free health care for the birth, but she pointedly denied me access to my child, a baby girl. It was a huge wrench that affected me more than I knew. Amy knew my moods and she prised the truth from me. She knew about my dalliances, but this news seemed to devastate her, bringing back the memory of those failed pregnancies. She started a slow slide into depression and then dementia; all fuelled by paranoia and prescription drugs. If I had been a true bounder, I would have used my wife's unstable nature to commit further adultery, but as it was I was drawn back to her. The support she had offered me had to be returned now she needed me. It was a hard, painful few years before her suicide. It was almost a relief when she died."

"What happened to the mother and child?"

"There was some contact, not much; she wouldn't allow it. Anyway, three or four years on, I read her obituary in the *Telegraph*. She'd died in a house fire in Richmond. The article was short. It said she had one daughter, Paige. I guess I could have made a move for adoption then if I wanted to, but Annabel had set up a trust fund with my money and the child's guardians packed her off to school in Switzerland."

Van Rennsburg swilled his glass, looking into it as if searching for an answer. "I don't know anything about her, James. My own flesh and blood. I'm dying and I want that. I want to say 'Hello' and 'How are you' and 'I'm sorry' before I die. Is that a childish thing?"

"I don't judge people, Robert. I told you that. But this sort of thing isn't my line of work. A private investigator could do it just as well. Even the police. In fact, I have good contact..."

Van Rennsburg cut him short.

"No. That's not what I want. I want someone who I can trust. Even the police can smell money and I don't want the story splashed across the newspapers. When I saw you today at the golf course, I recalled how highly Sir Miles used to talk of you, how much he trusted your judgement in every the situation. I want someone who won't let me down. Good or bad. And you can do that, James. I know you can."

Bond smiled at the thought of Sir Miles praising one of his officers, not at headquarters, but in the relative privacy of Blades. It would have been hard for him to admit, but he would have said it with pride and some unintentional irony. Tentatively he swilled the port in his glass and took a small sip, relishing the nectar on his tongue before he replied.

"I do have some contacts that may be able to help. But why do you want to meet this girl, Robert? What can you offer her after all this time?"

"There is no offer. I just want to meet her. Just once."

Bond set down the glass. He didn't like the job. It wasn't his game at all, but Robert Van Rennsburg was a desperate lonely, dying man. A rich man too, but someone who recognised his mistakes, regretted them and moved on. This wasn't a man seeking closure on the past; rather he wanted a last moment of wonder at the future. Against all his instincts, Bond nodded his head.

"All right. I'll do it. It might take a while, I do have a job to do, but I'm sure I can have a result for you in a few weeks."

The next morning Bond realised he didn't remember much of the journey home, a hazy alcohol fuelled fast drive into London. He hadn't made the tables, yet he'd made a few thousand accepting Van Rennsburg's offer of expenses in advance. If M found out about it he'd be hauled over the coals. Hot ones. The service frowned on moonlighting, although most agents utilised the service records and information departments to their own ends occasionally.

Immediately after breakfast, Bond booked a weekend in Royale-Les-Eaux, reserving a suite at the Hotel Splendide during the late season after the Arabs had gone and the French and Spanish old money returned to the famous old casino. He telephoned Dick at the Barn Garage to give the Aston Martin a full service – interior clean, new wheels, brake pads, exhaust, sparks, the works. Bond lunched at Fortnum's, where he also ordered, well in advance, an enormous Christmas hamper, and in the afternoon he went to Henry Poole, the bespoke tailors on Saville Row and got fitted for a

classic worsted suit, bought three new pure cotton shirts and two silk ties. He dropped into Berry Brothers and Rudd and made enquiries about the year's vintages, eventually depositing on two cases of Chateau Lafitte. Back at home he bought an expensive pair of tickets to the first rugby international at Twickenham, in full knowledge OO6 would bite his hand off to have them, and two stall seats for the revival of *Cabaret* that Penelope, his secretary, was battering on about. Bond ate a light tea before spending the evening in Lotts, a wine bar near Chelsea Harbour, where he frequently exchanged tall tales with the regulars. It was only as he settled down for a good night's sleep that he began to wonder what the hell it was he'd got himself talked into.

Bond didn't feel able to discuss meeting Van Rennsburg with anyone at the service, so he passed off the various gifts he had purchased as the spoils from a night of fortune on the roulette wheel. Between reading the daily communications and catching up on some long standing reports and paperwork, Bond's mind drifted to the task he'd set himself. The girl wasn't a missing person, which ruled out using the missing person's bureau. Neither was she so conspicuous as to be easily traceable. There was, however, something that nagged at the back of his mind. He felt certain that somewhere in the distant past, he'd had something to do with Annabel Constantine. Not directly, or he would have remembered, but a brief meeting, a passing of hands or a smile at social function. Bond hid the thought away and instead spent lunchtime and early evening in the records department, deep in the bowels of the MI6 building. Here resided an enormous, white washed brick walled library containing many thousands of original documents, some of vital national importance, others mere trivia. Bond was looking for some of the latter and got a raised eyebrow from the pretty librarian when he asked for access to the computer mainframe, which held the transposed microfiche of all the daily papers and magazines published in the United Kingdom since the mid-forties and the end of the war. Armed with the girl's date of birth, he trawled through the births, deaths and marriage columns, the personal message pages and the gossip columns. There was nothing, not a single mention of Paige Constantine; in fact there were hardly any Paige's at all. Bond scowled at the computer screen. His eyes were beginning to ache.

He took some insipid coffee from the dispensing machine and on a whim decided to look back at an episode from his own past. He researched *Harper's and Queen* and quickly found the article he wanted, a social piece about a blisteringly hot summer day at the Henley Regatta. Bond's paramour at the time had been the rather aristocratic Regina Fforbes-Carrington, a politician's daughter with designs of grandeur beyond her capabilities. They had embarked on an exciting few months of love, but it had dwindled once Bond had received his first orders from M and promptly disappeared for six weeks. Regina wasn't a particularly forgiving girl and there hadn't been a reconciliation. Bond clicked the cursor across the screen, turning the pages and smiled as he viewed images from a slice of personal history. There were shots of minor aristocrats, some earnest sportsmen, dozens of the well-dressed upper classes and even more of the slightly tipsy champagne girls, equipped with hats and little summer dresses. And there, nine pages in, was a photograph subtitled 'Regina Fforbes-Carrington and her new significant other Commander James Bond.' She wore a white wrap around dress, belted at the waist, decent by an inch or two. Bond was decked in traditional morning dress, navy blue jacket with battleship grey waistcoat and trousers. They were smiling broadly, champagne flutes, hat and corsage in hand. It was good picture, lively and fun. Other than official and private photographs, this was, as far as Bond was aware, the only available image of him in existence. The service chiefs had not been pleased, which was one of the reasons he'd been dispatched to Washington for the autumn. Inwardly, Bond smiled at how young he looked and ran his hand across his cheekbones and chin, feeling the day's stubble, the wear and tear of life.

He sipped his coffee and sat looking at the photo for some time, a wealth of good youthful memories passing through his mind. Those heady few months with Regina were good memories, despite the ending, with many faces and places, parties, late nights and beautiful mornings. He

wanted a cigarette to rekindle the thoughts in a more solid fashion. Regina, he recalled, had smoked Embassy Filters with more enthusiasm than a chimney.

Daydreaming finished, Bond stretched forward to log off the mainframe, when he saw her. Standing in the gaggle of bodies behind Bond and Regina, over his left shoulder, there was a pretty looking golden haired girl in a red dress and matching hat, trimmed with a bow of black silk. Bond magnified the picture. It was pixelated, but he could make out the high cheek bones, the blue eyes and the radiant smile that would have enchanted an old boy like Robert Van Rennsburg. Yes. He was certain. Annabel Constantine had, at some time, been an acquaintance of Regina Fforbes-Carrington.

Bond didn't want to contact his old flame. Even after many years, he didn't fancy her ire. Instead, he spoke to her brother Dominic, who once he remembered Bond, was enthusiastic about a social catch up. Bond suggested The Henry Addington near Canary Wharf, as it was close to Dominic's work place. They met on the Wednesday evening. Bond didn't waste too long on social niceties.

"I'm actually looking for someone, Dominic. An old friend."

"Really, old chap, who is it? How can I help?"

"Well, it's a bit awkward. Regina used to have a friend, Annabel Constantine. I know she died a few years back, but it's her daughter I'm looking for."

"Paige?" Dominic seemed a little surprised. "Why do you want to look for her?"

"You know her?"

"Not really. She's gone well off the rails, James. Better leave that one alone."

"What do you mean? Drugs?"

Dominic shifted uncomfortably. He was finding the conversation suddenly difficult. Bond detected it too. He emptied his glass and offered to buy another round. Their drinks came swiftly. Bond shook the ice against the sides of the tumbler, making it rattle.

"I'm not doing this for me," explained Bond. "Someone wants to speak to her. Might be of some help if the girl's in trouble."

"Reggie and Annabel weren't that close, you know." Dominic started slowly, with a resigned air.

"Our families used to meet up for the skiing season. When we all went to college and uni, us youngsters had parties and holidays and all that, you know the sort of thing. Didn't you come on a couple when you went with Reggie?"

Bond nodded at the bad memory.

"Annabel got a bit too much," continued Dominic. "She was some sort of nympho schizoid. Prim and proper half the time, then fucking all and sundry behind our backs. Reggie's mates called her 'Ring My Bell End' cause they reckoned she'd come running if there was a cock about. She was mad keen for it, if you get me. And the booze didn't help. She was a big drinker. Killed her in the end."

"I thought she died in a house fire."

"That's what they say," snorted Dominic, "but she was probably pissed. That girl couldn't be stopped. She was hitting a bottle of vodka before lunch. Even her parent's disowned her; they bought her the house share and told her to get on with her life."

"What about Paige?"

"We weren't really in touch then. After the fire, she just sort of disappeared. Years later Reggie's daughter met her at Felgates, but that was a bit weird. She insisted on being called Laura; not sure what that was all about. Sophie said she could be a right bitch and they never kept in contact. No-one did."

"Do you have any idea how to get in touch with her?"

"Not exactly. Try opening a newspaper. Or *Hello*."

Bond inclined his head a little. "I'm sorry. You lost me."

"She's in most of the papers every day. Real party girl about town. Just like her Mum, only she gets paid for being a slag. Famous for being famous. Calls herself Gabriella."

Bond couldn't help his surprise. Even he hadn't been able to miss the impact on the celebrity circuit of Gabriella. She was something of a notorious self-publicist; a 'lad's mag' pin-up, famous for her love of the camera, her frank interviews and her party going antics, which usually included vodka, Red Bull, short skirts and shagging – or so the interviews suggested. This was the sort of girl Bond was inclined to dislike. In his youth they called them tarts, these days the girls themselves seemed to relish calling themselves sluts.

The next day Bond telephoned Harvey Blackford at the *Daily Mail*. The service used Harvey indiscriminately to spread false rumour or gently report the truth. He was a man Bond felt he could trust, but he wasn't going to give him all the details. Over a pint in a Holborn pub, Harvey listened to the story. He could get the contact details for Gabriella's agency and was certain some of the freelance paparazzi had the girl's address. While they drank, Harvey made some calls on his mobile phone and within a few minutes Bond had a list of addresses and names. Harvey cautioned him against getting too excited.

"Frankly, James, the press love affair with this bird is dying. She's clipped her wings too often. The public want something more substantial than tits and ass – and that's all this girl's got left to offer. She's sold too many cheap tales for too much money. And she spends it like it'll never run out."

"Doesn't it bother you, Harvey?" questioned Bond. "You guys help create these girls, give them an illusion of a career, some sort of importance. Then when they've run out of scandal you just drop them. Like a stone."

Harvey shook his head. "If they want to live life through a lens, that's up to them. We'll give them the riches. But it'll only last while they can sell rags and mags. When they don't, it's bye-bye."

He waved a contemptuous hand and the two men sat in silence for a few moments. Bond ventured, "Do you think she'll actually want to meet Van Rennsburg?"

"Maybe. If there's money in it."

It was a pressman's reply, born out of years of cynical experience. Bond was inclined to agree with him. He left their brief meeting with no illusions that another layer of veneer was being stripped away from Van Rennsburg's precious superficial expectations.

Bond tried the agency address first. The place was called 1stKlass and its entrance was nothing more than a door in an alleyway off Kilburn High Street. Bond had not made an appointment as he didn't want anyone to be prepared for his questions. He rang the push button once.

A young female voice asked if she could help. Bond said he had a meeting with Dee Dee. This was the name of the publicist Harvey had recommended he used. There was a pause.

"Dee Dee doesn't have any appointments today. Who's calling?"

"My name's James Bond. I'm an associate of Harvey Blackford, from the *Mail*."

There was another even longer pause, followed by a loud electronic buzz and an almost inaudible: "Come on up."

Bond did as he was told and entered the small atrium. According to the plaque, 1stKlass was on the second floor. Bond trod the stairs gently. They didn't squeak. The door was open to the reception room. It looked like it was always open. The room beyond was small and comfortable, leading off from it was a corridor lined with doors on the left and windows to the right. A bashful girl dressed in a variety of colours that matched her equally colourful hair sat behind the small desk. She looked nervously up at Bond as he stood in the doorway.

"Mr. Bond? Dee Dee will see you in a few minutes."

Bond thanked her and took a seat. There was a small coffee table with a pile of well-thumbed fashion magazines sitting on it. Bond took one and absently flicked through it. Every photograph was beautifully composed. Every hair and crease seemed to be carefully positioned. Every exposed part of skin designed to titillate. Every smile looked like agony.

Bond tossed the magazine disdainfully back on the pile, sat back and smiled ruefully at the multi-coloured girl, who had been shyly inspecting him from under her fringe. The edges of her mouth twitched.

"What's happening in the fashion world?" he asked.

"We don't really do fashion," she said nervously. "More glamour, you know."

"Is that so?" Bond pretended to be interested. "Anyone really famous ever come here? I expect it gets pretty exciting sometimes."

The girl blushed and almost tripped over her words with excitement that someone was taking an interest in her. "Sometimes. There was a lot of fuss the other week. It was very exciting."

"What happened then?"

"The paps were about cause that girl from *X-Factor* was here. it was mad."

"Yes. I'm sure. They can be quite a handful these paparazzi."

"You're telling me."

Bond leant forward, clasping his hands together. The girl was hardly out of her teens. "How long have you worked here?"

"Since I left fashion school. I'm just filling in, you know, till something better turns up."

"Well, I bet it does," stated Bond confidently. "I'm sure you're being wasted sitting behind that desk."

Bond's minor ego-massage worked wonders and the girl's face lit up. She beamed a smile at him. Bond continued chatting to her about nothing in particular, asking questions about her hopes and ambitions. He wasn't interested in the answers. He wanted to gain the girl's confidence. Eventually, almost haphazardly, he asked: "Isn't that model Gabriella on your books? She's very famous. It must be great to meet someone like her."

"She doesn't come here much. Thinks she's too important, you know."

At that moment a door opened down the corridor and a woman's voice called out to the girl. "Sandy, send this Mr Bond in, will you, babe. And bring us coffee. Twice. Decaff. Milk and sugar."

Despite the 'babe' the sentence wasn't said with any warmth. The voice cut to the girl's heart like an arrow. She almost jumped.

Bond stood up and gave the girl his most practised charming smile. "Sandy, I prefer my coffee black, without sugar, but with caffeine. Is that all right?"

She nodded enthusiastically.

Bond went down the corridor and entered Dee Dee's room. It was a plush office, but not one for an executive, merely functional. Dee Dee was a large woman who had seen better days. Her lips spoke of thousands of horrid kisses and her eyes stared out from painted lids. She was dressed in an expensive charcoal grey suit that would have been smart if it wasn't crumpled across her copious bosom and conspicuous belly. She looked harassed.

"Okay. Take a seat, Mr Bond."

Bond did as he was told.

"What did Harvey send you here for? He's a sly little bastard that one. You got some scoop you want to set up? Someone you need a girl for?"

"Not exactly. I'm trying to make contact with a woman called Paige Constantine," Bond paused to gauge any reaction. When he didn't get one he carried on. "I understand she calls herself Gabriella these days."

"What of it?"

Aggressive, thought Bond. Harvey was right to warn him of the agency. They wanted to keep secrets secret.

"It's a personal matter. I don't work for the papers. I'm an investigator. I'd rather the matter wasn't made public."

"An investigator?"

Now there was incredulity. Bond expected Dee Dee was probably wondering what 'matter' could possibly be investigated about her client that hadn't been already. Bond had recently done a good deal of research about Gabriella; the girl was more of a sinner than most fallen saints.

The receptionist brought their refreshments. They didn't say anything as she set down the tiny tray carrying two steaming cups of coffee. It was pleasantly good. After she left, Dee Dee leaned backwards on her chair and placed her hands on the arm rests of her chair.

"Mr Bond, I appreciate you coming to see me," she said, although her tone didn't suggest it, "Gabriella is a huge asset to 1stKlass. She's a great model. A great role model to young people. But she is a very private person. My job is to protect her from the scum that want to fuck her up – the bastards in the news, the fly-by-nights, the hangers-on, the gold-diggers. Without me, she'd probably have a breakdown. I keep most of the shit off her doorstep so she can keep doing what she's good at: being herself and having fun. If you have any information about my girl, I need to know about it. If you don't want to tell me, you can turn around and fuck off now."

Bond considered the ultimatum. He'd met many angry women, indeed he'd angered many in his time, but the fierceness of Dee Dee was deliberate. It was designed to frighten him, to put him off the scent. She was acting for her client's benefit. Bond's responsibility to Van Rennsburg involved privacy. While he trusted Harvey Blackford, he didn't trust this ranting self-righteous publicist at all.

"If I tell you, my client would be most disappointed in me."

"Then you'd better disappear, Mr Bond."

Bond stood up to leave, replacing his half-drunk coffee cup on the tray. "I knew her mother once," he sighed. "Pretty lady, Annabel. Very troubled. Much like her daughter."

He had reached the door to the office when Dee Dee told him to stop. "Okay. Come back."

She gestured back to the chair, but Bond chose to remain standing. "Go on," he said.

Dee Dee's tone was a little more conciliatory, but only a little. "Listen, Gabriella doesn't like to talk about her mother. She's closed off that part of her life. She doesn't want people to know. They think she's an orphan, don't forget. It's an elaborate ruse she's spent years concocting. Dumb really. One day they'll find out, sure, but it doesn't have to be yet. I don't think she wants any family complications right now. Paige Constantine isn't important to her. Gabriella is. And that's how I want it to stay. It's what she wants."

Bond looked at her made up, impassive, heavy face. It was as set in stone as Ramses. Bond didn't say anything. Dee Dee waited several seconds for a reply, but when it didn't come she shook her head. "I'm sorry," was all she said.

Bond exited the office and made sure he closed the door behind him. He strode down the corridor and into the office. The girl was all smiles when Bond appeared.

"That was beautiful coffee, Sandy. Thank you." He leant forward his hands on the desk, so his face came close to hers. "She's a bit of a dragon. Do you get lunch?" Sandy nodded and Bond continued: "I'm going to be honest, Sandy, I really want information."

"What sort of information?"

"The kind your boss doesn't want me to know. I can make it worth your while." Bond took out his business card, marked with the logo of Universal Exports, and dropped it into her hand, taking care to caress her fingers as he did so. Smiling, he straightened up, turned toward the door and offered her a cheeky wink. "I'll be waiting."

The girl called him at one-thirty and they met in the Starbuck's on the main road. She was very nervous and Bond played the potential suitor to perfection, promising everything and nothing. He felt a pang of remorse over using the girl, leading her on, but he preferred this method than the difficult conversation he would have with a member of the press corps. Sandy, and by all accounts a lot of the models as well, clearly didn't like working for Dee Dee. She paid well, but treated her staff, colleagues and even her clients as if they were servants; nothing ever happened fast enough or well enough. The worst for Sandy was the aggravating telephone calls she had to deal with when models were booked but failed to arrive. Dee Dee was always happy to make a deal, but wouldn't pick up the pieces. 1stKlass probably had the most unreliable portfolio of models in the business; sometimes Sandy wondered why anyone hired them at all. Bond offered the appropriate sympathy before leading onto his own list of requirements. The girl could get phone numbers, but they would be mobiles, and Dee Dee's mantra to the girls was never to answer an unsolicited call. Similarly most address records were false or out of date; she knew that because she often had to change them. If Bond really wanted to meet Gabriella, he'd be better off with her party schedule which the girl admitted wasn't a fool proof document, but was as good as most likely. Later that day Bond received an email, marked in pink with kisses, detailing the likely where a bouts of his quarry for the next three months.

Four evenings later, Bond found himself in Sirocco, a small London dance club. He'd already attempted to make telephone calls, but as predicted his calls went unanswered. There was no voicemail service. Next, he'd spent an evening chasing the elusive Gabriela around the bars of London and all he had to show for his efforts were several hefty bar bills and a fleeting glimpse of the girls' golden tresses as she dived into a waiting taxi. Tonight had to be different, so Bond was gate crashing the launch party for the new album by the girl group The Saturdays.

Bond was always surprised they still called these compact discs and downloads 'albums.' His own collection of vinyl originals by artists like Duke Ellington, Peggy Lee and Tony Bennett was small, but he considered them real albums. The records had a central theme, beautifully designed covers and informative sleeve notes. Of course, in time, Bond had switched to CDs, but the plastic containers with their silver discs and now, even worse, the anonymous memory chips disappointed him.

Almost as disappointing was the ease with which Bond slipped past the security, waving nothing more than an empty envelope onto which he had digitally printed the cover for the new album. His police services identification would probably have gained him entrance, but it would also have drawn attention to him. Bond didn't want that. There was already plenty of attention on Shaftsbury Avenue, as assorted free lancers jostled the pavement trying to get photographs of any likely star. Bond recognised nobody and assumed this was a bash for what was usually termed the "z-list" celebrity. Pedestrians had to cross the road to avoid the crush outside the club and three policemen were attempting to control the chaos as it spilled off the pavement into the busy street. Bond saw two bouncers and a concierge, who constantly referred to his clip board, cramped into a roped-off

square of space outside the front doors. Bond recognised disorganisation when he saw it and he seized the first opportunity that came his way, latching onto a clutch of excitable mini-skirted and long legged girls by opening the door to their white stretch limousine.

It was a skill of the best agents to blend in with a crowd, however large or small, to effectively disappear even when in open view. The girls had provided Bond with the perfect opening to do just that. They were only too happy for the attention of this handsome older stranger who wore his Ventuno suit a little loose and had foregone a tie for an open necked COS shirt. He had a pleasant manner and an enticing if slightly cruel smile. One of the girls reached up and brushed back into place the comma of hair that had drooped over his forehead. Then, as the girls struggled to extract tickets from their clutch bags, the stranger waltzed straight through the foyer, flashing his own invitation.

The nightclub was dark, illuminated by strategically placed neon lighting and huge plasma screens that showed videos unrelated to the music. The decor was equally stark, being either black or a creamy white, and the upholstery was similarly coloured and a mixture of leather, glass and wood. There was a ballroom sized dance floor, at the end of which was a bare performing stage and to one side was a sectioned off VIP bar, which included the DJ booth. There was a mezzanine level above. The disco music was obnoxiously loud and no-one was dancing. From the clothes people wore Bond guessed they were either press hacks or competition winners. He wasn't early, but there wasn't much atmosphere, other than the stench of cheap cologne and over perfumed hairspray. These days there was no waft of stale tobacco to mask the odour.

Bond headed for the bar, waited impatiently and eventually ordered a double scotch over ice. The exclusively young staff all wore white t-shirts emblazoned with the same logo as Bond's fake invite. There was a lot of champagne being bought and some guests were sloshing it back with indecent haste. This was too much for Bond, who wished for the shady elegance of Ronnie Scott's or Smolensky's. He patrolled the club several times, exchanging snippets of shouted conversation with a selection of non-entities, but he failed to spot Gabriella.

Close to midnight the music faded away and an MC announced the main attraction of the evening. To a chorus of cheers and a low rumble of applause, the Saturdays took to the stage. The five girls were all perfectly toned and scantily clad. The music was equally slick and slight. The show lasted twenty minutes and five songs. Bond's interest in modern music was minimal. The singing was energetic and provocative; the girls responded to the flashing cameras with smiles, pouts and waves; Bond thought they sang off key. There was nothing accidental in the performance, which was all thrusting hips and exposed thighs. Bond yearned for a little seemliness. He edged back through the dancing crowd to the bar and ordered another double scotch from the curly haired barman who had already served him three times. The boy was cocky and Bond didn't like him, but they recognised each other.

"Seen anyone famous tonight, pal?" Bond tried to sound relaxed and familiar. It wasn't easy given his unfamiliar surroundings.

"Yeah, mate, loads. Why? You the press?"

"Sort of. Internet gossip. Seen anything hot?"

A shrug. "The *Nuts* girls are in the VIP. And that Gabriella's here. She's mates with the band – apparently." It was said with heavy sarcasm. The barman clearly didn't believe it; Bond gave him top marks for cynicism.

“Really? I didn’t see her come in.”

“She’s in the balcony. Private. Got some bloke with her. Don’t know where she picks ‘em up from. Ugly fucker.”

“How private’s private?”

“What’s it worth, bruv?”

Bond opened his wallet and showed it stuffed full of notes. The boy looked around him, and then gestured to the end of the bar. Bond slipped under the partition and for £100 was swiftly escorted up the back stairway and into the upstairs bar. Thankful that almost all the guests were watching the raunchy climax of the show, Bond ducked under the counter and took up a position leaning on the bar. There was even less atmosphere in the mezzanine, more watching and less dancing. The clientele here was older, respectful, unexcited. Among the corporate suits, Bond ascertained, were the associates, family and friends of the band. He also spotted Peter Stringfellow, the flashy owner of a lap dancing club, accompanied by his young wife, who if Bond’s memory was correct, once worked as one of his strippers.

Bond walked slowly along the bar, scanning the silhouettes of the crowd. He realised why he hadn’t seen Gabriella enter the club. The billowy blonde locks had gone and were replaced by straight, almost jet black hair, an unnatural colour that was striking, glistening when the light struck it. It was the blood red rose on her left shoulder blade that identified her.

Gabriella was a tall girl and her high heeled shoes raised her to almost six feet, as well as appearing to extend her already long legs even further. She stood with her ankles crossed, pinching her buttocks together, and held her head high and her back straight. She wore the smallest black off-the-shoulder dress and Bond detected no outline of lingerie underneath the taut fabric. Her breasts were not large, but upright and proud, shaped to the lines of her slim figure. The thin material of the dress exaggerated the curves of her chest, waist and hips. Her face was half covered by the long hair. Bond thought her body would look very beautiful naked. The barman was right about her companion, a balding middle aged executive type, who displayed the signs of too much extravagance in his girth and his blotchy complexion.

The show came to an end amid much whooping and applause. Bond thought he may have to wait another hour or so before making physical contact with the girl such was the crush around her and her entourage, which included several more willowy models with unsuitable men, but his chance arose much quicker. The girl detached herself from the main group, returning to one of the booths where she rifled through a bundle of bags, emerging with her own purse. A tall, swarthy man, possibly an Eastern European, was following her. He was a stranger to Bond, but clearly not to Gabriella, who engaged him in conversation. Bond recognised the sly signals of illicit activity. Without removing his eyes from the scene, he began to make his way across the mezzanine floor. He was a few paces away when the man produced the little bag of white powder and the girl started to dig in her purse.

Bond half-stepped between them, flashing his identification past the girl’s face. He ignored the man completely. “I wouldn’t take that if I were you. I’m not working, but some of my colleagues are.”

The girl looked at him straight in the face. She was silent, weighing up the situation and Bond, who didn’t smile. “You don’t want to take the chance,” he said assertively and then, for emphasis: “Do you?”

The girl nodded to someone behind him, her eyes giving an unspoken message. Bond allowed himself a quick glance over his shoulder. The Eastern European man had vanished to be replaced by the hulking presence of a personal bodyguard. None too bright, considered Bond, a skinhead thug, who was too slow for his job.

"If you want a thank you," she said, "thank you."

Her voice was clipped, with a haughty tone to it that Bond recognised as the preserve of the rich and privately educated.

"I'd prefer to buy you a drink."

She peered at Bond, squinting a little in the half light. Bond couldn't tell if she was sizing him up or trying to focus drunken eyes; her breath smelt of coconut. Too much Malibu, no doubt, thought Bond. She looked around her and, seeing her escort preoccupied, gave a shrug of indifference.

Bond gently touched her elbow and guided her towards the bar. It was lighter here. The bright bulbs behind the bottle shelves cast a glow across their faces. She was an attractive girl, but not in a conventional way. Her cheekbones were too high and her face long, framed by conspicuous gold earrings. Her small pretty mouth sat above a chin that had a tiny dimple in it. Her lips were touched with just enough rouge, making them pout seductively as if waiting for a kiss. Her rounded nose had deep nostrils, the left one of which was pierced by a sapphire-tipped gold stud. She had painted her hand and toe nails the same deep azure. The blue matched the colour of her eyes, which she hid under lines of black mascara. Her skin had that false sun-kissed shade of manuka honey.

"What will you have?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Are we celebrating? Perhaps some champagne?" Bond waved over the barman. "Two glasses of Kristal. The '99." It was a shocking choice, but Bond had seen everyone else drinking it. When in Rome, he decided.

"You needn't be so extravagant."

"That's all right. I rather like champagne." Their drinks arrived swiftly. Bond handed her a glass and tipped his own towards her. "And I ought to be celebrating. It isn't often I rescue a beautiful woman."

"Who are you?" she asked. "Do I know you?"

"I don't think so. My name's James Bond."

"And what made you want to rescue this particular beautiful woman?"

"I thought I knew you. Perhaps I've seen you in the papers."

She emitted a polite chuckle rather than a laugh. "You needn't be so obvious, James Bond. Everyone knows me from the newspapers."

"That's true. But I'm not here because you're famous. I wanted to ask you about Paige Constantine. I understand that's you."

There was instant suspicion. The girl sipped her drink and glanced up at him again. The drunken look became steady. The eyes were sharp and when she raised them, her stare penetrated its way into Bond's own, unsettling his thoughts.

"I'm an old friend of your mothers..." he began. The eyes blazed and Bond realised too late his mistake.

"I don't have a mother!" she hissed. "I don't know what you are talking about!"

"I'm sorry. I must be mistaken. I thought..."

"Whatever you thought, you thought wrong. Who are you?"

Bond didn't have time to answer. The girl slammed her glass hard on the counter. The contents split across her hand and she flicked it contemptuously at Bond. Champagne fizzed across his face. For a second Bond saw desperation as well as fire in her eyes.

"You'd better stay away from me! You don't know anything about me. You don't want to."

She turned abruptly away and returned to her group of friends. The confrontation had caused a minor stir and Bond was the subject of a few curious glances. He ignored them, despite feeling rather foolish, and spent a minute or so finishing his drink, after which he waited for the girl to look his way. He knew she would; something about the passion in her eyes had told him so. He chose that moment to make a deliberate, obvious exit, and felt her fierce gaze follow him across the floor and through the exit.

Over the next few days, Bond decided to utilise Harvey Blackford's list of contacts. He didn't get any information from the effeminate hairdresser, who was clearly more than happy to see him in his salon, the Fitness First gym or an ex-neighbour, who mumbled something about loud music and parties. Bond looked again at Sandy's schedule. There was a movie premiere that night, a spy thriller starring the actor Daniel Craig. Bond would have to sidle past security again, and avoid the cameras, but it was worth a shot.

It was another sweltering evening in London. Bond didn't know the etiquette for premieres and arrived too early. Bored, he slipped into the Radisson Hotel, which dominated the south side of Leicester Square. He took a seat at the bar and ordered a Vodka Martini, insisting on very little Martini with the thinnest sliver of lemon peel. The bar was all leather upholstery and vast vases of white orchids. It had a certain garish contemporary elegance and was very busy. Despite the breeze of air conditioning, Bond began to feel uncomfortably warm. It was going to be another night of short dresses. The paparazzi would be out in force. Bond mulled over how to access the cinema unobserved; M would not be pleased if his face appeared in a newspaper.

Bond nursed his way down a second cocktail, before standing to leave. As he did so there was a flash of a camera bulb. Taken by surprise, Bond whirled around in time to see a skinhead bodyguard dealing aggressively with the opportunistic snapper. There was going to be quite a scene as the interloper was determined not to surrender his camera, a small but powerful pocket digital, the kind the worst of the paparazzi used to get intimate, close pictures of their prey. Bond recognised the bodyguard immediately and, behind him, sitting in a booth and half hidden by orchids, he spied the

head of jet black straight hair and the honey coloured face. Gabriella sat with the same balding executive Bond had seen before, watching the tussle with detached interest.

Bond inwardly kicked himself. So preoccupied had he been with his drink, he missed the guilt edged opportunity of contact with the girl. Bond strode purposefully forward and snatched at the photographer's wrist. The man cried out in pain as Bond took a vice like grip and the camera fell to the floor. The bodyguard swiftly picked it up. Bond wheeled the photographer away, ignoring his protests, shuffled him out of the bar and through to reception. At the front door he offered a gentle push to send the protesting man on his way. Bond had no time to argue.

"Just disappear," he said. "Be glad it's only your wrist."

When he returned to the bar the girl was making to leave. Behind her the bodyguard was crushing the camera under his foot. She wore a sheer skin tight red Lycra outfit of virtually nothing, cut to expose all the flesh it could without her being nude. Her legs were encased in matching knee high boots. The bald man was delicately holding Gabriella's hand, as if she was a precious flower. Bond felt certain she was more like the thorny rose tattooed on her shoulder.

She looked at Bond with the same hazy air she'd displayed at Sirocco. "Still rescuing girls, Mr Bond?"

"I seem to be making a habit of it."

"Stop it, then."

Bond stood aside for them to leave. The bodyguard acknowledged him with a nod. It was more thanks than Bond expected. He was more pleased the girl had remembered his name. She certainly hadn't been hostile. Clearly he had made an impression when they first met. Bond didn't feel he'd get anything extra from this evening, but perhaps all was not lost in his pursuit.

Bond waited a few moments and then followed them outside. He lit a cigarette, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs, calming his heightened pulse. He watched Gabriella striding towards the red carpet approach to the Odeon, where hundreds of fans were clamouring for photos or autographs. The bald man kept a discreet distance. Bond could see her already taking on a new persona, smiling broadly and waving. Her stride was confident. She laughed with the photographers, calling out the names of those whom she knew and teasing them. She posed theatrically, tossing her head and the long mane of black hair, thrusting her breasts and her backside. She looked like a mannequin come alive. It was a better performance than the one the Saturdays had given a few nights ago.

Bond turned back inside the hotel. A young female steward walked past with the remains of the camera in a dustpan. Bond stopped her and peered into the pan. There, amongst the debris, was the flash of copper he was looking for. He swiftly extracted the memory card, smiled and offered his thanks to the girl. Bond returned to the bar, where he ordered his third Martini of the night.

Later, Bond took a taxi across the river to the MI6 building. The security guard was surprised to see him off duty, especially dressed so smart, and commented that he could be auditioning for *Strictly Come Dancing*. The MI6 computers had the download facility he needed to view the images on the memory card. Bond sat at his desk, switched on his Dell desktop and inserted the memory chip using a chip reader. The program fizzed through the password encryption in seconds. It was a 100G chip and the photographer had collected photos on folders, each one labelled with a celebrities name. This paparazzi wasn't interested in anything but female celebs. Bond went quickly to the folder marked 'Gabriella.' There were subfolders, dated appropriately. He saw nothing particularly

untoward, except that for each batch of photos, there seemed to be a different man alongside the girl. The photos were dated from the start of the year. He switched the computer off, sat back and wished for some nicotine. Sub-consciously he ran his finger down the spine of a Morland cigarette. So many men. And, although Bond was not a celebrity spotter, while some were famous many, like the balding man, were unexceptional types. Who were they and why were they with the gorgeous Gabriella?

Bond studied the girl's schedule again. The appearances were neatly spread through the weeks and there was a brief two day gap every month. Bond nodded silently to himself. It was time for one of those insipid cups of MI6 coffee.

Bond telephoned Sandy, charm oozing in his greeting. She knew straight away who it was. Her voice sunk to a whisper. "Hi, James. How are you?"

Bond could almost feel her interest down the phone line. "I'm great. Listen, Sandy, I want to ask you something."

"Wait, James, one minute." Bond heard some rustling and movement. There were voices and laughter in the background. He could hear music and then the sound of a door squeaking open. "That's better."

"Where are you, Sandy?"

"In the pub toilets. I'm on date."

"Congratulations." Bond smiled to himself. Good girl, he thought, well done. He put on his most teasing tone. "Is he as good looking as me?"

She giggled. "Yes, but he's a bit younger. What do you want, James?"

"Tell me more about these phone calls, Sandy. Why are the girls so unreliable?"

There was a long pause.

"They're just really busy. I think. Dee Dee always has these little schemes going on. The girls don't always get to every appointment."

"What little schemes, Sandy?"

"You know, parties for rock stars, private photo shoots, videos, that sort of thing."

"That sort of thing," repeated Bond. "Come on, Sandy, you're not naive. You know what Dee Dee's getting up to. These girls are escorts, aren't they?"

Sandy was silent for a few seconds, then she spoke nervously. "I don't want to get in any trouble. 1stKlass pays me well. I have loans and stuff to pay off. I don't want to lose my job."

Bond waited a moment. "You'll be okay, Sandy. I'm not out to wreck Dee Dee's little empire. But take my advice. Get out of there, fast. It's not good for you."

He hung up, angry. What the hell was he going to tell Robert Van Rennsburg? He owed the old man some sort of explanation, but he wouldn't like these answers. He wanted to leave the whole sorry saga alone. This was more a job for the vice squad. Again he wondered what on earth he'd got himself talked into. He went home via the Claremont and had some of the stiffest whiskies he'd drunk for years while losing five hundred on the turn of a wheel.

By the morning Bond had softened. When he telephoned Van Rennsburg, he offered a guarded account of his findings so far, leaving most of the sordid stuff out, but including all the mundane facts. Bond stressed he didn't think the girl was particularly interested in meeting anyone associated with her mother. Van Rennsburg offered to come with him if it would help. Bond hastily declined the offer.

"Let me try again, Robert. I'll try to be more tactful."

Bond had earmarked one more possible opportunity to meet Gabriella, the winter show by the trendy fashion designers House of Holland. For the second year it was being held at Quaglino's and Bond was lucky enough to be on drinking terms with the maitre d'. Bond was pleased not have to dodge the assorted press outside the venue as he was ushered in through the kitchens. The music was as loud in here as it was in Sirocco. The fussily decorated tables had all been removed and replaced with a temporary foot-high catwalk stretching down the centre of the restaurant. The bright cream decor and the glass ceiling seemed remarkably subdued among the host of fashionistas filling the front rows. They included, Bond noted, Dee Dee, who looked like the lump she was amongst the slim stars. Of Gabriella there was no sign.

The show was predictably bizarre. House of Holland styled itself as so modern it hurt. But this year featured a series of retro designs, something that Bond seemed to feel suited the surroundings. Bond didn't care for fashion; it confused him. There were logo and slogan painted t-shirts, heavy army style trench coats, thigh high boots encased in fake animal skin, jumpers big enough for three people, stretch jeans without any buttons or flies and plastic raincoats. Bond lost interest almost as soon as the first of the beautiful models pouted at the bank of flashing bulbs. He was scanning the audience for a model of his own. Finally he saw her at the back of the restaurant. She was watching the parade from the cocktail bar, her face an impartial mask. There was a different man next to her. He was dark skinned, of African or West Indian abstraction. It took a few moments, but eventually Bond recognised him as the reality star he'd had the misfortune to meet at Calum's charity golf event. What was his name again? Bond mentally shook his head to decipher the memory. Clifton. Bond made his way around the temporary tier of seats towards the bar. The music was blaring ever louder here and Bond winced under the aural onslaught. The girl was dressed in hipster jeans and a silver satin halter top, a pleasant surprise to Bond considering what he'd seen before. She looked more like the pretty every day women he normally saw than a goodtime girl out to attract attention. He didn't wait for a reason to meet Gabriella, but chose to approach her boldly, giving his best, most conciliatory smile.

"Hello," Bond said easily. "Another surprise."

The girl took a glance in his direction, without ever appearing to take her eyes from the catwalk display before her. "I'm sure. Are you following me, Mr Bond?"

"Certainly not. I admit our paths do seem to cross. I'm not remotely interested in you personally. I'm working for someone else. You just need to let me explain."

"Why should I do that?"

Bond sensed some agitation from her companion. There would be another scene if he wasn't careful. Not for the first time he considered his training with the service lacked the skill of social subtlety. Briefly, he thought about how to phrase it, but the words simply tumbled out.

"There might be some money in it for you. If you want it."

She cocked her head towards him. She didn't say anything. The reality star looked across at Bond. He was a drinker, Bond knew that, he'd seen it at Deal, and he'd been on the sauce too much already tonight. Clifton was coherent, but slightly slurred in the drunkard's manner. "Why don't you piss off, dude? The bitch is mine tonight. You can't even afford her, you prick."

Bond felt his muscles tense. He was used to dealing with killers and assassins, whose words would wash across him. This was different. An insult from an upstart. He resisted the urge to deliver the lad a sharp cuff on the chin. There were too many people present, too many eyes, too many cameras. The time wasn't right, the object not worth the trouble. There was a shift in the girl's posture. She leant towards this Clifton-Creature, as if informing him where her interests lay; but her eyes swivelled towards Bond and betrayed her indifference.

The bodyguard's bulk arrived silently beside him. Bond cast him a glance. The edges of the skinhead's mouth formed a brief smile and Bond sensed the mutual respect. He'd seen how well Bond dealt with the photographer; he wouldn't want to fight. Instead the big man put his lips close to Bond's ear.

"Time for you to go, Mister." Bond opened his mouth to object, but the big man carried on, whispering: "Trust me."

Bond went with the bodyguard towards the exit and the big man continued to talk. "You're a good man. Resourceful. These assholes. I hate 'em. Go to the Washington Hotel, Curzon Street. Room 28. Teach this idiot some manners from me, okay?"

Bond didn't wait for a second invitation. The Washington was a smart, functional four star hotel not far from Quaglino's. It was the kind of establishment Bond always believed was used for assignments of this sort. He bought an *Evening Standard* and sat in the bar, which had a view of the hotel lobby. Bond had read the paper from front to back and drunk three strong Martinis before he heard a tell-tale click-clack of high heels and a loud drunken, baying laugh that he recognised from two weeks ago. He gave no more than a second's glance to confirm Gabriella's arrival. She seemed to be as drunk as Clifton, or possibly, Bond suspected, high.

Bond waited ten minutes. He paid in cash for a bottle of the hotel's cheapest sparkling wine and asked for it to be sent to Room 28 with an ice bucket. Bond took the elevator upstairs and waited for the steward. When he arrived he took the wine, slipping the man a ten pound note, and said simply: "It's a surprise."

Bond wrapped on the door. "Service!"

He heard a startled and annoyed male voice. It seemed to be having a conversation with itself. Bond wrapped again and ducked his head a little so he couldn't be seen through the spy hole. Clifton's voice came through the door: "We haven't ordered anything, man."

"From the management. For Miss Gabriella."

“Okaaaay. Tops, man. One moment, dude.”

Bond heard the lock being shifted. The door opened half way, revealing an almost naked Clifton, a bath towel wrapped around his waist. Bond caught sight of the clear signs of arousal under the fabric. Clifton didn’t recognise him. Good, thought Bond, and launched himself into the room, forcing the startled man backwards. Bond slammed the door shut behind him.

“What the fu – ”

Bond hit him flush on the jaw with a short right jab. Clifton cried out, staggering back and nearly tripping over a pile of discarded clothes. Bond tidily placed the ice bucket on the tableau desk. Clifton stumbled forward, choosing to launch a counter attack, but Bond evaded his haymaker and wheeled around, the bottle raised in his hand. Clifton put up an arm to protect himself, but the bottle smashed into a thousand pieces as it exploded over his shoulder. He closed his eyes to protect them from the fizz and the glass. In those few moments of blindness, Bond hit him again, a swift upper cut that cracked the jaw and knocked out a gold front tooth. Blood spurted out of Clifton’s mouth and he fell to the floor, emitting another yelp of alarm. Bond didn’t care. His blood was up. He ruthlessly kicked out twice at the torso beneath him and it wailed once, then groaned in stifled agony.

“Stay there, you bastard.” Bond, pumped up with the fight, turned to the king size bed, expecting to argue with Gabriella. But the girl, as beautiful in her nakedness as Bond had imagined, sat still and dumb, cross legged. Her bottom lip trembled and her body started to shake.

“Mum...”

Bond stopped. The girl seemed to be in some sort of trance. Booze? Drugs? Epilepsy? A kinky thing, like tantric sex? He passed his hand in front of her face and then touched her shoulder. Gabriella jumped and screamed. Her voice sounded like that of a child.

“Mum! No! Mum! Stop it! Stop it!”

She cried huge tears that ran down her cheeks like rivers, into her open mouth. Bond took hold of her shoulders and shook her, but the shouting continued. He slapped her, once, very hard across the face. The girl fell sideways, corkscrewing onto the bed. Her body continued to be wracked with huge sobs, but she stopped screaming.

Bond ignored the man, who was crawling across the floor towards the bathroom, and looked around the floor for the girl’s things. Her hand bag was open on the desk, packets of unused contraceptives on the top. He put her tiny strapless shoes in it. There was a discarded bathrobe over the back of one of the chairs. Bond wrapped the girl in it, slipping her arms into the sleeves and pulling the cord tight. She didn’t resist.

“Can you walk?” he asked, urgently. She barely nodded. Bond collected her clothes. He heaved her to her feet and walked her to the door. Bond cast a final threatening look at the frightened huddle that was Clifton, then took the girl out of the room and to the elevator. It wasn’t the simplest of journeys through the lobby, but Bond got through it on energy and authority. The concierge got him a taxi in extra quick time.

Bond had nowhere to take her except his flat. By the time the black cab pulled up outside his residence on the little square just off the King’s Road, the girl was fast asleep. He carried her up the

stairs in his arms, her head lolling against his shoulder, and prayed none of his neighbours, who were an awfully nosey lot, had seen them. Bond put her in his bed, removing the robe and tacitly admiring her naked body, before tucking her in under the single sheet. He telephoned the night watchman at the office. He wouldn't be coming to work tomorrow; a slight chill. As he did every night before he retiring, Bond took a quick look through the front window of his flat. Across the road Bond saw an unfamiliar silver Mercedes R-Class. A large figure was hunched awkwardly in the driver's seat. It looked like there would be two men having an uncomfortable night's sleep.

Bond woke up stiff from his sleep on the sofa. He showered, put on a fresh shirt and a pair of day old jeans. The Mercedes was still there. He went outside and approached the vehicle. Inside it sat the familiar bulk of the girl's body guard. He was already awake. The electric window smoothly descended as Bond approached.

"You're more loyal than I expected," said Bond. "Gabriella's fine. But she won't need your services today. Maybe not for some time."

The man nodded. He said, almost with regret: "Take care of her, sir. I couldn't." The window slid back up and the man drove away without a second look.

The girl didn't rouse until almost eleven. Bond heard her footfalls as she padded into the bathroom. He'd left a clean towel for her. Bond made a fresh coffee and waited for her in the kitchen. When she appeared she still wore the bathrobe, pulled tight around her, but nothing else, not even any make up. Bond thought she looked fresh and revitalised, although her body language was wary. He gestured to the seat opposite him and poured her some coffee. He pushed the milk jug and sugar bowl towards her.

After a long silence, she daintily she sipped the steaming brew. "Am I supposed to thank you?"

"That depends if I deserve to be thanked. I'm not entirely sure what I've done."

"Lost me some good money."

"No doubt." Bond paused, searching for words. "You had quite a turn last night."

"Did I? I don't really remember. How did I get here, James? It is James isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. But what do I call you? Gabrielle or Paige? Or is it Laura?"

"Or Susan. Sometimes even I don't know who I am."

"You do seem to have some troubles."

"I went to a doctor once. A specialist. He said I have multiple personalities."

She surprised Bond by admitting to her problem so easily. Multiple Personality Disorder was a rare psychological condition, an acute sickness, often, but not always, caused by childhood trauma. The major symptom is a person's ability to dissociate themselves from events, allowing alternate personas to materialise. Bond had probably witnessed such an event at the hotel. Gabriella may not have been the worst of sufferers, but M.P.D. would explain her erratic behaviour. Bond also wondered about her mother's behaviour. He'd read it could be genetic.

"Is that the reason for all the drink and drugs?" ventured Bond. "I read some of the stories about you in the papers. Are you trying to suppress it?"

Her face fell and she sunk her head into her shoulders. It was a resigned posture. Defeated, she grimaced in confusion. "Maybe. Yes. Probably. I don't know."

"Why were you calling for you mother last night?"

"I don't even know who my mother was. She died so long ago. I was a little girl." She looked at Bond with those sapphire eyes, wet with the onslaught of more tears.

"But you do remember something about her," said Bond. "You were calling for her, telling her to stop."

The tears started to come. "Please, I don't want to talk about it."

"But you have to talk to somebody, Gabriella, or you'll drive yourself mad."

"Aren't I already mad, James?" she asked desperately.

"I don't think you're mad," reassured Bond, "but you need professional help. And maybe a little time away from 1stKlass. And the camera lens. Time for yourself."

"But that's my life. That's who I am. It's who I've decided to be."

"I don't believe that," Bond said harshly. "I think you're lying to yourself. You're hiding the truth. You don't really care what happens to you or what happened to your mother."

"Stop it." Her reply was quiet, shallow, afraid.

"Why, Gabriella? Why should I stop asking questions about Paige and Laura and your mother?" He leaned over the table, for effect, palms down, his face close to hers. He continued urgently: "There was a little girl crying last night and I want to know about her. Why was Paige calling for her mother?"

The girl sat back, scared. She wiped her wet cheeks with the sleeve of the bath robe. After another long pause, she took a deep breath and slowly started to talk.

"I was asleep upstairs in the little house by the river. And that bearded man came around, an older man. I knew it was him because they always shouted when he was there. He was something to do with Mum, a friend, a lover maybe. He always wanted to see me, but Mum wouldn't let him. Twice he tried to take me away and they fought and I screamed so hard until Mum got me back. I was always frightened. This time they shouted so much and I was so scared for Mum. I hid at the top of the stairs where I could see. I didn't want anything to happen to her."

The girl paused and Bond nodded encouragement. He handed her a clean tissue from his jeans pocket and she blew her nose, all the time looking at him. Her face began to take on its customary, vacant stare.

"She tried to make him leave, but they had another fight. She was trying to hit him with a bottle but he took it from her and then he hit her." Suddenly she cried out, her voice changing to the tone Bond had heard last night, high and child-like: "Mummy..."

Bond reached forward and clasped Gabriella's hand. "Go on."

"She'd hit her head. She was so still. I wanted to see her. So I came down the stairs. The man looked at me. He looked like a ghost. So pale. So shocked. I didn't say anything, but he said Mummy would be all right and I was to go to bed. I wouldn't go and he had to carry me upstairs, but I struggled and struggled. I was really scared for Mummy, but he shut the door and I couldn't reach the handle. I cried and cried and cried, but nobody heard me. And all the time it was getting hotter and hotter. And then there was smoke. And I was crying and coughing. I couldn't understand why Mummy wasn't there. It was all so dark. And then I was safe. In a room. A big white room with strangers in it. And cuddly toys. And flowers. And nurses telling me what a beautiful little girl I was. No one told me about Mummy and I didn't know where she was. I tried to ask about the man, but no one wanted to listen to me. I really tried. I really did."

"And you stopped trying?"

"Mummy didn't come back. No one was interested in me. I was sent to a horrible school. It was torture. I didn't want to be Paige any longer. She died in that fire."

The girl collapsed forward sobbing. The effort seemed to have exhausted her. Bond reached out a hand and soothed the girl's hair while her head and body shook with the sorrow and fear of a wretched memory.

After a long time, she calmed down enough for Bond to leave her alone. He made a call to Sir James Moloney. He was an old friend of Bond's, a semi-retired psychotherapist. The service used him to help recuperate shell shocked and doped agents. Bond had visited him often, for reassurance more than anything else. Sir James listened to Bond's brief story and, although it wasn't procedure, he said he'd find a room for her at the clinic. Bond trusted Sir James. There was no need to tell him this was a strictly private matter.

Bond took the girl down to The Park himself. Sir James was friendly and reassuring, offering tea and sandwiches in his big comfortable sitting room. He kindly asked Gabriella to repeat the story she had told that morning and the girl did so quietly, with none of the melodrama Bond had endured. With Sir James prompting, she revealed a little more, describing how Laura had helped her through a spate of bullying at school and how Katie allowed her to enjoy sex. Gabriella had started life at the beginning of her modelling career when she needed someone else to strip naked. After almost an hour, and sensing the strain was beginning to tell on the girl, Sir James stood up and ordered fresh tea and cakes.

Gabriella's case was not extraordinary, he concluded, and he could certainly help her. Multiple Personality Disorder was still a controversial subject, being a recent, culture-specific syndrome. Many experts considered it an extreme form of post-traumatic stress. The vast majority of sufferers are female, possibly affected by sustained child abuse. The distinctive feature of M.P.D. was the emergence of alternate personalities, each one dissociated from the others and past events, and Gabriella certainly suffered from this. Her personalities were distinct individuals, with their own histories and habits, all unrelated to her true personality. Any stressful or traumatic experience triggers the re-emergence of the dissociated parts of her mind.

"This is quite normal," Sir James said, "but most curiously, my dear, you also seem to be living whole periods of your life as these 'alternates'. That is not so normal."

Bond was sitting next to the girl on a beaten up leather sofa. She looked more normal and more beautiful than he had ever seen her. The pretensions of glamour had gone and she sat simply, delicately, and prudently at ease, her long legs tucked underneath her. She listened intently to Sir James as he explained the long procedure ahead, how they will unravel her 'alternates', treating each one until they could be consolidated into a new integrated personality. She would be well looked after and safe at The Park. The secluded Georgian mansion was so secret, the girl wouldn't be disturbed here by any of the press or her associates, but it would be a long hard struggle. The girl seemed to recognise this and looked forlornly at Bond as he left her in Sir James' care. This was the best place for her right now, he knew that, and it wouldn't do to have him hanging around. Bond promised he would come back to see her and he meant it, but now there were other things on his mind.

Initially, he telephoned 1stKlass and was surprised to find it was Dee Dee who answered the phone. Sandy apparently had heeded his advice.

"What do you want now, Mr Bond?" Dee Dee said brusquely.

"I just wanted to tell you that Gabriella is taking a holiday." Bond got an earful of abuse. "No," he said, "I can't tell you where she is or when she will be back. It won't be any time soon. Goodbye."

Finally Bond drove down to Tunbridge Wells. It was another beautiful summer's day, much like the one Bond had enjoyed when he had first embarked on this saga. He cast his mind back to that fateful round of golf and how relaxed and at ease the celebrities had been. Bond wondered how many, like Clifton and Van Rennsburg, had secrets they kept hidden from the prying eyes of the press. Now celebrities were not how Bond remembered them. He recalled again that halcyon day of golf between Watson and Nicklaus and thought how unspoilt it was. There was no sully of reputations then. The public didn't clamour for scandal, while journalists and photographers didn't always provide it. The public seemed to own the rich and famous now; everything was in their interest. Nothing, it appeared, was in the interest of those under the camera's scrutiny.

Satchel answered the door to the lodge with a broad toothy grin, but it was wiped clean by Bond's stern expression. Van Rennsburg was in the conservatory, lighting a thin Puerto Rican cigar. Bond smelt the richness of vanilla amongst the tobacco. He sat down and declined a drink or a cigar. Van Rennsburg was looking older than when Bond had last seen him. His face was sunken, hollow, his beard unkempt. His chest heaved up and down with each breath, a procedure that seemed to be agonising for the old man.

"James, how are you? I hope you have some good news for me."

Bond thought about the evening he'd spent in this man's company, the stories they had shared and the offer that had been made. Bond should never have got involved. He looked at the dying face in front of him. How much longer did he have to live? Perhaps only a few weeks. The experts had told him he wouldn't see out Christmas. Was it guilt that had driven him to look for the girl? Did he want to admit to a killing? Perhaps he couldn't hide it any more. Bond didn't want to know. This wasn't only about Van Rennsburg anymore, it was about Paige Constantine or the woman she chose to become, the famous Gabriella who lived her life for the camera lens.

"I'm afraid I don't, Mr Rennsburg," Bond said abruptly, forcing any emotion out of his voice. "I found the girl, yes. I met her three times. But she doesn't want anything to do with you."

Van Rennsburg had noted the formal tone of address. He nodded a little and sucked on his cigar. He gave a gentle "Aah" but made no other comment.

"I hope everything goes well for you," continued Bond. "I understand this is a hard time for you, Mr Rennsburg, but I can't help you anymore." He stood up to leave, but pointedly did not extend his hand in farewell.

Van Rennsburg looked up at him, the eyes flickered once. Bond thought there was a brief moment of recognition, similar to the one he'd seen on the golf course. "Did she say anything about me, James?"

"Yes," Bond lied. "She said you can go to hell."

Four:

September:

A Season of Sorrow

When James Bond reached the little terraced house he was relieved to find she hadn't called the police. It was spitting with rain and he pulled his charcoal coloured over coat tight to protect his new Maurice Sedgewell suit. She'd called him a little before lunch in tears. As she talked her voice became a shrill cry and Bond told her to stay calm. He was sharp and short, authoritative. He got her to describe exactly what she had found. Anita was suddenly very lucid. She was a good girl. Bond knew it. He told her not to do anything, not to touch anything until he got there; he would be with her within the hour.

Bond didn't tell his bosses where he was going that lunchtime. He quietly slipped out of the old grey building opposite Regent's Park and strolled to Albany Road, where he parked his navy blue Triumph TR6. The six cylinder engine roared into life and he made the trip through central London and across the South Circular in less than half an hour.

The house was on a run-down street off the Addiscombe Road. Once trams had run this route and it had been considered a place for the middle classes, but they had moved out of suburbia altogether, preferring the leafy towns of the Home Counties. Now the gardens were full of garbage and overflowing black bags. The bin men were on strike again and there were piles of stinking rubbish everywhere. Another mess for Mrs Thatcher to sort out. Most of the houses were unkempt, the paintwork peeling and the curtains, if there were any, tatty and faded.

He knocked gently on the door. The girl answered it, composed, but red eyed. He held her gently and kissed her forehead, reassuring her. He took her through into the sitting room with its two functional arm chairs and a cheap coffee table. A cheap portable television was on, showing a children's programme about a bear called Paddington.

"It's been on all night," she said.

Bond nodded. The room smelt of tobacco smoke. The wallpaper was stained brown. The front windows had condensation running down them. The net curtains draped in the pools of water and were damp and mouldy at the base. There was a three bar electric fire, but Bond didn't turn it on. He got the girl to sit down and took hold of her shoulders.

She looked expectantly up at him, as if he was going to have a solution. Bond knew he didn't have one. She knew it too.

"You need a cup of tea," he said.

The good old British cup of tea. Never fails, he thought. Bond went into the back rooms, where there was a spartan, unfurnished lounge and a tiny kitchen. He put on his gloves and boiled the kettle on the gas hob, using his lighter to ignite the flame. Bond didn't drink tea and he didn't make a good cup. He made it strong, was thankful there was day old milk in the larder, and put in two spoonful's of sugar.

Bond gave the girl the steaming brew and squatted before her. Gently he stroked her arm. "Where is he, Anita?"

She started to weep again. "Upstairs. In the bathroom. Oh, God, James..."

Bond gave her his pocket handkerchief. "I'll go and have a look." He paused at the door. "Anita, you didn't touch anything, did you?"

She shook her head, but Bond wanted confirmation. "Nothing at all?" Again she shook her pretty head.

Bond went up the uncarpeted stairs. The bathroom was in front of him, its door slightly ajar. When he pushed it he found something stopped his entry. Peering around inside the doorway, Bond could see the body collapsed on the floor. Bond squeezed his way into the room.

The Russian's bulk covered all the floor space and he was lying in a confused tangle of limbs, his head cocked at a peculiar angle. His wrists were slashed and blood still oozed gently from them. His clothes were soaked. The wash basin was full of what was once water, but was now a crimson gruesome cocktail. The razor blade the Russian had used to kill himself was still sitting in the soap dish.

Bond realised he had trodden in the blood that spilled over the floor. He looked for a towel. None of them were clean, but he took one, and tossed it outside onto the landing. Quickly Bond searched the dead man's trouser pockets, but only found a blood stained handkerchief. There wasn't anything he could do here.

Bond went back outside, carefully treading only on the towel. He wiped his shoes and then kicked the bloodied rag back inside the bathroom. The backroom was empty, save a few unpacked boxes. Bond peered inside them, but he couldn't see anything of any interest. Mostly they seemed to contain a collection of books and clothes. Bond took a quick look out of the upstairs window. The rear garden was a muddy pitch.

The front room contained the bed, a double with a slim mattress and grubby sheets. The blankets were pulled back. The floor didn't have carpet, but a patterned rug, homemade by the look of the design; it lay next to the bed and a pair of holey slippers sat on it. There was a desk in the room, littered with various nick-nacks. The unconnected assortment included a comb, a bottle of cologne, a packet of Silk Cut cigarettes, an unemptied ashtray, a half empty litre bottle of vodka, a glass, more books, an alarm clock, pens, sheaves of paper, a copy of *Playboy* and a heavy hard back version of *Das Kapital*. Bond smiled at the irony of it. He opened the front cover. It was borrowed from Croydon library. It was overdue.

Bond turned to the scrunched up papers. They were covered in tiny writing. Bond recognised the Cyrillic alphabet. Some of the pages would be hard to decipher as they were tear stained. Bond carefully picked up the pages of writing and folded them into half. He placed them in his over coat pocket, the deep one inside the lining.

Bond went back downstairs. The girl was sitting, tense. She looked up at him with that same expectant expression, as if she thought Bond could solve the problem. He shook his head.

"This is bad, Anita," he announced. "I'll have to call in the firm. I warned you not to come here."

"It isn't fair, James. Why did I have to leave him?"

"It was orders, Anita. That's what we get paid to do."

She swore. An unladylike choice of words, thought Bond. And then she swore at him, calling him several names, claiming it was all his fault, that he didn't have to do everything the bastards told him. Bond didn't flinch.

There wasn't a telephone in the house, so Bond went out to his car and opened the glove compartment, where he kept an emergency two way radio. He called in to the main desk and gave the day's pass word. In a minute he was speaking to the Chief of Staff and explaining, in a series of codes, what he'd found. He was advised to get out of there fast. They would call the emergency services anonymously, but it wouldn't do to have Bond and the girl there when the police arrived. Bond understood and went straight back indoors.

"Come on, Anita, I'm taking you home. We can't stay here."

She nodded. She understood. Bond asked again if she had touched anything. She shook her head, holding up the mug of tea in one hand and a pair of ladies gloves in the other. Bond gave a little smile. Even now, despite her disposition, she was still professional. But he wondered for how much longer.

They left the house, the girl taking the mug with her. Bond drove them fast through the traffic to the girl's house share in Hanworth, near the airport. He stayed with her, consoling her and talking to her as she shared some of her memories of the Russian. There were a lot of tears and a lot of shouting. Towards the evening, Bond boiled some potatoes and they ate them mashed, with a tin of pilchards and thick slices of bread.

Later on, when the girl had stopped crying, she played with Bond's hair and kissed him, apologised and thanked him. They made love, but it was a sorrowful affair, born out of desperation on her part and ambivalence on Bond's.

When Bond left her it was almost midnight. She was sleeping soundly. Back in his own flat, just off the King's Road, Bond looked at the pages of writing he'd taken from the Russian's house. Bond didn't understand Cyrillic, but he would be interested to find out what the translators made of them.

Bond got the papers down to the translator's department himself, wanting to keep their existence secret. He approached a bored looking clerk and sat down in front of his desk. Bond wasn't about to pull any kind of rank; he was still only a Special Operative after all. But he made it quite clear he didn't want anyone to know about the papers.

The man fiddled with his pencil. "What's in it for me, chum?"

"What do you want? I can slip you a few if that's what you'd like."

He sniffed. "Get me two stall seats at Covent Garden. Domingo's doing Traviata next month. My wife's a big fan."

"Christ, that'll set me back."

The man shrugged and handed back the papers. "I heard you can afford it out of your winnings from the Claremont."

Bond shook his head ruefully. "Okay, okay, I'll get the tickets."

"It'll be done by tomorrow. I'll take it home. Just get me the tickets, chum."

Bond had to wait three days to get the translated copies. It took him that long to find the opera tickets; they were like gold dust. The copies arrived in the internal post the same afternoon. Bond didn't have an office of his own. He shared with five other operatives, all of whom were hoping to achieve the elite status of a double 'O' number, the Holy Grail of British espionage. Most of them had seen active service in the military or the armed divisions of the police and their qualities had been identified by observers who forwarded their recommendations to the Secret Intelligence Service. Bond hid the papers from any prying eyes.

Some of the boys tried to tempt him out for a drink, but he said he wanted to do some gemming up on Russian firearms, so they left him alone. It was six o'clock in the evening when Bond sat back in his chair, lit one of his Morland's and took a swig from a flask of Danty XO he kept in the bottom drawer of his desk. He took out the slim file of papers and turned to page one of the translations. He started to read:

"My name is Nikolay Volkov. I have been betrayed. Betrayed by Great Britain, this heartless, bleak country I find myself in. Betrayed by the secret services. Betrayed by the woman I love. But, worst, I have betrayed my own fatherland, my own people and my own family, my wife and my beautiful children. Before my life ends, I have to tell you why.

"I was born on a hot summer's day in late July 1938, such a hot day that my mother fainted from exhaustion. We lived in Novosibirsk, the biggest city in Siberia, a town that owes its existence to the Trans-Siberian railway. My grandfather helped to build it and was later given a post at Glavny Station. We lived with him in a two bedroom flat close to the railway line and the trains used to rattle past every minute of every day. We were Jews, but we didn't practice. I never saw my father go to the synagogue. Mother never encouraged me to go. It wasn't like that in Soviet Russia.

"My father was already in the Red Army, a corporal, and before I was one year old he was fighting the Finns, far to the West. I only saw him for a few short months, before he was called back to fight the Great Patriotic War. He was a tall, strong man, with happy eyes and he would tell me folk tales as I lay in my bunk. When he came back five years later he looked old and tired and his eyes didn't shine. He never spoke about the war; just occasionally he would mention some horror or a moment of peace among the fury. He was a broken man and after providing me with three little sisters, he suffered a heart attack and was invalided. Mother tended to his needs and raised us all and still worked in the upholstery factory. Grandfather used to try and help in the house, but he was so very old he was more of a hindrance. I think it was a relief to Mother when they both the men died.

"I didn't warm to my mother. She was a peasant woman, hardworking and unfussy. She wasn't any great beauty; her hands were like big chunks of meat. Yet there was a delicacy to her which allowed her to stitch and sew and embroider. I think that was her only escape. The only time she could be herself. She understood the need for education and after the war I was sent to the Staliniski School. I was two years behind the others, but I wanted to learn and I learnt fast. For a time, because of my size, the teachers wanted to add me to the ranks of athletes, a wrestler or boxer, but I resisted, a foolish thing to do, insisting I had a brain as well as brawn. They only believed me when they saw my test results.

"The city was growing faster now and at sixteen I joined the workers on the building sites constructing big new blocks of housing for all the comrades who poured into the city. It was a clever choice as my family was allowed to be rehoused into one of the new flats. I think it was the last time I saw my mother smile. Of course, you had to join the Party and I became a komsomol. I saw all the possibilities. It was a good opportunity and I took to it with some zeal. I enjoyed those early formative years. But I was restless. I still wanted to learn and I wanted to move away from the stinking city with its million inhabitants segregated by the criss-crossing railway lines.

"Of course I had to do my three years of National Service. The Siberian Military Division was based outside Novosibirsk, so my initial training was very local. Later I was posted as a Platoon Captain with the 73rd Khakassia Rifle Division and I completed my formal education in the army. There was a lot of informal education too and I learnt to drink, smoke, fight and womanise in the army. We were based outside the old fortress city of Tyumen. The nights in the beautiful old town, its picturesque buildings and its stylish bars felt a million miles away from my Novosibirsk.

"Things were changing now. Stalin, Our Great Father, had died and the horrors of his reign became apparent. They sent so many to the Gulags, the camps, the prisons and the execution chambers. Perhaps twenty five million. As a child I never knew. People, whole families, would just disappear. And that is what everyone told us. They just disappeared. You didn't talk about it.

"I saw in Khrushchev the chance for change and I wanted to be part of it. I thought I could change things too. So, when I left the army, I began working in local government, as a treasurer, allocating the Party Funds. It was a good job. People looked up to me, despite my young age. Even then I started to notice that there was fear in their faces.

"At twenty two I was sent to officiate the Akademgorodok, a huge purpose built facility for scientists, where they lived and worked, never far from the institute. Nestled in the taiga forest and stretching along the banks of the Ob Sea, the Academy was the most peaceful of places. At last I began to see nature. I talked to the professors there. I began to learn of art and writing and music. The professors were not very discreet and frequently talked of Western scholars. An unspeakable thing in my Soviet Union! But, fascinated, I would let them talk.

"I married in 1962. Not for love. Yelena was a pretty girl, from a nice family. One warm evening we lay down together and she became pregnant. We both knew we should marry. She was only sixteen. Four weeks later it was done, at the local ZAG office. Her father got very drunk. I fought her brother and beat him. A typical Russian wedding. We have five children now. Yelena is a good mother. But I do not love her. If I ever did love her it was in that first year of wedded bliss, making a home for ourselves and our son Gregory, who we named after my father.

"I was restless within a year. It had been the coldest of cold winters. Minus thirty and snow so deep you couldn't see over it. Our little boy suffered terribly and we sat his crib next to the stove all the days and nights. I couldn't stay in this place. The Academy was worse than the city during the winters. I went back to the party officials. Was there anything I could do? Something suitable for my talents, I asked. Again and again I asked. Then someone said they knew of a man, an official in the Ukraine who, having discussed my talents, wanted to see me. I made the six day journey West through Omsk and Ufa and then further South to Samara and a stop in the new Volgograd. I had never seen such progress. Everywhere buildings were being erected, streets paved, factories and shipping warehouses teemed with life. And to think only fifteen years before this city had been razed. At last I saw the Soviet miracle. It made me proud to be a citizen and comrade. I was humbled by the Pantheon and overcome by the sight of Mother Russia wielding her sword. When I finally arrived in Donetsk, I was full of patriotic zeal, something which had never inhabited me before.

“Sergei Yaroslav was in charge of economic reform in the territory and he wanted a strong right hand, someone to manage the administrators, accountants and auditors. Of course, I accepted. This was a magnificent opportunity, especially for someone so young and without university certificates. Poor Yelena was not happy. She didn’t want to join me; her home was the low hills of the Ob Valley, she said, why would she want to live with the grain farmers of the Ukraine? In the end I didn’t give her a choice. If we had any love left, it vanished soon after.

“We settled into a three room apartment that hardly did justice to my position. But it was in a managed block, quiet and we had special privileges. I never returned to Novosibirsk. I never saw my sisters again. My mother died some years ago, but she was lost to me before then.

“If I had known what Yaroslav required of me I would never have taken the post. Khrushchev had tried to change things, to launch reforms and decentralise the economy. But you couldn’t break the one party state, the authoritarian rule, the central plans and the perverse social control. We didn’t have widespread purges anymore, but people still feared the unexpected knock on the door and any demonstration of dissent was ruthlessly put down. I discovered that this was the role Secretary Yaroslav envisaged for me. Unfortunately I could not turn the post down. If I had refused it now I would lose much face. I had also passed on the apartment at the Academy. Yelena and I would have been destitute. So, reluctantly, I went to work.

“I found myself looking at paperwork for clues of misdemeanours and corruption. I read reports from informers at factories and in the collectives. I contacted the secret police. It was not pleasant work, but as I never had to carry out the orders I provided, I tried not to dwell on the consequences. The Comrade’s Courts were closed and we suppressed the publication of samizdat. No newsletters, no books, no literature at all, unless it was approved by the Party.

“The worst of the story is how the Party machine itself was breaking. Even in the days after Khrushchev, when they re-instated social and political control, it was a corrupt and self-serving government. Nationally and internationally we appeared powerful, regulated and infallible. But lower down the ladder of officialdom, we became rotten, a mire of bribery, lies, slander and entrapment. And I was playing my part.

“You can’t do this kind of work and not be noticed. I hoped to be promoted. Yaroslav had got drunk one time too many and was run over by a tram right outside the house of his mistress. A very messy affair that I had to clear up with the minimum of fuss. When the committee over looked me for Yaroslav’s position, I searched for another way out.

“In 1967 Yuri Andropov became the head of the KGB. I was exactly the sort of comrade he needed to help form the Fifth Directorate. We were charged with suppressing all dissent – political, nationalist, cultural and religious. We effectively nullified opposition at home and abroad quickly and efficiently. But it wasn’t blind repression. We received accurate reports from the territories, the Soviet bloc and from our embassy staff and international sympathisers. We anticipated the cracks in Poland long before the West saw their public manifestations. We didn’t trust Brezhnev and his cohorts, many of whom, like his daughter Galina, we knew to be pilfering millions of roubles. We turned a blind eye until they ceased to serve any useful purpose.

“Andropov was better informed than the President about the Western powers. He approved of Kosygin’s ideas to forge ties with the West, at least to obtain their technology: it was Andropov who supported the Apollo-Soyuz space mission in 1975. He recognised our military machine was becoming a burden on the economy. It cost millions to continue our nuclear defence program while

the quality of our armed forces was still open to question. Ten years later in Afghanistan his fears were proved correct.

“We had entered the period of detente. Life was good for me and Yelena. Good, but not happy. We had moved to Kiev, to a big apartment on Sofiivska and had a dacha on the Black Sea coast in the Crimea, with all the other party leaders. The conditions of detente were supposed to help us spread the ethics of communism. But we started to look inwards instead. Outside we only saw a strong, imperialist West.

“I made my first trip outside of the USSR in 1973, to Finland, for the European Security Conference. Not, you understand to negotiate, but rather to observe, to spy on our own representatives. Andropov was terrified someone would defect. Several people did as a result of that conference – but not immediately. For myself, I was intrigued. Life in the Soviet Union was always a struggle. We were comfortable and the children were educated well. But everyone wore the same drab clothes. We all cut our hair the same way. We listened to the same music. We read the same books. It was stifling. And I was guaranteeing this oppressive atmosphere continued.

“I was promoted in 1977: another new apartment and the title First Commissar, Ukraine Authority, 5th Directorate of the Committee for State Security. Yelena gave birth to our last child, my fourth daughter. Personal relations between us ceased soon after and, like others in my position, I sought the services of the secretaries, the impressionable young things and the prostitutes, especially at weekends in the Crimea, which became my home from home.

“But I wasn’t satisfied. I had a better life than most of my countrymen, but I was hollow inside. I wasn’t fulfilled. Banishing political riff-raff didn’t thrill me. I wasn’t excited by reform. It was my son, Gregory, who changed it all for me. A keen teenage sportsman, he had narrowly failed to join Dynamo as an apprentice. Disgruntled he asked if I could exile the coach. It was said in jest and he was happy to begin a career as a physical education teacher. A year or so later I met Oleg Ochenko, the head of football development in the Ukraine. Dynamo Kiev were the Champions of Russia and as such had gained entry to the European club competitions. Ochenko approached me, worried about the potential loss of his star players. Not just as defectors, but as genuine purchases for overseas clubs. I told him of my sons joke and after some consideration, Ochenko offered me a deal. My son could join Dynamo as a fitness coach, if I could guarantee none of the players ever went abroad.

“It didn’t take me long to decide. Ochenko was good enough to offer me some sweeteners also. Free tickets. Hospitality. Travel to support the team. Despite never being interested in football, I took the opportunity, because I wanted to see more of the world far beyond my windows.

“My taste for foreign travel was noticed, but it wasn’t frowned upon, as on my return I always presented a report from the Soviet Embassy or from an informant I had arranged to meet. I found it easy to leave the playing staff, to enjoy a glass of beer in a small cafe, or a meal in a fine restaurant. I began to learn English and French to help me to communicate with the waiters and the women who were intrigued by the tall man from Mother Russia.

“I still had a career with the KGB. In 1979 I attended the negotiations for SALT II, a treaty to limit arms production. Politically, it wasn’t successful. The West was already suspicious of our involvement in the recent fall of some moderate regimes. Vietnam, Mozambique, Angola, Ethiopia and Yemen all switched to radical left wing government. The fall of the Shah of Iran was perhaps the final straw for the NATO powers and by the end of the year, long range missiles were deployed in Europe.

"Underneath this sudden tension, I was in a state of flux. I had met a wonderful person in Vienna. She was not a Russian. In addition to the high level military discussions, there were a number of gatherings, small parties and banquets. I was introduced to Anita Brookfield by a British attaché. She spoke Russian, so he thought we could have a proper conversation. She was a very good Russian speaker, but in the White Russian fashion. I didn't tell her, as it was charming to hear some of the old phrases and accents again. Her mother's family name was Rostov and they came from Leningrad – she still called it Petrograd – escaping during the Civil War, sailing first to Sweden and then to Britain. I had never met an exile. She was nothing how I expected. There was no bitterness and no hatred. I almost felt she was sorry for her forebears having caused so many problems. It was hardly her fault. She was a slip of a girl, only in her early twenties.

"I wasn't supposed to fraternise with foreigners, but she was attentive, pleasant and flirtatious. I had never had a proper friendship with a woman; perhaps with my wife, at the start, but certainly not in the last twenty years. It was a revelation. It was fresh. Suddenly, the work, the Party, didn't seem quite so important. Not in the beautiful city of the Hapsburgs. I was only interested in this beautiful girl whose family memories seemed much clearer and better than my own. It wasn't hard to slip away from my own minders. We made love, hurried, passionate love in a small hotel.

"Foolishly I took her details. I could send articles abroad without having my post subjected to scrutiny. And I sent her love letters. She sent letters back, via the Soviet Embassy. Her words were soft and comforting. I managed to find an excuse to visit Vienna again in the fall and she was there, waiting for me, in her little apartment opposite Stadtpark. We shared three days of heady love. What was I doing? A First Commissar is falling in love with a silly little English girl! Don't be an idiot, I told myself. But it was too late for thinking. I couldn't get a posting abroad anymore, my profile was too high, but I could travel with the football team. Perhaps, I suggested, she could travel to the same cities.

"It was the most ridiculous idea. But I knew it would work. The blind spots in people's judgement that had so infuriated me when I was young became my ally. When people are already afraid of you, they don't question where you go or what you do. There were assignments in Turkey, Ostrava, Vienna again and twice in Sophia – each one a further revelation of our love. Yes, I say love. A mad passion. An aching, beautiful desire. It was like nothing I had experienced before or since. My heart still aches. But now it is more painful. There is much regret and much hurt. Eventually someone has to question your movements and it could only be your own flesh and blood, your only son.

"When Gregory confronted me, I could not lie. I saw the distaste on his mouth and heard the hate of his words. But I also saw the fear in his eyes. I was after all a First Commissar of the KGB. There is not much argument with me. I told him, honestly, bleakly, that I no longer and had hardly ever loved his mother. But I meant no harm to her, to him or his sisters. Would he rather I embarrass them all in Kiev with one of the loose women from Batyieva Hill? No, of course he wouldn't. He had to be sensible. Be silent. I wasn't asking him. It was an order. And Gregory knew that and now I just saw disbelief and hurt on his face.

"It didn't stop me. I became even more determined. Now my son was lost to me, it seemed even more important to sustain the last happiness I had. My letters became more desperate, more frustrated. I sensed in her replies a similar longing. The Soviet Union was on the verge of change. Brezhnev had suffered a stroke; we all knew it, even if Pravda denied it. He wouldn't live for much longer. I knew that Andropov was going to resign from the KGB, so he could strengthen his position in the Politburo. He had aims on becoming General Secretary, head of state in all but name. After I left, he was elected. Had he lived, maybe there would be more hope for my people. He'd only one year to change things; we at the Directorate knew he needed ten.

"All the political intrigues, the sackings and the reshuffles, the aligning of support, were distractions for others. It allowed me to go about my private business unsolicited. In April I concocted an excuse to visit the Embassy in Vienna. I met Anita in the Prata Park. We walked and talked and ate in a little cafe. We watched an old French film about love and wartime memories in Japan.

"Later, as we ate dinner, Anita reminded me of that lonely actress watching her lover but not daring to speak to him, to approach him, to tell him how she felt. In the morning, just like the actress, she told me the truth. And when she told me, all the happiness I had in me vanished. Her posting was at an end. She was returning to England. She couldn't meet me anymore. It would be too complicated in London, too dangerous for us.

"It wasn't enough. I told her that. I needed her. I wanted her. I loved her. Her joy was both a pleasure and a relief. Did she love me too? Yes, of course she did. I would come to her. I promised it. I would defect.

"Madness. Forty years as a communist. To throw it all away. She begged me to reconsider it. My family, she said. My wife. My position. It was too dangerous. Hadn't I told her we still executed dissidents? Hunted down and assassinated defectors? It wasn't an argument she was going to win. I told her I would find her in England. She was angry. No woman had ever been angry with me and I didn't know how to react. What did I think I was going to do? Jump on a plane, she said, walk over the border, she said. Something like that, I said. Did I think it would be that easy? Hadn't all those years with the KGB taught me anything? Didn't I realise they knew everything about everybody?

"I did know that. But I also knew there was information we didn't retain, people who were not observed, details known only to a few, discussed only face to face. The highest of security levels: the aural committees. Of course I couldn't be certain, but I didn't think I was discussed at these undocumented meetings; I had recently been invited to attend some in Moscow, a sure sign I was regarded as trustworthy. I would create an opportunity. The leaders at home were preoccupied with an internal power struggle. It was a perfect moment.

"Anita didn't believe me. I saw sadness in her eyes. She was afraid, she said, because she didn't know what would happen to us in England. The authorities. The public. Her own family. She loved me so much, but there was no-one to trust, no-one who would understand what was inside her heart. I said: there was me.

"I left her sad and in tears. I think she was heartbroken. But I could mend what was broken. I didn't cry. It was time to be strong and decisive. I thought of all those people I had signed into exile, condemned to prison. There was no escape for them. But there would be one for me.

"I had never enjoyed the company of Oleg Ochenko, but at last I had a real use for him. The USSR had qualified for the football World Cup, which was to be held in Spain. Oleg, I wondered, would there be any tickets available for the First Commissar? Of course there would! The early games were held in Seville and Malaga, but if we qualified, the second stage of games would be played in Barcelona at the end of June. Would a few days on La Rambla be acceptable? I agreed it would.

"The team duly succeeded. Leaving my family, my girls, my wife, was not the easiest of days. I did nothing different from my other journeys. Yelena had found my sudden interest in football mildly amusing. I think she was glad to be rid of me for a few days. The girls used to be upset, but not so much now. They were mostly grown up and pretty, like their mother. It was only the youngest, Arina, who wanted a hug and a kiss. I stroked her golden hair for the last time on 30th June 1982. It was my last contact with my family, but it meant little.

"I spent an anxious day travelling to Berlin and then onto Barcelona. I had all the diplomatic clearance I needed, but I could see the officials at both the airports inspecting my visa closely. Was this really Nikolay Volkov? And travelling alone? There was a dismissive shrug. I expect a button had been pressed somewhere. I joined the team at their hotel, a functional building outside the city. It looked as if it had been uprooted from the Soviet Union and replanted in Catalonia.

"We won the game against Belgium, but I was too on edge to think of the result. There would be some celebrating in the hotel that night. Even these professionals enjoyed a glass or two of vodka. It didn't bother me. I can hold my drink. The party was dying by midnight, only the executives were left and I made my excuses and retired. The hotel was a good distance from the city centre, but I had studied the maps and the road routes very carefully. I washed and changed.

"It was hot that July night when I walked past the dozy night porter and made my slow journey those six miles to the Avda Diagonal. I passed all manner of strangers, cavorting, drinking, and singing. It was as much of an awakening as the train journey I had made all those years ago from Siberia to Donetsk. I sat for thirty minutes in a little cafe on the corner of Calle de Buenos Aires. I thought about my children, even the son who hated me and the wife who had borne them all. I thought of my pledge to the Party, to the State and to the Directorate. It didn't matter anymore. There was a beautiful woman waiting for me. A woman who wanted me as much as I wanted her.

"I walked over the road and entered the British Consulate. I introduced myself to a startled receptionist and explained I was hoping to defect. I think she thought I was joking. I was asked to wait one moment. A smart, slightly flustered individual wearing a suit, but no tie, came to see me and ushered me into his stuffy office. He didn't seem to take me seriously either. But I insisted he spoke to the Embassy in Madrid. I explained he needed to contact them immediately. The Russian contingent would be rousing at eight-thirty and if I wasn't found missing they would alert their own authorities as well as the local police.

"He finally took me seriously enough to make one phone call. I was asked to confirm my date of birth and my position in the Committee for State Security. It was like a bomb had gone off. There was a sudden flurry of activity everywhere. I was in Madrid by noon. I was on a diplomatic flight to London before the day had passed.

"And then the worst of it came. The drugs to make me sleep. The little white padded room. The suspicion. The disbelief. The doctors and the nurses. The endless tests. I was photographed, finger printed, blood samples, voice printed, teeth, eyes, height, size, shape, body markings, a full medical, heart, lungs, liver, urine. My clothes were taken away. I never saw them again. My passport was confiscated. I never saw that either. Even criminals have better treatment, I supposed. Except I knew in my country they probably hadn't.

"Then at last, I was presented to a grey haired old man, a very short tempered man, who wore a very well cut suit which stank of cheap pipe tobacco. He didn't tell me his name. He said he was from the British Secret Intelligence Service. He wanted to know why the Russians had not admitted to my defection or at the very least to my disappearance. No announcement. Nothing in the traffic they intercepted. No rumour even. He thought I was a plant. Someone sent to provide a host of misleading information. It was the middle of the Falkland Crisis. Did the Russians really think the British were so stupid? I was asked. I didn't hesitate. I told him the truth from the very beginning. I told him of my love for Anita Brookfield. I told him there was no politics involved. It was a matter of the heart. He was astonished.

“Whether he believed me or not, I do not know. I never saw the man again. The next weeks passed in a blur, each one blending into another. For day after day, hour after hour, I was taken to a big room, with recording equipment, lie detectors, heart monitors, and cameras. I was introduced to three men who called themselves Smith, Jones and Baker. They asked me questions. Questions about everything. About my life, my family, my friends, my enemies, my work. Especially about my work. They wanted names, dates, places and times. I told them everything I could remember. And after I finished a lifetime of memories, they asked me again. And then again. Different questions, to see if I gave different answers, but I had told them everything I knew.

“Towards the end, almost as an afterthought, one of them asked why I liked Anita. I said she reminded me of the actress in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, lost and afraid, searching for someone to love her. But I wasn’t describing her; I was describing me.

“They finally let me see the sunlight after that. It was so bright I thought I was going to faint with shock. I sat for a long time on a bench watching some ducks paddle across a pond. I did not know, I still do not know, where I was. I was well cared for and had good meals and everything you needed to live. But I only had myself for company. At night I could think of Anita and I would be happy. Sometimes I remembered the feel of my daughter’s golden hair and I was sickened by my own selfishness and pride.

“Eventually another two men came to see me, both very formal and polite. They had new clothes and new documents. They carried with them a big folder full of the life history of a man called Brian Greene. They spent four days explaining to me where I was going to live and what I should do. I had contact numbers. I would be monitored. I would be sufficiently paid. They appreciated my accent was something of a problem, but they had reproduced a life story similar to my own. Only Brian Greene had been born in a place called Cumbria and served in the military, the pensions department, for twenty years. He had retired from the army through ill health and bought a little flat in Goring-on-Sea. I didn’t have a choice. I had to become Brian Greene.

“I saw my little keepers every day. Mr and Mrs Platt. I knew they were the ones responsible for me, because they introduced themselves, bringing a bottle of disgustingly sweet wine. It was a solitary life. It wasn’t what I came to England for. To be shoved aside and kept hidden. To be given something that only resembled a life. The money ran out so fast. I hadn’t ever learnt to cook and I learnt I was a bad cook and a poor shopper. I learnt to buy things every day, because if I didn’t it would go mouldy. And the drink was so expensive I couldn’t even drink myself to sleep.

“And then one day she appeared. I saw her from the window. I stood there so still. I didn’t want to move in case she disappeared. She didn’t disappear. She came right to the door and rang the bell. And when we stood face to face it was as if all the months of waiting had been worth it. She looked fresh and exciting. I was shamed by my shirt and trousers. It wasn’t the suits and uniforms she had been used to seeing me in. I had also taken to growing a beard. But she stroked it with her hand and when she kissed me she murmured that I tickled, that it was nice. And then I held her so close and so tight.

“Anita! My Anita! But I sensed her holding back. She was crying already and had her little handkerchief out. She had something to tell me. That was why she was here. She hadn’t expected me to come. She really hadn’t. We sat down. Was she happy? Yes, it was wonderful I had come, but it was also a mistake. What was I thinking of? Why was I here? Did I not know what the Russians had written about me?

"I didn't understand. And then she told me. I was a dead man. The Russian authorities had announced my death and I was buried in the Army Cemetery outside Novosibirsk. A small ceremony attended by my family. I did understand; I had authorised many such ceremonies; it meant I was free; they didn't care where I was or what I did. It meant we could be together.

"She shook her head. No, the S.I.S. couldn't agree to that. She wanted it so much, she said, she desperately wanted to be with me. But it couldn't happen. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. Had I not realised what was happening? Surely I knew their movements were observed from the outset? The attaché who introduced us? The photographers in the cafes? The little Fiat outside her apartment? Was I so blind? Was I so foolish? And yet she too had fallen in love. And she had tried to stop me coming, told me I mustn't defect, mustn't leave my family. She knew what would happen if I came. Hadn't she told me that last night in Vienna – 'Don't come. Please.'

"I couldn't speak. I was dumb struck. Whatever else she said to me was like water to a duck. All my life I had looked at reports that I believed to be true and adjudged the guilt or innocence of individuals on the strength of the written and the spoken word; now here someone was speaking to me, but I could not digest the information. It was as if it no longer mattered. And if it did, it was my turn to suffer, not those under scrutiny.

"The pain when she left was too huge. Was there any hope? No, there was someone else. I saw him, a very good looking young man, driving a small dark blue sports car. I watched them leave from my window and he gave me a long hard look, one that sent a shiver down my spine, not because it frightened me, but because I knew I had lost her.

"Goring-on-Sea isn't the place for a retired army major. I made for the city in a few weeks, carefully selling the possessions in the house day after day. I still had Brian Greene's bank account. At the last moment I withdrew everything in it and journeyed to London. I stopped at East Croydon. I rented a house, from an old Jewish man who wanted to pay someone, a strong man, to collect rent from his other properties. For once I didn't have to worry about being Jewish.

"MI6 must walk with their eyes closed. I wasn't hiding; perhaps the best form of camouflage is normality. Eventually I found her, using the telephone directory, the public records, asking questions in cafes and bars. I watched her for three weeks. Watched the other girl she lived with come and go. Eventually she left on her own one morning and I followed her to Feltham station. Her trip to work was a long one, past places called Barnes, Putney, Wandsworth, finally Victoria and then a slow tube ride. I accosted her on Regent's Park tube station, just before the escalator. It was as if she had seen a ghost. And then she held me close, crying, melting into my arms.

"It doesn't matter what we said, sitting on the platform, on the old brick benches. I told her I loved her and I would always love her. She told me she would never love anyone how she had loved me. We both believed it. We kissed and we wiped a few tears from each other's faces. She whispered 'I'm so sorry, Niky, can you forgive me?' Of course I could. I said she would always be with me, where ever I was, until I died.

"I don't know if Anita understood what I said. Perhaps she did. Perhaps she just wants me to disappear like everyone else. The British don't need me anymore. The Russians have killed me already. My family and my wife have lost me. My son hates me. It is time to disappear, like all those names that vanished after the stroke of my pen.

"Nikolay Volkov, First Commissar, Ukraine Authority, 5th Directorate of the Committee for State Security."

The original papers had been dated and signed. Bond put the last page down on his desk. It was more than dark outside. His desk lamp provided a sole shaft of white in the dull office, illuminated only by the yellow street lights that penetrated the thick windows, net curtains and day old smoke. He'd been reading a long time.

Bond took another hefty slug from his hip flask. He lit his fortieth cigarette of the day. The match flickered before him. Bond watched it burn, almost to his fingers and then dropped it onto the corner of the document where it smouldered and started to take hold, tiny flames flickering in front of him.

Quickly Bond swept the little pile of burning paper into his waste basket, originals and copies together. He watched it burn. As he watched, he smoked calmly, without any compassion, and when it was done he found a bin liner and poured the whole smouldering contents into it. On his way home, Bond disposed of the bin liner in a public litter bin somewhere close to South Kensington tube station.

Bond remembered on that short drive home the first curious conversation he'd had with Tom Colthorpe, the Chief of Staff.

"Look, James, you're a good looking lad. And that's what we need. It's what this lass needs." Colthorpe was very much of the old school. To him, thought Bond, girls were girls and men were men. Women, frankly, didn't exist unless they were married with children. Bond secretly wondered if Mrs Colthorpe felt the same way. He had an image of the man removing his shoes before he'd even set through the door in case he sullied the carpets.

"We're not expecting you to fall in love or make her forget Volkov. That would be ridiculous. She's been totally upfront with us about the whole affair. The girl got emotionally involved. So, she may have got a few tit-bits of information, but frankly that's not the point. We had to pull her out of there. She knew it was getting too bloody serious; both for her and for him. And now Volkov's talking about defecting. It's a bloody mess." Colthorpe paused; the moment of silence seemed to curtail the explanation. "M thinks there might be some mileage in setting her up with some dates. You know take her dancing, the theatre, a few drinks, that sort of thing"

That sort of thing, mused Bond. Colthorpe didn't have much of an understanding of modern courting rituals. He gave a diplomatic shrug.

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt," Bond said. "As I understand it, she's quite a pretty sort. I don't suppose the service is offering to advance a few expenses my way? For the duration."

"Certainly not." Colthorpe looked visibly shocked. "We're not the Bank of bloody England, Bond. You can submit them every second week like everyone else."

Bond stood up to and said his thanks. As he opened the office door, Colthorpe cleared his throat and Bond hesitated.

"Mark them for my attention only," said the Chief of Staff. "We don't want anyone to think you're getting special privileges, do we? Before your promotion, I mean."

"No, sir."

Bond's heartbeat almost skipped. Canny old devil, he thought. Well, if seducing a pretty little secretary was going to help him get his stripes, so be it.

Anita Brookfield wasn't hard to find. Bond merely made a few gentle enquiries in the canteen to have her pointed out to him. She was certainly a pretty girl; blonde, slim, with a European taste in fashion and an American taste in big bouffant hair. But he considered her smile a trifle melancholic.

After a few days he engaged her in conversation in the lift and later on over lunch. Bond already had something of a reputation with the ladies and she was well aware of it, but persistence sometimes pays dividends. She agreed to a solitary drink. And a week later she agreed to the ballet. That weekend they went to Ronnie Scott's. Soon they were the talk of the dreaded powder vine. Bond wasn't particularly bothered. She was good company. He found her intelligent and fun, without being totally exuberant. She didn't discuss her personal life much, although Bond learnt a lot about her family history, a subject she seemed particularly proud of. She asked a lot of questions and empathised with his difficult childhood, the loss of his parents and the difficult education. One Saturday night after a close dance at Annabel's, she kissed him so softly Bond felt her lips tremble. Anita taught him some Russian phrases and they greeted each other with foreign hellos and how are yous. One day Bond told her, in Russian, that he loved her. He didn't mean it; he just thought it was what she wanted to hear. It was certainly what his superiors wanted him to say. They made love that evening and Bond was pleasantly surprised by her skill and suppleness.

And then word got to her about Nikolay Volkov. How she found out hardly seemed relevant. She found out. Bond tried to deflect her questions. Sometimes he didn't have the answers. The Russian had already been in the country for six months and it took another three for her to track him down. How she did it, Bond didn't know. He guessed she used similar bribes to the ones he often pulled. Her looks were certainly promising enough.

She persuaded him to drive her down to Goring-on-Sea, a town Bond considered a place for the retired and infirm. The two lovers spent an hour together. Bond waited patiently outside. When Anita returned, she was crying uncontrollably. Bond glanced up at the third floor to see a big, bearded face looking wistfully down. The Russian was crying too.

On the return trip, Bond told her about the meeting with Colthorpe. It didn't go down well. But he told her she was a diamond girl and that he really loved her, it just hadn't started how he would have wanted it. Was he forgiven? She merely said there seemed to be a lot of guilt and forgiveness in the world at the moment and for the first time she told him everything of the affair with the Russian.

Bond and Anita saw less of each other over the next few weeks. The passion that had grown dissipated and they settled into a gentle friendship, sharing words and the occasional drink. It was all very civil. Colthorpe seemed very happy.

And then she had been late to work and she was never late. She'd approached Bond in a corridor, flustered and panicked. He pulled her aside into the nearest gentlemen's lavatory, checked it was empty, closed the door and leant against it. She spilled out the problem, making this difficult request. He objected. She persuaded him. The Russian was going to do something terrible, but she didn't know how or when. She couldn't let it happen. She would do anything.

There wasn't anything Bond wanted, but he said he would look up the name of this Jewish landlord. There might be a list of his properties somewhere. He got her the list by the end of the day. Anita kissed him her thanks. Bond said if she got in any trouble, she must call him.

She certainly found trouble, thought Bond, changing gear as he slowed along the King's Road. The rest of the story was recent history.

Croydon Crematorium lies in the suburbs of South London, just East of Mitcham Common. An assembly of fifty or so stood silently in the rain. Family people mostly, or old acquaintances. Some had known her long ago and remembered her with fondness; others had been with her to the end, loved her unconditionally, but had no inkling why she had requested her ashes be scattered here. The eulogy had been brief. The Reverend had not known the deceased personally and was not familiar with her family either. Now he shook their hands with a respectful almost apologetic kindness. The bundles of red and pink roses, white tulips and lilies, which had surrounded the polished pine coffin, now lay arranged outside the portico. The droplets of rain splashed on the delicate petals. Umbrellas were raised and the water cannoned off their surfaces with big loud thumps. It was the end of the day and the dark clouds and grey sky foretold of an encroaching autumn evening.

James Bond felt a flicker of warmth on his skin. The last embers of sunshine caught his face, a ray of light streaking through the ash trees, speckled with spots of rain. Maybe there would be a spectacular, technicolour rainbow to accompany her final resting place. Bond smiled at the irony. He recalled an old Humphrey Bogart film that ended something like this. Every now and then, he thought, life really was just like a bad film: a sudden illness and a funeral in the rain.

Bond had pretended to love her many years ago. Her family didn't know it. They didn't know about the Russian either. It was still a classified secret. Someday they would learn why Anita Brookfield wanted her ashes sprinkled on the rose garden beside the chapel. She wanted to lie with the love of her life, Nikolay Volkov, a man she had been forced to give up and who had not been able to live without her.

Bond felt as if a camera was craning forward, capturing his belated sorrow. But Bond, unlike Bogart, had nothing to say. The sun stream flickered and died: a slow dissolve, then cut. Slowly Bond moved away and returned to his car, closing once and for all a distant season of his life.

Five:

October:

The Blink of an Eye

The deep orange of dawn stretched across the horizon melding seamlessly into the last vestiges of the night sky. The pin points of stars still glinted high above the flaming strip of morning and the occasional flock of waking white storks took off towards them. The buzz of insects mixed hypnotically with the gentle lap of water against the river bank. Slowly, inexorably the rising quarter moon of yellow became a half circle. The hot bright rays of sun turned the darkness of the terrain into rifts of golden dunes flanked by dense green foliage. The once black water became an expanse of bright blue and shimmering silver. Traditional feluccas, their white canvases aloft, made the gentle journey across the river, the bargemen and fishermen starting early before the heat made hard work impossible. The tranquil scene was one that had been replayed over the River Nile for centuries.

The girl breathed in the sight that morning. She stood on the secluded balcony, one hand resting on the top rail, the other shielding her eyes from the brilliant beaming morning. Her long ash blonde hair blew gently about her head, occasionally falling across her face, at which point she brushed it back behind her ears. She let out a contented sigh. The sun was warm to her body and she felt it on every pore, which was quite possible as the girl was completely naked.

She stroked her painted nails across herself, tickling her skin into tiny goose bumps; first over her neck and shoulders, then her arms and thighs, across her breasts and nipples, down to her belly, her buttocks and finally her moist intimate places. She was happy and satisfied. They had made love twice last night. She had abandoned herself to the same wild and beautiful passion that she gave to all her lovers. Her desires had been wondrously reciprocated. It made her excited that he enjoyed her; she hoped her licentiousness had pleased him also. They had slept with each other every night since meeting, but this was to be the last morning they would awake together.

The girl ran her tongue across her parted, kiss bitten lips. She hadn't slept long, but she couldn't sleep much when her body was so alive. Every inch and ounce of her felt sensitive to a breath of breeze. Her heart beat loudly, murmuring whispers of lust. She sighed again, in resignation this time. Nudity was illegal in Egypt; it wouldn't do to be caught. She had already spent over half an hour watching the sun rise and it was now almost fully light. The girl retreated into the cool confines of the first class cabin, opening and closing the door noiselessly, so as not to wake him.

He lay on his chest, one hand tucked under the pillow, the other occupying the space where she had lain. He was asleep, his breathing controlled and shallow. She looked again at the sinewy back and neck, the muscles that had tensed as he took her. She admired the strong hands, the fingers that had explored her. She ran a delicate hand along the taut legs and buttocks, the body she had bound to her. This tough, weathered man showed the scars of battle. There was a new, temporary mark, on his shoulder, where she had bitten him in a moment of ecstasy. Once again she licked her lips. She wanted to wake him, to start their love making again and to have his hard torso fill her with joy. But he looked peaceful, even slightly dozy in his slumber, so she controlled her own desire and let him sleep.

The girl took a long shower under warm water. She cleaned every inch of herself with herbal soaps and oils, cleansing and revitalising her skin. Her hair was washed in tea-tree oil. She shaved her legs

with a razor and her more personal areas with a tiny beautician's shaver. She plucked her brows, her ears and her nostrils. She puffed and pampered. She filed the nails on her hands and her feet. She applied the tiniest amount of make up to her cheeks and eyes. It was only morning after all. Lastly, indulgently, she stood back facing the smoked glass shower screen and admired her refection.

She knew she was beautiful, because she had been told it since she was a little girl. But she had only understood her beauty as a teenager when adolescent boys said it. Now many men and boys had told her and she knew it to be true. She was above average height. Her blonde hair fell thick about her shoulders and she had it parted simply in the middle. Her high forehead and cheeks gave her face an oval look, which complimented her wide mauve eyes. If her nose was a little too large, she always thought herself lucky to have a wide mouth with full lips, which attracted more attention. Her smile was big and broad and she smiled now as she ran her hands through her hair, down her neck and onto her generous breasts making the large pink nipples harden again. She traced her curves from her sides to her pubis, traced the outline of the tattooed serpent that snaked in curls down her right side, its blue and grey tail pointing towards love. She tweaked the sapphire encrusted, three hooped belly ring and giggled at the memory of his tongue as he played with it. She turned to admire her backside, which men claimed to adore, and studied the tightness of her toned long legs. She stood on tip toe, to see how her bottom looked when she wore heels. The half-light wouldn't show it, but she had a natural even tan.

The girl shook herself gaily. It was time to wake him for breakfast. Perhaps, she hoped, if she woke him gently, sensually, he might want her now, fast and cruel. She trembled with the delicious thought. The girl opened the bathroom door and took one step into the bedroom before stopping motionless where she stood. She didn't scream. She didn't cover herself. She didn't panic.

One man, a stranger, sat in the arm chair, a large, silenced revolver in his hand, pointing directly at her beautiful belly button. The other interloper in the room, an older man, was more familiar. She recognised his deep set eyes and thick moustache from the casino. He was filling a hypodermic needle from a small phial of liquid. She didn't need to ask what it was. The two men must have entered the room while she had been washing. They must have been extremely quiet as she couldn't recall hearing any noises. The bed clothes were rumpled, showing signs of some resistance, but her lover was knocked unconscious, even though he lay in almost the exact same position. His gun was lying on the floor where he had dropped it.

"Good morning, Karlyn," said the second man, in a soft fatherly voice, that by its very normality was frightening. "Someone wants to play with you."

Muhammad Abdul Razzaq stared at the tiny tongue of blue and white. In a matter of moments the croupier's fingers would spit the card towards him, adding it to the four already lying face down on the green baize.

It had been a difficult night's play. Razzaq wasn't used to having to work so hard for his money. The wealthy patrons of the casino, small as it was, had offered easy pickings for him and it had been a relatively simple week's play. He was never going to make a fortune here, not like the winnings he posted on the Riviera. Yet the small matter of over fifty thousand dollars' worth of blue, red and black chips sat before him and he wasn't about to lose it.

There was an equally impressive pile of chips across the table in front of his opponent. This man wasn't your usual gambler, the sort who came in, played a few hands, thought he was on a streak and lost everything on the turn of a card. This man, like Razzaq himself, studied the play. He knew when to raise, when to call and when to fold and surrender the pot. He wasn't afraid to lose if it meant retaining a stake on the table. His expression rarely changed; he was a mask of assiduous concentration, occasionally brightened by a sip of his drink, a pull on his cigarette or a stolen glance at his wife. He didn't smile much, unless he made a particularly good coup or his wife kissed him *au revoir*.

It had been his wife that had first brought the man to Razzaq's attention. Blonde, slim, tanned and very beautiful, she had a figure and demeanour that immediately caught his eye. She carried herself like a goddess, straight backed, confident and commanding. Yet there was something primitive about her; the impertinence in her smile, the ease of her manner, the way she flirted, how she dressed. She was a contradiction, both untouchable and available. Indeed, on the occasion he had bluntly propositioned her, she had remained taciturn to his insulting offer, while her body language appeared remarkably receptive to the indecent suggestions.

Razzaq had sighed. His position with the government allowed him too many freedoms and he enjoyed those freedoms, abused them sometimes, to drench his animal desires. The women came to him nervous and afraid, but they left happy and a little richer, a small reward for their husbands, brothers or fathers. Sometimes they did not leave so happy, but he still paid them. Other times there were the women who he didn't pay, the prisoners, the whores, the traffickers, the thieves, the young interns looking for promotion. With them he made it painful and obscene. The white women he met at the big casinos, the hotel bars and the nightclubs, often saw him as exotic and not unattractive; he generally found his money wasn't necessary on those occasions. It did come in useful when paying off indignant husbands. And if money didn't work, the sight of a gun or the inside of a prison cell was equally successful. Razzaq had lost count of the number of his conquests.

Equally, he had lost count of the number of death warrants he had signed and the number of times he had participated in torture and murder. The lust for love and death almost went hand in hand. A forceful sexual encounter often followed a day's interrogation. The day to day of his government role disinterested him. He had a team of advisors and administrators to deal with that. It was all he could do to attend cabinet meetings and sign the documents he needed to. He was well aware he wasn't in the cabinet for his abilities as a politician. They wanted subterfuge, coercion, blackmail, entrapment, assassination, wiretapping, bugging, embezzlement, bribery, corruption, murder, torture and theft – without any retribution. And he was happy to provide it and be involved in it.

The card flicked out across the table. Razzaq turned one corner of the card, just enough to see the emblem of the king of diamonds. He remained impassive, but inside his heart started to sing. He'd discarded a three of spades, leaving him with two pairs, kings and queens. Now this new card gave him a full house. He knew almost all the aces had gone through the pack in the last few hands, he'd won handsomely already with a pair, and this surely was his unbeatable hand. He sat back, shuffling his five cards together. Then, dramatically he pushed twenty thousand of his chips towards the centre of the table, making the bid.

The German Count's mouth twitched. On the next round, he folded instantly, the pot was already too hot for him and he paid his way out, taking a massive hit on his winnings. He took a suck on his Havana cigar, a big disgusting barrel of tobacco. "Je suis fini," he said in his faltered French.

The other man smiled for once and looked directly at Razzaq, who felt his gaze, fought off his inquisitiveness. The man inclined his head towards his wife, who was dutifully watching the play, a

little to one side, the crowd of curious late night observers surrounding her. She looked nervous, thought Razzaq, uncertain. Of course, there was a lot of money at stake here; perhaps her husband did not have the funds to cover his losses.

The man tapped the top of the pile of chips before him. Then, slowly, without a trace of anxiety, he said: "Je vous eleverai a quarante mille dollars."

It was a bluff. It had to be a bluff. Razzaq knew it. So did everyone else around the table. They had seen the cards dealt. The shoe doesn't lie.

Earlier in the evening the cards had not fallen for him, the faces around the table had been determined and alive and he'd had to fight to make a raise count. But about an hour ago the other faces had grown tired and the hands started to fall in his favour. Only this man had stayed close to him. And now he too was about to fall. The cards were not in the stack to provide two winning combinations. The man had rejected two of his cards, the sign of a poor hand and a desperate gamble. He couldn't have the beating of a full house. Razzaq was certain this was his night. He'd gambled for many years along the Egyptian Riviera and in the high class clubs of Paris and Madrid and he had an instinct. Nothing tangible. Nothing he could explain. Some people called it a sixth sense. He called it 'his eye.'

Razzaq watched the man's expression. It hadn't changed. It was still that stoic, slightly affable facade. His cigarette had burnt to the filter and, Razzaq noticed, for the first time he didn't strike a new one. Confidence or fear?

Razzaq paused. He looked around the faces, searching for Salim, his right hand man, who had brought him the information this afternoon. What had he said? The man was not to be trusted. He wasn't a journalist. He wasn't particularly rich. He wasn't even married to the woman he called his wife. He was an agent, a spy, a likely decoy.

"Muhammad," he had said, "be careful; they are setting you up."

Yet as he remembered the warning, Razzaq felt his adrenalin rise. Even if it was a set up, he could still come out of the affair with tens of thousands of dollars. He fumbled in his dinner jacket pocket, pulling out his reserve, two chips amounting to an extra twenty thousand dollars. He added them to his stake and pushed the pile forwards. The markers collapsed in a wave, scattering across the table.

"Je suis tous dans. Quatre-vingts mille dollars."

An audible gasp rippled around the tiny arena. The man at last looked nervous. When he spoke, he used English, not French, the customary language of the casino, "I can't match that, Mr Razzaq. I don't have that sort of money."

"I understand, Mr Stock. You have gambled well tonight." Razzaq's tone was even, measured, exactly how he spoke when seducing the pretty interns or the daughters of army officers. "I have enjoyed the contest. I am sure you would not want either of us to be deprived of the satisfaction of winning. May I suggest a wager?"

"What kind of wager?"

"If you win, you get to keep all the money."

“And if I lose?”

“If you lose, Mr Stock, I get to sleep with your beautiful wife.”

Karlyn Foucart’s first encounter with her lover happened four years earlier. She had told him after one of their bouts of love making, but he didn’t remember the occasion. Karlyn did because she had a gift for names and faces, one of the principle talents that had led her to work for the overseas division of MI6. She had been working at the Air France flight desk at Heathrow’s Terminal 2, the oldest and least customer friendly of the airport’s hubs, and he was checking onto a flight to Tel Aviv. He had given her a warm smile and they joked about the merits of window seats. He was a charming man. Karlyn didn’t expect to ever see him again, but she remembered his face, with its steel blue eyes, the fading scar on his right cheek and the comma of dark hair that flopped over his brow. A handsome man, she had thought.

Karlyn had applied to work for the Translation Department of the Security Service a year earlier, but the aptitude tests, the psychometric assessments, the physicals and the security checks took a long time to complete. Her lack of experience in the civil service or the military didn’t seem to hinder the application. Indeed they were particularly excited by her photographic recall, her arithmetical attention to detail and her language skills, of which she spoke four, excluding English, a benefit of a naturalised French-Canadian father and half-Swiss mother. She found herself recruited as a cipher clerk and she received an intensive six months of training at a school located just outside Gloucester.

During this time Karlyn engaged in several love affairs, some of them running concurrently and gained something of a reputation for her sexual prowess. Subsequently she endured a further series of tests after which she was asked some embarrassing questions about her sexual habits, a story she looked back on with some amusement for the poor analyst was clearly more embarrassed than she.

Her initial posting was in the translators department at GCHQ, which, being close to the training college allowed her to continue living with her best friends, Sally and Eleanor, in a little rented bungalow. It wasn’t long however before Robinson, the Human Resources Officer for MI6, summoned her to Millennium House and offered her an overseas role in Paris with Station F. Her French language skills would be put to good use. Tournier needed a good administrator and a decoder to help him with the traffic he picked up from Africa and Europe. She was excited by the opportunity and accepted immediately.

She was twenty four years old when she left for Paris three summers ago and in those three years she had turned down a marriage proposal from a decadent French aristocrat and engaged in a series of love affairs, romanced by people like her landlord – a man of a certain vintage, but much experience and tenderness – an artist, a barista, a tattooist, a keen cyclist, a financier, an office boy, a chanteuse, even a married but untethered couple. There were more and she checked the list periodically in her head, even though she never forgot a single face or hand or kiss.

Karlyn was unaware that Tournier kept his own list of her relationships, not in case she slipped up, although that was a consideration, but because the service required it as a matter of course. The information could always prove useful should she prove unreliable in security matters, a form of emotional blackmail. Tournier rather thought the young English woman didn’t give a care what people thought of her behaviour. She seemed addicted to enjoying herself.

The second time Karlyn met James Bond, she was reading *France Marie Clair* in the first class lounge at Charles De Gaulle Airport. When he was mentioned at the briefing, she remembered instantly his name and his fine, slightly cruel face. She began to get excited just thinking about meeting him. He did not disappoint and had not even appeared to age over the past four years. He gave her that wonderful, indifferent smile and held out his hand.

“Bonjour, Mademoiselle Stock, je m’appelle James Bond.”

She giggled at the little joke, accepting his hand, which was firm and strong. “Coucou, Monsieur Stock, je m’appelle Karlyn Foucart. Comment allez-tu?”

Bond had smiled again. “That’s a little forward isn’t it? We’ve only just met.”

She reached past his arm and touched the hem of his jacket, patting his thigh. “Oh, I’m sorry, I thought you were my husband,” she teased, giving him her best, most innocent look. “What a great pity.”

He laughed and she liked it when he laughed. They had been briefed separately, Bond in London, she in Paris, but, as he was the senior, and a double ‘O’ at that, his briefing was the more substantial.

They discussed the operation on the flight to Luxor. They took to filling in their background story; how the journalist Mr James Stock had met in his wife in Paris while covering the G20 Summit for the *Financial Times*, how they had embarked on a whirlwind romance and married in the fall. They had honeymooned in Normandy, a region they both knew well, and now lived in a comfortable apartment in Chelsea. Despite herself, Karlyn couldn’t help flirting with him, touching his hand with her fingers, allowing her eyes to linger on his face just that moment too long, winking when he made a cute remark and even slapping her hand lightly onto his leg when he made a joke. But she was careful to remain sitting with her knees together. She didn’t want to appear too available.

When they landed at Luxor, Bond had taken control and they whisked through the diplomatic gate. He got them a taxi, thankfully clean and air conditioned. They made a slow journey into the city centre, eventually stopping outside the old market place, where Bond asked the driver to wait for half an hour. Karlyn noticed he kept hold of his attaché case, even as he led her through the main avenues of the ancient souk. He walked purposefully and fast. Karlyn was a little disappointed because she wanted to admire the gorgeously decorated silk scarves and the precious stones and gold jewellery. The atmosphere was a heady, bustling hive, noisy and teeming with life. The heavy aroma of sweet perfume mingled with the smell of a hundred spices. Souvenir sellers cackled at them as they strode past, tempting her with knick-knacks, leather goods, fake papyrus and vivid geometric-patterned carpets. Bond stopped at a small, insignificant stall, where the gapped toothed proprietor was selling tea leaves and coffee beans.

“Lau samahat, ana abas ahn Ali Abbas,” said Bond and the coffee seller soundlessly ushered them into the back of the stall.

Inside they found a small, beady looking Arab, dressed in a hot looking suit. He was trying to cool himself with a battery operated miniature fan. Despite his relaxed air, his face was as alert as a hawk. Ali Abbas, head of the Cairo Station, stood up and greeted them both with a warm smile. He spoke quickly to Bond, handing over a booklet stamped Royal Egypt Travel Enterprises, a new set of passports for them both and a small silk purse, that jangled with the sound of coins.

"We'll be following the boat on the Corniche Road; a bit dusty, but I won't be any more than a mile or so away. We'll have you under twenty four hour watch." Abbas recited his mobile number. Karlyn automatically committed it to memory and she assumed Bond had done the same as he made no note of it.

"Good," replied Bond. "Keep yourselves hidden, Ali. We want to avoid any suspicion if we can."

Abbas nodded in agreement. They all shook hands and Bond led the girl back through the bazaar to the taxi. As they sat in the cool interior, Bond opened the silk purse and ten different sized wedding rings dropped into his palm. He held out his hand and said with mock seriousness: "Darling, will you marry me?"

Karlyn fished through the collection of bands until she found a perfect fit. "What took you so long to ask?" she said, coquettishly.

They reached the harbour a little before sunset. The *S. S. Osiris* was an imposing cruise ship, made to look like a Victorian paddle steamer, the kind that the consuls, sultans and viceroys used to travel in. It wasn't powered by steam or paddle, but a modern oil fired boiler and propellers. It was just shy of a hundred metres in length, four storeys high with the addition of a sun deck above the top storey. The ship had forty-eight cabins for a maximum capacity of ninety-six passengers. She was, along with her sister ship the *Isis*, the pride of Royal Egypt Travel, a deluxe luxury liner for the wealthy or those who aspired to wealth.

Karlyn and Bond offered their tickets and passports at the reception office on the quayside. They were welcomed as if they were old friends returning after a long absence, despite the fact they'd never set foot on the ship. While stewards took their baggage on board, Karlyn, Bond and several other passengers sat through a safety video and were given a full run down of the four day cruise including the excursions available. They opted to book any trips on a day-to-day basis, in case it was too hot, they said. They were given a small pile of brochures.

Their personal steward was called Ram and he met them in the beautiful wood panelled atrium on the second floor. There was a central elevator shaft surrounded by a spiral staircase. The floor was polished and rang with their foot falls. The same wood floor ran through all the outside decks and the inside passages. Huge vases full of sunflowers, red poppies and the golden orange tongues called Bird of Paradise decorated each of the floors; Karlyn noted later they were fresh each day. The interior of the ship was delightfully cool. Their cabin was on same floor, one of sixteen Edwardian style suites. It was painted an off white which contrasted sharply with the dark wood skirting and cornices. The furnishings were all of teak. The chaise-long and two big arm chairs were upholstered in pale cream, the cushions in magenta. There was a huge bed, bigger than any bed Karlyn had seen, invitingly turned down, the linen also cream and red. The three lightly smoked glass doors led onto a private balcony. The spacious bathroom was all white marble with gold accessories.

While Bond dealt with the steward, Karlyn ran around the suite, opening doors and letting out oohs and aahs, thrilled at the opulence. Bond was much more methodical and set about checking the light bulbs, the mirrors, the ornaments and the phones for listening devices. Karlyn realised she was forgetting herself. She wasn't here to luxuriate; they had important work to do. She unpacked her things carefully and then watched as Bond did the same. She noticed his case remained half packed. He also opened the attaché case she had seen him keep close at hand. An automatic pistol rested inside the case and he carefully checked it over while she made coffee. Guns didn't interest her; she'd never been trained to use one and her role at Station F didn't require it. Later, she noticed he slipped the weapon under the pillow before he slept.

Bond suggested they wash and change for dinner. He allowed Karlyn to use the bathroom first. She went through her cleansing routine, flustered that she might be taking too long. He made no comment when she appeared, over forty minutes later, wrapped in a big Egyptian cotton bathrobe that fell to her ankles, and said she would use the dresser for her make up. Karlyn methodically applied mascara and eye shadow, colour and gloss lipstick and a little rouge. She repainted her finger and toe nails. Bond re-appeared looking fresh and shining. He was already wearing his suit trousers and dress shirt. She helped him with his cufflinks and cummerbund, and then picked out a discreet black bow tie.

Karlyn went back into the bathroom to put on her dress, not because she was shy, but she felt it more respectful. Tournier had allowed her the use of the Universal Export credit card to purchase some clothes from the Paris fashion houses and she had spent a fabulous afternoon trying on gowns by Lacroix, Christophe Josse and Chanel. She was expected to look stunning at every moment. Tonight's dress was from Emilio Pucci; a deep olive green, long and split to the thigh, shoulder less and virtually backless, but full at the front and held up by a choker at her throat. It was at once both provocative and decent. It showed off the best aspects of her figure, her legs and breasts and behind. She wore her hair down.

When Karlyn re-appeared, Bond was opening a bottle of Bollinger. He popped the cork and she accepted the glass, although she only took a few tiny sips. Karlyn wasn't a big drinker. They sat in silence on the balcony and watched the sun sink beneath the horizon. Eventually Bond broke the hush.

"Are you nervous, Karlyn?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"A little."

She thought he said that for her benefit. Bond stood up and looked out across the Nile. A few hundred yards along the shore they could see the temple complex of Karnak. The imposing ruins were illuminated in a dusky orange, giving them an unworldly quality, as if they were part of the staging for an epic film. He turned around and stared straight at her.

"Don't worry, Karlyn, everything's going to be all right and you'll be fine. You're doing wonderfully well already." Bond's reassurance was accompanied by a warming smile. He carried on: "You can always pretend it's a great adventure. Like being in a movie or something. I know that sounds lame, but you're not trained like me and it won't be easy for you to maintain your concentration. With respect, you're my window dressing. You don't have to say much, just look fantastic. And make sure you stick to the back story we've created."

Bond paused and chinked his glass to hers.

"Cheers," he said. "And, by the way, you do look fantastic."

They lazily took the elevator one floor up. The aft area of the third floor was completely given over to the restaurant and its kitchens. Bond had organised with the steward a particular table, one towards the back of the room. Bond sat facing her and the entrance. Karlyn looked over the whole room and out of the big bay windows that offered a sweeping view back down the river. Bond asked her if she liked it. In truth, Karlyn thought the dining room over fussy. The starched cloths, low lighting, dark woods and heavy curtains gave it a dungeon-like ambience. The heavily upholstered

chairs were almost too comfortable, like sitting on velvet. Confronting her was an array of glasses and cutlery surrounding a folded napkin stitched with the ship's moniker. She preferred the little, busy and bright bistros of back street Paris, where you could be secretively indiscreet. This was much too formal.

Bond asked her to describe some of their fellow diners. Karlyn reeled off a few brief portraits. Bond nodded several times, sometimes asking her for extra details, his eyes always focussed on the mirror behind her. He was checking her observations.

"The minister is here," she said. "And I guess that's his wife sitting with him. She doesn't look very happy."

Karlyn paused while Bond emitted a low snort, as if this not a surprise to him.

"And I can see his counterpart, Mr Farouk. He's dining with five other men. They don't seem to be enjoying themselves."

"I can't see them," said Bond. "Where are they?"

"To the right hand side, at the back. The biggest table."

Bond nodded, but didn't turn around to check.

"The other men are probably his advisors and his security," he said. "Can you see our target?"

"Yes. The table in front of Farouk's. He's the one with that scarring down his face. Hard to miss him."

"I think he found it hard to miss you."

Bond said this without any particular sentiment, his attention taken by the reflection in the mirror.

Karlyn was looking straight at the target. The man gazed long and hard back at her, even when she turned away and continued to talk to Bond. It wasn't a timid look. This man was used to getting what he wanted.

They ate classic French cuisine, *salade de pigeon chaude* followed by a delicious *steak au poivre*. For desert he ate cheese, while she chose the *croix de glaces*. Bond had ordered a bottle of *Croze-Hermitage* and once again Karlyn delicately sipped at her glass.

After dinner they went to the lounge, where a pianist was tinkling a selection of standards on a grand piano. There was a big open air deck and they sat on one of the comfortable divans that lined the rails, Karlyn finally crossing her legs and allowing the split in her skirt to expose as much skin as was decently acceptable. She felt the eyes of hot blooded males swivel in her direction. Bond ordered a vodka martini for himself. Karlyn asked for a long fruit cocktail. The company was good, if a little old. There was a group of Americans, spending their life savings on an around the world trip; Miss Hartlett and Miss Beresford, two spinsters from Wales; Harry Dawson, an industrialist from Texas, on honeymoon with Shay, his exceedingly young wife, his fifth attempt at marriage; the Derbyshires; the Tennants; there was a German Count and Countess; an Austrian Baron and his two daughters, at least that was who he said they were, his attentions suggested something bordering on the illegal; a friendly ancient woman who was a poor relation to the Greek royal family; some

extravagant Russians, a smattering of the international rich as well as those who merely wanted to be rich, and of course the British and Egyptian politicians.

Not everyone was in the lounge, but it was a pleasant gathering, and Karlyn hoped she might make a friend or two here. Bond was attentive for an hour or so and then excused himself, as he wanted to visit the casino.

His lips nuzzled her neck and cheek in a quick kiss and she felt the hairs on her skin stand on end, as if Bond had set off an electric current. She smelt him up close, the wine and cigarettes and that slightly earthy, manly scent. She exhaled long and deep with the thrill of it.

She chatted a little more, finding the company of Shay Dawson the most cheerfully feminine, while the enchanting tales of a travel writer held her and the extended party to attention.

At almost eleven o'clock, she joined Bond. This was less of a casino than a smoky gambling emporium. There were two roulette wheels and a half dozen semi circles of green baize. Only three of the tables were occupied. Bond was seated at one of these, a drink and an ash tray full of stubbed filters at his side. He was playing baccarat and didn't appear to be winning. Two Russians shared his table and they looked eagerly up at her as she approached.

"Darling, you made it," cooed Bond. He introduced her to his playing partners.

"I wanted to make sure you weren't up to any mischief," Karlyn replied and then addressed the Russians: "I hope he isn't stealing all your money."

There was a flutter of laughter. Karlyn stayed for a few hands. Then, as they had discussed earlier, she moved from table to table, pausing behind one player, then another, passing onto another table.

Karlyn knew he'd noticed her as soon as she walked in and the target scrutinised her from behind his cards and the wafts of tobacco smoke. When she approached his table, she was careful to cut him just one glance, a quick flash of her eyes but no smile, before moving on. His was one of the seats she did not stand behind. She walked through onto the rear deck, leaning on the rail. She liked the warmth out here. The cool interiors made her feel chilly.

When Karlyn turned around, he was already standing at the door, an austere smile on his lips. The smile did not transmit to his countenance. He wasn't an unattractive man, tall, muscular and good looking in a swarthy, mysterious way. The scarring down the left side of his face and neck, an unsightly blemish from horrific childhood burns, added an air of raffish diabolique. He looked younger than she expected and he dressed well. When he introduced himself and they shook hands, she noticed his nails were manicured.

"Good evening. I am Muhammad Abdul Razzaq. Welcome to Egypt."

"Karlyn Stock. Thank you. It is very beautiful."

"If I may say, the most beautiful thing in Egypt stands before me now."

Despite herself, Karlyn blushed. She recovered herself quickly. "I'm not sure my husband would appreciate you making that comment."

"Forgive me. I was impertinent. Perhaps I can offer you some refreshment?"

“Yes. Some coffee.”

“Certainly.” He ordered it ‘qahwa saada’, hot and extra sweet, and it arrived in double quick time, with a little fold out table to place their cups on. The stewards recognised the man’s importance, treating him with a cloying deference that he ignored.

They talked for a while, about nothing in particular. Karlyn said she was interested in visiting Edfu, but she was really hoping to top up her tan and relax. Razzaq was diffident, both with his words and with his manner, but Karlyn knew he was searching her replies for opportunities to broach a different subject entirely and his eyes periodically, blatantly, explored her. Karlyn found his attentions not entirely unappealing; he was a mixture of boyish charm and latent menace. Curiously she found the fear of the latter did not distract her from the charm of the former. His manner, she realised, was deceptive, so assured as to be almost mesmeric. After coffee, he said he wanted to return to his game and they shook hands again. Karlyn felt he held her hand a little longer than necessary.

Bond was still at the baccarat table and she draped an arm around him, her breasts rubbing against his shoulder as she bent to whisper in his ear.

“I’m going to bed now, darling, don’t be late.”

James Bond was very impressed with Karlyn Foucart. Robinson had said she was the best looking girl in the service and, at least for now, Bond had to agree with him. She was reading a fashion magazine when he first met her and her long blonde hair was covering half of her beautiful face. She was wearing an uncreased muslin coloured skirt and matching jacket with a rose-pink coloured blouse.

When Bond introduced himself, he was struck mostly by the colour of her eyes, an almost lurid shade of mauve, like lavender petals. He’d noticed it in the photographs, but hadn’t expected her look to be quite so startling. Her big, wide, smile instantly distracted him and after a time he rarely gave her eyes a second thought. She sat straight and proud, not unashamed of her excellent figure and starry looks. She reminded Bond of Christina Lindberg, a notorious Swedish actress of his youth, whose naked poster had hung on the walls of the sailor’s mess.

Karlyn was frivolous and fun. Bond didn’t restrain her, tolerating her girlish flights of fantasy as they created the back story for Mr and Mrs James Stock. He noticed she drunk very little alcohol and smoked rarely. There was something else that made her alive. She seemed to wriggle in her clothes, as if they were an encumbrance. She tossed her hair a lot. She touched his arm and hand. She frequently dipped her head close to his to talk. Her voice was a low sexy whisper, with a trace of a Parisian accent, picked up over the years at Station F. Equally Bond appreciated her businesslike, efficient manner when discussing the operation. Karlyn was calm, unshakable and certainly not naive. Bond thought she would do well, he was certain of that. Although he preferred to work alone, if he had to have a companion, he couldn’t think of a better one to have that Karlyn Foucart.

Bond noted she tensed up considerably as they dressed for dinner. Perhaps the knowledge that she was at last entering the field, that it wasn’t all just a lovely holiday, was finally sinking in. Bond tried to relax her and it seemed to have something of the desired effect. She was certainly very attentive over dinner. He hoped she would be equally as proficient later in the evening.

Bond needn't have worried. Karlyn was demure enough to deflect the attention she gained, so that despite her beauty, people found her modest and unassuming. She could not deflect the powerful fixed perceptions of Muhammad Abdul Razzaq. Bond saw that quite clearly as he chased after her with almost indecent haste once she visited the casino. Bond had surreptitiously observed their conversation. She was very good. At once casually sensual and enticing, while staying tantalizingly circumspect.

When she returned to him and kissed his cheek, he caught the aroma of Ghost, the fragrance he'd spied on the bathroom shelf. It reminded him of apple blossom and roses, the unspoilt countryside and days lost to love. He didn't wait long, finishing a few hands and depositing his modest winnings into the bank.

She was waiting for him. She offered him her big smile and, while he took off his jacket and tie, she poured him a glass of the long forgotten Bollinger. The balcony doors were open and Bond felt a warm breeze. The suite was bathed with a moon lit glow.

"We haven't discussed sleeping arrangements," she said, matter-of-factly.

"There's no need. I'll be perfectly comf – "

She put a finger to his lips. The girl stretched up on her toes and gave him a kiss, a short teasing one, but a kiss whose touch lingered on Bond's lips.

"Don't be silly, James. Get undressed. We're supposed to be married."

Karlyn retreated from him, turning her back and walking towards the bed. She released the choker around her neck and the evening gown fell to the floor. Her skin shone in the blue hue of the night and her silhouette gave form to the delights only hinted at when she was clothed. Bond swallowed the champagne in one, his mouth suddenly dry from the drink and tobacco. He slipped quickly out of his clothes and approached the bed, on which she now lay, admiring him, propped up on one elbow.

He touched her, lightly, uncertain. She belied his worries by reaching for him and offering her mouth again. He ruthlessly took it, searching her with his tongue, licking and biting. He felt the hardness of her nipples and the plumpness of her breasts. He caressed her shoulders and spine, down to her buttocks, and slipped a hand inside her lacy, pointlessly small knickers.

Karlyn broke away, making him watch as she toyed with the gusset of her panties, removing them inch by inch. He seemed to like that and she sneered at his salacious behaviour.

Bond kissed her hard again on the mouth, pushing her onto the soft down of the pillows, and then, starting at her chin, he began to stitch a succession of kisses down her body and across her breasts, weaving ever lower in his explorations. The blue twist of the tattooed serpent pointed towards the apex and formed an erotic pathway to love. She was fashionably hairless, the twin tails of her lips hung invitingly open, revealing her most intimate delights. Bond was acutely aroused. Karlyn seemed to charge him with a preying sexual urge. The girl sighed and moaned and cried, until, relieved, she lay glistening with the heat and the pleasure of those blissful moments.

They made love again a little later, the girl taking charge this time. After she was satisfied, Karlyn told Bond she had wanted him since they shook hands at the airport and that he could have her whenever he wanted and however he wanted.

"We only have four days and nights, James," she whispered. "Four days and nights to provide a lifetime of memories."

"It's an odd little number, 007," said M. "Not our sort of thing at all. The request has come from the F.O. themselves. They certainly don't want this informal conference to be disrupted."

Bond put the dossier back on M's desk, having read the summary of the operation. The Egyptian government were coming under increasing pressure to prevent the spread of Muslim Fundamentalism. Although there hadn't been any recent incidents on the scale of the atrocities that targeted foreigners, those in Alexandria and Dahab, there was a general international acceptance that Egypt could do more. Its trade links with the West were especially good and, because its ruling government was essentially a military secularised one, many E.U. countries saw Egypt as a stepping stone to developing a safer Arab world. Madu Farouk, the Foreign Minister, and a known Western sympathiser, had invited Sir Iain Phillips, the European Foreign Development Minister, to share a four day cruise on the River Nile. Officially it was a holiday; unofficially the approach had been made because Sir Iain, in his ministerial capacity, could help organise a financial package in return for security assurances. Both parties were playing a close game, afraid of any potential leaks which could scupper their negotiations.

The British had become alarmed when the name of Muhammad Abdul Razzaq, head of the S.I.R.D., had appeared on the passenger list. The Surveillance, Investigation and Retribution Department is the most secret arm of Egypt's General Intelligence Service. Officially, they didn't exist, but most foreign secret services were aware that Egypt's appalling human rights record was mainly due to this disparate unilateral office of torturers and assassins. The department's motto is 'Ihna Barra Qanoon', literally 'We Outside The Law', and many Egyptians, even those in government, would refer to Razzaq and his enforcers as The Outsiders. They were notorious for keeping their own brand of justice. The man himself was a hardliner, publicly styled as a pious fundamentalist whose views were anti-West, anti-Zion, anti-woman, anti-liberty, pretty much anti-anything. However the private man, the one the media never had access too or never dared, was a womanizer, gambler, drinker and murderer. He carried the scarring from a fire, the result of Israeli bombings in Sinai, and it seemed to have scarred his mind as well. The reports Bond read suggested the man was psychotic.

"And Razzaq is just the man to do it," commented Bond. "Do we know if Farouk actually wants him to be there?"

"It's unlikely. Of course Farouk isn't the most popular man in the government. He's too interested in peace and reconciliation, always a dubious cachet in the Middle East."

"Can't we just call the whole thing off?"

"That's been considered, 007," explained M, choosing her words carefully. "Sir Iain knows Farouk. Polo or eventing or something equally obscure. He's keen to show a degree of faith. Hopefully it'll be reciprocated. What I want you to do is distract Razzaq. Throw him off the scent a bit; give him something else to think about, something more to his personal tastes. I know you're good at cards, Bond. I think you'd enjoy the challenge."

"And this girl?" he queried. "You really want to set up a honey trap?"

"God, no," replied M firmly. "I don't want her put to any danger. But Robinson tells me she's the best we've got. In terms of looks and..." M flinched a little "...other things. She'll be the perfect second foil. If you two can keep Razzaq occupied, hopefully the politicians can get down to some deal making."

Karlyn shuddered when she heard the words.

She felt as if the whole room was staring at her, not only the people in it, but the very room itself, the walls and doors and ceilings. She had to stop herself from screaming. The words rang around her head again and again. She heard them even above the disapproving whispers that ran around the crowd of onlookers.

"I get to sleep with your beautiful wife."

God, had it come to this? She didn't want to do that. Teasing and flirting was one thing. But not this. Not now. Not when things were complicated by a man called James Bond. Why had he never said anything? Did he know this might happen? Surely, he must have seen the likelihood? Why hadn't he told her, really told her, instead of dressing it up like some grand adventure? God, what had she been thinking to believe it? She must have been so blind, so stupid. Was she so wrapped up in her own exquisite affair, she'd failed to recognise what was happening around her? All those moments when Bond had left her alone: every evening in the lounge, the trip to Edfu, that afternoon on the sun deck, one lonely breakfast. He'd been setting her up, manoeuvring her into situations where the man couldn't fail to see her or talk to her. And Razzaq's appetites were clearly similar, if not more, debauched than Bond's.

Yes, she could see it now. She had not been here solely to play at husbands and wives, to add some glamour to the dull journalist Mr Stock. It had been a ruse all along. And she had unwittingly played her part to perfection, possibly a little too perfect.

She remembered now how Razzaq had escorted her gently around the temple of Horus at Edfu, the best preserved of all the temples in Egypt. They had walked through the massive temple pylon, with its faded hieroglyphs, and into the great halls, guarded by magnificent hawk statues. He'd shown her the reliefs where the stories of the ancients had been drawn. His touch had been light, almost non-existent, and his words were filled with poetry and a wistfulness she found beguiling.

He'd recited the tale of Osiris and Isis, brother and sister gods who had married during the time of sweetness and harmony. Their brother Seth, consumed with jealousy, for he also loved the beautiful Isis, murdered Osiris and cut him into fourteen pieces, tossing them into the River Nile. Isis found thirteen of the pieces and bandaged them together as the first mummy. But Isis was missing his penis, so she constructed a clay phallus, which she inserted through the bandages, reviving him for long enough to conceive a son, the sun god Horus, the god of the golden disc, the god with the all-seeing eye. Horus avenged his father's murder by killing Seth at Edfu.

The narration had been so tender; Karlyn thought he'd sighed with pity when describing Isis binding her lover together. He'd shown her a carving of the story. Isis, disguised as a kite, the throne of kingship over her head, fluttered above Osiris' body, reciting the incantations that would allow him to impregnate her. Looking at the beautiful stonework, Karlyn had felt a strange providence. Perhaps

it was the effect of the heat or the telling of the tale, but she thought Isis looked lonely and desperate, as if time was running away from her.

Razzaq went on to describe how Horus found true happiness with the goddess of love, Hathor, and directed her to other chambers, where the reliefs showed dancing and merriment and fornication. Karlyn could not help but touch the cold stone, imagining the sensations of a thousand years of ritual, as he continued to whisper his hypnotic erotic stories. Desperately she fought it, but she could not help becoming aroused, and eventually she had forced herself away from the man, rejoining the main group to find solace with the older women. Nonetheless, she looked back, and he seemed cold and menacing again.

He had apologised for his behaviour and the remainder of the tour passed without incident, yet all the while Karlyn knew this man was watching her, thinking of her, demanding her. She knew it was what was expected, that this was the exact distraction Bond wanted her to cause. An apology may have sufficed for the morning, but by the afternoon cruise to Aswan, Razzaq had discovered her again. Bond had been sunbathing with her, but suddenly wanted to return to the cabin.

“Stay here, darling, I won’t be long.”

She was alone on the sun deck. She watched his strong back retreat. They had already made love that afternoon and Karlyn was still in the throes of the sensation. She could not stop her pulse racing and her head was filled with the memory of their urgent sex.

She was still reminiscing when Razzaq appeared for his daily swim. She’d noted he always swam at that time of day. Now, looking back, she knew Bond had noted it also – which was why he’d suggested she sunbathe alone. After a few lengths, Razzaq pulled himself out of the pool and, drenched, stood before her blocking out the sun. He was muscular, defined, toned with hardly an ounce of fat on him. Even the scarred tissue did not detract from his fine physique. The sun danced over his shoulder and onto her face and she shielded her eyes to see him.

Razzaq’s expression was unlike any she had seen before; he looked at her with anger and disgust, yet he was clearly also aroused. Karlyn suddenly felt very exposed in her tiny tiger print bikini. He just told her, quickly and with all the worst expletives, what he wanted to do to her, all the while holding himself for her to see. Her breathing became short and her muscles tightened, but she did not look away.

“I’m sorry, I can’t,” was all she could say and it came out like a squawk. “I’m a married lady.”

“Married, perhaps.”

Razzaq gave a contemptuous tut and rearranged himself, before storming away, a towel concealing his immodesty.

Karlyn watched him go. Her pulse was running even faster now and she panted with the tension and the thrill and the danger. She lay back, gasping, passing a hand across her breasts. She was shocked to feel her nipples erect and hard. Instinctively she touched herself. Karlyn started to panic, her mind a muddle of delirious excitement and painful hate and indecent lust.

She was saved by the appearance of one of the little old spinsters, Miss Hartlett. Karlyn had not even realised the old woman had been on the sun deck.

"What a disgusting man!" the spinster exclaimed. "I really should report him to the Captain. I've never seen such behaviour!"

"No, you don't need to get involved. He was very drunk."

"That's as maybe. It's still a disgrace." Miss Hartlett suddenly seemed to remember that there was another victim on the sun deck. "Oh, my dear! I'm quite forgetting! It must be an awful shock. Here, let me get you some mint tea."

Thank goodness Miss Hartlett wasn't in the casino now, thought Karlyn; she would probably have fainted.

The casino was silent, bar the distant sound of the pianist playing the piano two flights above them. Karlyn took a shallow breath, waiting for Bond's reply.

"All right," he said.

Saad Kabul yawned and unscrewed the top on his coffee flask. The night had been, as usual, an uneventful one. The lights had gradually gone out across the boat. The lounge and casino stayed open much later than normal, but eventually they too dimmed and a few cabin lights switched on and off as the final retirees took to their beds.

Saad sat on a camp chair, a blanket wrapped around him. He was on the flat roof of a traditional mud brick crofter's house. The co-operative old couple inside had been tending their family plot for sixty years, but times were not what they were and they would be the last generation to traditionally till the land. Less than two miles away from the farm the Western Desert took hold and the imposing sand dunes and rocky outcrops began to break the plateau.

Saad had a pair of powerful night finder binoculars next to him, the lens caps off, ready for him to use in an instant. He'd not used them for some time, not since about two a.m. when he'd sat up, surprised, to see a dusty black BMW X5, its windows tinted, arrive at the quayside. A small motor launch containing two men had made its way to the S.S. Osiris. The men climbed aboard the steamer and their place was taken by Muhammad Abdul Razzaq. The launch returned to the shore and Razzaq was driven away towards Aswan. Saad took down the registration number of the car and noted the time.

As an afterthought, he contacted Ali Abbas, who was a little disgruntled to be woken. Abbas made some non-committal noises. He thought Razzaq was probably less of a nuisance off the boat than on it. He told Saad not to worry.

Saad had shrugged indifferently at the response. He didn't understand the point of keeping the ship under constant observation if the only thing of note that happened was deemed to be unimportant. Never mind. He consoled himself with the hot coffee.

The sun had risen and the heat of the day was starting to take effect. Two hours more and Abbas would relieve him. He could get some sleep before the full day's journey back down the river to Luxor and home.

Saad squinted.

There was movement on the lower deck. Two men were manhandling a wheeled laundry basket along the deck to the rear of the steamer. Saad raised the binoculars to his eyes. The men were not stewards. He didn't recognise them. Then Saad recalled one of the men he'd seen earlier had a curious gait, as if he was club footed. The second of the two men had a similar limp. Saad made some notes. As he did so he heard the mellow chug of the motor launch making its way across the harbour. Another quick glance at the quay revealed the BMW had returned. Damn! How had he not heard that?

Saad turned back to the boat. The two men were loading the laundry basket into the motor launch. As Saad watched a third man appeared. He recognised him straight away as Khalfani Ben Salim, the nominal second in command to Razzaq. All three men stepped into the launch. Quickly Saad looked about the steamer. There didn't appear to be any stewards in evidence and the bridge was conspicuously empty. This was unusual; there had always been some movement this early in the morning, usually the decks were being swabbed and the engineers were doing their routine checks. It was as if they had all been told to be scarce.

The motor launch made its way back to the quay and the two men struggled to off load the laundry basket. They wheeled it up to the BMW. Salim already had the boot open.

Saad moved his angle of view, trying to see what was in the trolley, but the open boot completely hid the activity there, which was swift and silent. There was some arrogant gesticulating with the man in the motor launch, before he reluctantly took the laundry basket back to the ship. Meanwhile the three men got into the car. Saad followed its rear lights as far as he could. It was definitely on the same road that Razzaq had taken earlier.

Saad considered whether to wake Ali Abbas again. The events he witnessed were certainly peculiar. The laundry basket had seemed very heavy. Perhaps Razzaq had ordered the ship's safe to be opened and he'd stolen the passenger's valuables or the takings at the casino. Knowing Razzaq he probably had a few bottles of Smirnoff added to the loot for good measure. Yes; that would be it. He'd probably received a fake cable or a call ensuring he wasn't on the ship at the time of the theft. It was just the sort of thing he'd got used to hearing about the Outsiders since he started work for the Cairo Station.

He decided not to telephone his superior. He'd be here at seven anyway. Saad made some detailed notes and then sat back in the chair. Content, he struck a cigarette, confident he'd made the best decision.

Bond thought the girl was acting differently, something he detected in her manner and her physicality, a neediness that hadn't been there before. Bond didn't let it concern him. Perhaps she was getting too attached to him. That'd be no bad thing, he thought, as he washed the sweat of the day from his body.

They dressed for dinner and she kissed him on the mouth, but gently so as not to spoil her make up. They ate a traditional cheese and tomato salad, that Karlyn thought a little spicy, and two beautifully grilled fillets of bream. Bond chose a light Margaux, the Pavillon Blanc '99, and he noticed she drank

a little more than usual. She didn't look across to where Razzaq was sitting. In the mirror, Bond could see the man's eyes boring across the table, like a bird of prey, homing in on a kill. This was no longer the charming, if forward, suitor.

It worried Bond a little. So far Karlyn had done a wonderful job, proving a more than ample distraction. Indeed, Razzaq had hardly spoken to Farouk or Sir Iain, at least not in public, and Bond had observed the two ministers sharing more than one drink in the lounge. When most of the passengers had taken the five hour trip to Edfu, Bond had ensured they were relatively undisturbed in Farouk's Panorama Suite, one of the executive cabins at the front of the steamer. Whatever had occurred to upset Razzaq, Bond knew he had to be fully alert. Razzaq's reputation suggested he wouldn't accept an assumed slight with any grace.

Razzaq went straight to the casino. Bond and Karlyn, as usual, went to the lounge for after dinner drinks. Bond stayed for an hour before heading downstairs. As he reached the floor below, a figure stepped across the landing, blocking his path. Bond recognised Khalfani Ben Salim and hoped he didn't look surprised. He tensed, his eyes swivelling left and right over the man's shoulders, waiting for any accomplices.

"Don't worry, Mr Bond, I am alone."

Bond. He'd called him Bond. That was bad news. At least one other person knew he wasn't James Stock. And how many more knew it too? Bond nodded his understanding. "What do you want, Salim?"

Salim ushered him into the elevator and they descended to the lower level. Salim walked outside, along the promenade deck. Bond followed, offering him a cigarette, but Salim declined and he smoked alone.

"I found out who you are, Bond," explained Salim, "It took me a while. Your service is very thorough. There really is a James Stock listed at the *Financial Times*. He has not posted a single report in sixteen years on the foreign news desk."

Bond smiled. Worth taking that bit of information back to M, he thought. "So what happens now, Salim?"

"I want to warn you. Don't antagonise Razzaq tonight. Everything is going against him. We've had surveillance teams listening to Farouk's conversations." Salim saw Bond register surprise and allowed himself a little smile. "We used amplified micro-bugs. In the fresh flowers. Those poppies are everywhere. That's why we're talking outside."

"And what have you found out?"

"Farouk's done the deal. It's good politics. Razzaq isn't happy."

"I can well believe it."

"He doesn't like rejection. And when I told him about you and your 'wife' – well, he went out of control. I can't promise to stop him tonight."

Bond looked at Salim, with his tired expression and drooping moustache. He looked more like an overworked accountant than a seasoned killer. For whatever reason, he didn't see Bond as his

enemy and he had just provided the link to both Razzaq's and Karlyn's strange behaviour. Bond tossed his cigarette away.

"Razzaq knows who I am?"

"Yes," Salim said, grasping Bond's arm in gentle restraint. "Stay away from his table tonight, Bond. Tomorrow he's going to his lodge on Lake Nasser. He'll get drunk and forget this stupid charade."

"Thank you, Salim," replied Bond, "but I have a role to play too. And while your paymaster is on this boat, I'm going to keep playing it."

Bond could feel his heart beating a little faster. So, Razzaq was rattled. Well, thought Bond, perhaps it was time to shake his tree a little more, teach the arrogant son of a bitch a lesson. Involuntarily, Bond stood taller, primed for conflict over the tables. His expression took on a sturdy, unflinching facade. He loved the electric atmosphere of a casino. He loved the thrill of winning on the turn of a card and equally the despair of a big loss. He loved the challenge of beating the house at dice and roulette. He loved pitting his wits across the baize at an anonymous opponent. He especially loved the old big establishments in France and Italy where the rooms were fit for kings and real royalty sat at your table, sharing in the highs and lows of the night.

The casino here was more of a gentleman's club, with each passenger given an honorary membership. There wasn't an awful lot of gambling, some came just to use the bar and play a few hands of whist. Bond had observed a long winded game of bezique and a few turns of the roulette wheel, but most of money was at the two baccarat tableaus and at the poker table.

As it was essentially a private establishment, members could play their own game. Bond had observed Razzaq preferred an old fashioned version of draw poker, but with deuces or aces wild. He went straight to Razzaq's table, taking a seat opposite him at the semi-circle of green cloth. Immediately Bond felt those angry eyes measuring him. He requested his winnings from the bank, which he'd held over each night, an ash tray and a vodka martini.

Bond hadn't spent much time at Razzaq's table, usually approaching when the table was tired, deliberately extending the Egyptian's night by playing several nonchalant hands. His immediate approach was unusual and Razzaq noticed it. He sat back, taking a long swig at his drink.

"I have been watching you, Mr Stock," said the Egyptian. "You are a clever gambler. But you avoid my table. Why do you want to play with me now?"

"Let's just say, I have a feeling things are not going your way today."

If Bond expected a reaction, it wasn't the one he got. Razzaq smiled. It was a twisted, ugly grin, but it held a fascinated bent of pleasure, as if someone worthy was finally crossing swords with him. He almost laughed when he replied.

"We will see. I have more than a feeling, Mr Stock. I have an eye for these things. An instinct."

"Even an eye blinks, Mr Razzaq."

Bond didn't consider poker to be the most refined of card games. Like its childish cousin, blackjack or twenty-one, he found it too easy to build a lead. He appreciated you could lose as easily, but the odds were lower. The sheer, cruel fortune of the baccarat table was still his preferred game of

choice. He hoped this evening would be as enthralling as the summers he spent in the gambling cathedrals of France.

The game started slowly. There were only four players, including the Count, but gradually this increased to seven. Bond built his winning cautiously; he bet low and safe unless he was assured of victory. Once or twice he lost a sizeable sum, but gradually, inevitably, his pile of chips began to increase in size, matching the stake Razzaq was acquiring.

Bond lost a cool \$10000 when he folded, uncertain that his pair of aces was a winning hand. Angry, he excused himself. He washed his face in the toilets. His eyes looked tired. It was one a.m. and he'd been playing for almost three hours. He'd noticed the game had taken on another dimension. Interested observers, hearing the ante had increased to five thousand were craning their necks around the table. There was the occasional clap or hum of approval after a coup came off and the sighs of sympathy when a good hand was lost. Razzaq didn't work to a system and played with an abandon that suggested sooner or later he had to lose. Incongruously, his winnings kept piling up. He was disguising an astute gambling brain behind bold, flamboyant actions and bids.

When Bond returned to the table, he saw Karlyn waiting for him. She touched his shoulder and said she would be retiring. It had been a long day. Her last words were said with a curt glance towards Razzaq.

"Stay a little, darling," suggested Bond. "I won't be long. I'd like to have you with me when I win."

Razzaq's expression didn't change, but his eyes shifted from Bond to the girl and back again. His fingers reached out and curled around the edges of his cards. He started with a minimal bid, drew two cards, another raise and then won the hand with a \$20000 coup with three of a kind. One of the Russians quit the table at this point. He probably didn't miss the money, but the losing was upsetting him.

Bond won two hands, the first with a pair of threes and some optimistic bluffing, the second with knaves and nines. The latter forced out an American, who'd come in late and lost heavily. Bond's pot stood at some forty thousand. The chips made impressive stacks. Despite the ten to twenty thousand bets that were suddenly riding on every hand Bond didn't feel any pressure. He was relaxed, in his element. He rarely considered his opponent; he continued to play his game, matching his bets against the cards he held. When they were good, he came in heavy; when they were mediocre, he was cautious, bluffing; when dealt a poor hand he surrendered it quickly for the smallest loss.

Razzaq won, taking the Count for another ten grand loss. He was loose, the alcohol taking its effect. He rarely spoke during the game, only to acknowledge a particularly fine win. Yet Bond felt his presence hovering over the table, the piercing stare designed to frighten the mortal gambler. He seemed to take particular relish in acquiring Bond's money.

The dealer slipped the cards across the table and Bond took the quickest of glances and then, without viewing, he reshuffled the five cards into order. It was an appalling hand. There was nothing in it. The knave of diamonds was his highest card. Otherwise he had a rum deal, the four, five and six of clubs and a nine of hearts.

When the first interval bets started, Bond had to hide his surprise at how quickly it escalated. Almost without a second thought he ventured ten thousand. Razzaq matched it and raised him. Both Bond and the Count shared an unspoken word and checked. The pot sat at sixty thousand.

The Count drew one card, but the edges of his mouth twitched, a sign he hadn't improved his hand. Bond had got used to seeing it. He considered his own move. The knave meant nothing; one to get rid. He'd recently won with nines and suspected the shoe may be running dry of them. His best chance looked like a low flush in clubs, so he discarded the high nine as well. Razzaq confidently switched only one card.

Bond took a quick disinterested glance at his replacement cards. When the second betting interval started the Count folded, despite his three tens. Whatever cards Razzaq held they had to be high and mighty. But Bond was confident too. There was something brazen in Razzaq's manner, particularly over this hand. The way he had failed to tickle the corner of his mouth, failed to swill the ice in his drink and failed to scratch the scars surrounding his ear. His natural pensive habits were not in evidence. Bond had seen this reaction earlier in the evening. And that time Razzaq had won with a full house. The secret was out.

Bond, against even his own better judgement, put his whole stake on the line. Razzaq wasn't bluffing, but he couldn't see Bond's hand. And then Razzaq made that astonishing offer which sent a ripple of amazement around the casino.

"If I win, I get to sleep with your beautiful wife."

Bond looked at Karlyn. If she could have run away she would have. Bond recognised the signs of fear in her face. He had to make the decision fast. The gauntlet was thrown down and instinct told him to accept the challenge. But could he live with a mistake of this magnitude? Would the girl forgive him if he lost? Was his intuition, honed on those lonely nights watching faces and hands of high rollers, enough to risk the girl's virtue?

"All right," he said.

Karlyn watched Razzaq's fingers turn over his cards and separate them individually on the table. His expression didn't alter, but his hawk eyes switched to see the reaction on her face as he revealed his kings and queens. She almost gasped. A winning hand. Oh, god, no! She felt physically sick. What had Bond done? There were groans and murmurings around the table. What hand did the Englishman have? Could he have the beating of that full house? And what of the woman? The whispers sounded deafening to Karlyn's ears.

Then there was silence as Bond flipped over his own hand, revealing those glorious five cards. A straight flush. Another impossible winning hand. What must the odds have been? A thousand? A million? Two such wonderful combinations in the same run of the shoe. It was a miracle. She exhaled long and hard. The breath must have tickled Bond's neck, because he looked at her and smiled. A smile that said everything was always going to be all right.

When the two new cards had first flashed across the baize, Bond had delicately bent the corners. He hid his amazement by taking a long pull on his cigarette. It was the luckiest of lucky combinations: a two and an eight of clubs. The deuce was a wild card, allowing Bond to hold it as a seven. He now had a straight flush, a low run for sure, but a winner all the same. Bond knew it and knew the shoe had turned against the man opposite, the torturer and murderer, the psychopathic, licentious, lunatic head of the Outsiders.

Bond said nothing in victory. He made a point of completely ignoring Razzaq, who made no movement except a vindictive curl of the lip. Bond stood up from the table and asked the floor manager to remove his winnings, leaving a thousand for the dealer. Then he turned, took Karlyn by

the hand and escorted her out of the smoky adult playground. He could hear the sounds of excitement receding as they walked up the passageway to their cabin.

Muhammad Abdul Razzaq finally blinked. Astounded, he cast his eyes back down at the cards he had been certain would guarantee him a victory. The man Bond and the woman Karlyn had already disappeared, but he would not forget. This was not about money. This was about reputation. Not only had these two agents from England disturbed his plans for Farouk, they had made him look a fool. Vengeance had to be swift and already he had a plan of retribution. Eagerly he searched the room for Salim. It was time for action at last.

The heat of the day was only sated by a mild breeze. It breathed its gentle path across Lake Nasser, tickling the skin of the torpid body that lay stretched out on the lawn. The man was safe from the sun underneath the giant awning, but he could not escape the heat. The swimming pool provided some short term relief, but Khalfani Ben Salim wasn't much of a swimmer. Equally he didn't want to retreat into the air conditioned chill of the villa because that would bring him too close to the sordid affairs of his superior.

Salim didn't drink or smoke. It was unknown whether he had ever had a woman or, possibly even, a man. He was almost sixty years old and, while not particularly devout, he attended the mosque every Friday and on Holy Days. He had made pilgrimages on foot to Mecca and Medina. He had trained as a doctor, but never used the title and no longer printed his qualifications. He was not a doctor now; not officially. Salim's role was quite simply Deputy Chief of the S.I.R.D. He hadn't meant to become involved in the security services, the career had rather fallen into his lap.

He had been born and raised in Al-Arish, a town on the North coast of the Sinai Peninsula, and his wealthy family's house sat on a hill overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. In 1967, during what became known as the Six Day War, the Israelis launched a lightning invasion of the area. Salim's political education began at this point and, while he made hard steady progress as a medical student, he began to develop a deep sense of the injustices in and around the Arab world. When Egypt recaptured some of Sinai in 1973 Salim was serving as a medical officer in the army. He was commended for his bravery during a missile attack on a village, when he saved the lives of seven children trapped in a collapsing hospital. Quite by accident he became something of a father figure to one of those children, an orphan boy who suffered terrible burns. The boy was bright and intelligent, but had suffered an appalling childhood, beaten by his uncles and abandoned during the war. The boy's name was Muhammad Abdul Razzaq.

Salim sponsored Razzaq through his education. The boy was headstrong, often devious, with a streak of nastiness, but he nonetheless excelled at school and joined the army. Salim meanwhile became involved in politics and joined the National Democratic Party, first at a local level and then later sitting on the Shura Council, where his war hero status made him popular. Razzaq however, came under the influence of the Islamic Brotherhood, a fundamentalist action group, and, having completed his officer training, his promising career in the military came under scrutiny. Again it was Salim who helped him, arranging, on his personal guarantee, a transfer for him to the G.I.S. Here Razzaq's intellect was prized and his indifference and cruelty became feared. Razzaq's progress was swift, but Salim's career stalled. The orphan did not forget his only true pater. When Razzaq was offered the post of Chief Surveillance Officer, he offered Salim a position as his aide. Salim initially

refused, but Razzaq blinded him with riches and comfort, and for once Salim let his principles be drowned.

Salim found he was required at interrogations and executions, essentially as a doctor. Often his sole purpose was to keep a prisoner alive and prolong the torture. Salim began to realise that there was a monster within the orphan boy, a devil in disguise. His lusts were as prevalent as Salim's were repressed. But he needed sound counsel and as Razzaq ascended to the top of his career ladder, even entering the cabinet, Salim was there with advice and guidance, exactly as he had been in the orphan's youth. Salim didn't like the methods or notoriety of the S.I.R.D., but he understood its intentions. The governments of the West may complain about human rights violations, but they did not know how close to the brink of civil unrest Egypt had been in the last decade. Despite their reputation, the Outsiders had actually maintained many freedoms in the country, ensuring stability where they might have been chaos. Salim was both proud and ashamed of his work with them, but often he wished he had stayed a doctor in Al-Arish.

The peace of morning was interrupted by the villa doors sliding open and a tall, naked man appeared. He carried a bottle of a spirits in one hand and an empty glass in another. He staggered towards Salim and planted his backside down on a sun lounger.

"You not taking a turn, Ali?" he said gruffly

"No. How is she?"

"She's fine." The man let out a lecherous chuckle. "A hot bitch that one. Where did you find her?"

Salim looked at the ogreous face. It hurt him to be surrounded by such ignorance. They may be loyal, but that was no substitute for a little enlightenment. He had to get away from this appalling creature. Salim raised himself off the lawn and walked back inside the villa, crossing the big comfortable lounge with its sunken seated area.

The villa was shaped like a 'T' and while the ground floor was occupied by a lounge and dining room at the tail end, the top of the building shared garages, a gym, a reception room and the security office. Salim headed for the latter. Only one of the three guards was on duty, the others were indulging themselves with the woman. The man turned around, expectantly, but his face fell when he saw it was only Salim.

"Send one of them to relieve me, Ali. I'm getting bored. I want to join the fun."

Salim could see the fun he talked about on one of the monitors. He sniffed unappreciatively.

"Anything unusual happening?"

"No, it's all quiet. Some idiots were messing about in a boat by the woods, but I sent Nen to sort them out." The guard almost laughed. "He wasn't very happy about it."

"When was that? Have they gone?"

"I don't know. Let's see."

Suddenly Salim was alert and a little angry. This fool had spent so long watching the proceedings upstairs, he'd forsaken his job. The guard enlarged one of sixty four images from the duty monitor.

The image was of a small sailing craft, turned on its side on the shore line. The guard nervously clicked onto the neighbouring cameras. The third camera revealed the prone bare legs of a man, twisted at an awkward angle, sticking out of the bushes and trees that bordered the villa to the East.

“You idiot,” said Salim, with no sympathy. He leant forward and clicked through the cameras, methodically checking the likely path any intruders would have taken. His brow creased in annoyance. He ignored the bleating of the man next to him. He found them in a few seconds, a group of four men, skirting the woods that approached the lawns and the swimming pool. They were dressed in light coloured slacks and shirts with no attempt at disguise or camouflage. They were armed with revolvers, which looked like Russian makes, possibly APSes. One of the men was white. Salim zoomed in on the little group, which was splitting in two.

The guard looked at Salim. “Isn’t that – “

“Yes,” Salim said thoughtfully.

“What are we going to do? We must tell Razzaq.”

Salim stared at the monitor for what seemed an age while the guard shifted uneasily in his seat. “Do you want to tell him?” asked Salim sternly.

“No, I thought, perhaps...”

“Of course you did. It’s all right. I’ll tell him,” Salim was thoughtful; his calm untroubled voice reassured the worried man. Salim turned to the corner of the room where the guard’s Kiparis sub-machine gun was propped in the corner. He reached for it and spun it in his hands. “You had better take this.”

The guard automatically stretched out his hands before he realised Salim was pointing the weapon directly at his chest, the nozzle no more than a few inches away. Confusion gave way to shock as he checked the expression on Salim’s face. For once, the doctor’s features were hard and cold. He’d heard Salim had killed before, but he never believed it possible. Until now. Powerfully, Salim grabbed the man’s shoulder and thrust the machine gun forward onto his breast bone, his finger squeezing once on the trigger.

When Ali Abbas finally woke James Bond, almost three hours had elapsed since Saad had observed the curious goings-on at the quayside. He’d relieved his young assistant promptly at seven o’clock and asked for the night’s details. He read the notes quickly, his expression becoming more worried by the second.

“What was in the bag?” he asked abruptly.

“I couldn’t see.”

“And you didn’t think this was worth telling me about?”

Realising he may have made a mistake, Saad said nothing. Abbas stabbed at the digits on his mobile phone. There was no reply. He set off for the *Osiris* immediately.

They found Bond alone in his suite, his gun on the floor. He wasn't conscious, but his eyes were wide open. He'd been drugged with some sort of ketamine, not much of a dose, but enough to put him to sleep for a few hours. Abbas revived him under a cold shower and got him to consume copious cups of sweet coffee until he was sick. Saad and Abbas walked him around the suite until Bond's muscles became fully active. His mind buzzed with peculiar dreamlike memories. There were leering men playing games of poker; champagne and love; a hot trip through the desert; soldiers were in his bedroom; there was a girl. It was her face that finally brought Bond back to reality.

"Where's the girl?" he snapped.

"She's not here, James. We think Razzaq has her."

"Jesus Christ, Ali, how the hell did that happen?"

Bond was angry, but part of his ire was directed at his own negligence. Khalfani Ben Salim had warned him, but he'd ignored the warning and worse, when the poker game was over, he had assumed the game really was finished. Bond wasn't one to dwell on the past. It was a done now. He didn't listen to the muttered explanations until Saad mentioned the car had taken the road to Lake Nasser.

"Of course. The lodge," Bond said. "Salim told me there's a house on Lake Nasser."

"I know it." Abbas nodded. "A big modern affair about thirty miles up the shoreline. You want to see it? Do you have an internet connection?"

While Saad continued to walk Bond around the room, Abbas switched on the suite's home P.C. system and logged into Google Earth, zooming as close as he could onto the secluded property. Bond viewed the site without optimism. The villa was set on an open stretch of headland, surrounded on both sides by palms and thick bushy undergrowth, hiding, according to Abbas, a six foot high wall. The ends of these walls materialised out of the woods and ran to the shore. The house itself was "T" shaped with the tail pointing towards a private beach on the lake. The front entrance was gated and guarded.

"How many men do you think he has there?"

"I cannot say. He has six guards. They run the shifts at the gate and in the security room. Maybe there are more today."

"Count on it. How many are we?"

Abbas' face broke into a wicked smile. He was part Bedouin and that side of him occasionally came to the forefront. If there was fight to be had, it would be a most welcome distraction. He was very particular to always recruit pure or part Bedouin to the Cairo Station, chiefly because they didn't really like the Arabs, but also because, from an early age, their father's taught them to fight.

"Four," he said. "But they won't expect any kind of assault. Not during the day. We could storm the gate. I am sure we can find a truck."

"No," replied Bond. "The drive is too long and wide. There's nowhere to hide. We need to get close." He stretched out a finger, indicating the woods. "There's a lot of cover here. And there would be easy access into the villa through the patio."

Abbas nodded. "We could approach from the lake. A short walk perhaps."

"Or a boat."

It wasn't much of a plan and Bond knew it. But he owed it to Karlyn. Whatever those bastards were doing to her, he had to stop it. For a moment he wondered if he ought to inform M. He decided any suggestion of attacking the home of the Head of the S.I.R.D. would be rejected. He had to do this independently.

They took Abbas' uncomfortable battered Ford Galaxy. The men were all armed and Bond found some grim amusement in the knowledge they equipped themselves with Russian guns. The drive took a little under an hour, but Bond knew from Saad's reports it was almost five hours since Karlyn's abduction. Bond silently prayed she'd been dosed up like him. Perhaps she hadn't woken yet.

The driver, Hamad, slowed as they passed the frontage of the villa, protected by the high wall. Bond could see a guard standing by an old fashioned sentry box a few feet inside the yard. Hamad drove on into the next village where he stopped the car by the shore. Some local fishermen were tending their nets and Abbas negotiated a deal with one of them to use a spare boat. It had a small outboard motor. The four of them settled into the boat, Abbas at the tiller, and chugged the six or so miles up the shore.

As they drew closer Bond could see CCTV cameras pointing out towards the lake in four directions, covering all angles of approach. He told Abbas to head towards the shore. He didn't want to be spotted yet.

They beached the little craft and pulled it as far into the trees as they could, trying to hide it in the sweet papyrus. Bond took the lead through the shelter of tall palms and wide sycamores. They did not speak and their silence allowed them to hear the approaching footfalls of the guard. Bond motioned for the men to crouch. The cameras must have observed them on the lake. That meant trouble.

The guard had walked down the length of the wall, on the inside of the property, and then rounded it, taking the beach front route to the abandoned boat. He was dressed in only a pair of shorts. Even his feet were bare. He carried his Kiparis loosely by his side. The sun made him dry and he struggled to think clearly through a haze of vodka. This was inconvenient. He had hoped for another turn with the girl. There wasn't any sign of the four men, but there were some untidily covered foot prints leading into the woods and towards the villa. Curious, he thought, why would they be doing that? Everyone knew this was the house of Muhammad Razzaq. He skirted the woods, expecting to catch the men when they appeared at the other end of the bushes. It was quiet, only the crickets seemed to be making a noise.

Bond saw him through the palms and the tall papyrus grass. He was too far away. Bond stayed still, silent. This was the waiting game. Either the guard would lose interest or he would venture in this direction. Bond had to wait a good minute as the guard swept the area along by the wall, shaking his head. He turned his back and Bond struck. The guard was probably no more than five feet away, but Bond didn't have a clean run at him. He leapt through an assortment of flora, making what he

thought was an almighty noise. The guard had half turned when Bond's knee smashed into the small of his back. His right hand went for the machine gun knocking it out of the guard's grasp, while the left grappled at his throat and neck, taking a firm hold and cutting off the man's vocal chords. Bond brought his other hand to bear, clasp his head in a deadly lock. There was a noiseless few seconds of struggle before Bond twisted firmly, expertly. There was a crack of snapping vertebrae and the guard slumped into Bond's arms.

Bond lay the lifeless body down. He ordered Hamad to tidy the mess. Together Bond and Abbas mounted the wall and slid down the other side. They reconnoitred as close to the villa and the gardens as they dared. They saw one man sunning himself on a reclined chair, apparently drunk. As they watched, Razzaq appeared on the patio. He wore a short cotton bathrobe and shorts and carried a tumbler half full of drink. He took a long swig at it and started a conversation with another man, who appeared a few seconds later. This one walked with a limp. The two men sat under the awning sharing some obscene jokes. Bond and Abbas slunk back into the undergrowth to talk to Saad and Hamad, who had by now scaled the wall. Despite knowing where four of the men were, the odds were still not great. Bond told Saad and Hamad to hold their position, covering the rear of the house. Slowly he and Abbas crept further along the wall, keeping deep in the undergrowth, until they could see the guard post at the front of the property.

Bond looked at the front of the villa. It was a concrete building, squat and ugly, with the first floor extending out from the main frame, creating a pillared portico across the front. Bond couldn't see any sign of an entry system or a doorbell. He didn't have the time for lock breaking. If the door wasn't open he'd have to shoot the lock out. That would make a lot of noise. Bond waited an agonising few minutes until the sentry was preoccupied with lighting his cigarette. Instantly Bond ran across the open space to the porch, all the while keeping his eyes fixed on the back of the sentry. His hand reached for the door handle. Before he touched it, and to his astonishment, the door swung open.

Khalfani Ben Salim beckoned him inside. Bond hesitated, uncertain. He raised his Walther to the firing position, but Salim didn't react. Bond ventured into the lobby. He had one minute before Abbas opened fire.

"Where is she?" he hissed urgently.

Salim inclined his head to the stairs. "The third room on the right."

"Where are the others?"

"They're in the lounge."

"Have we been spotted?"

Salim shook his head. Bond nodded. Quite why Salim wanted to help him, he didn't know. At the moment he didn't care. Bond crossed the lobby and ascended the stairs, his revolver at the ready, listening for movements, grateful for a deep thick carpet to muffle his footfalls. Vaguely he saw Salim retreat into a room at the front of the house. Bond could hear a toilet flushing and then, just as he reached the landing, a door to his left opened.

A large pot-bellied man, unshaven and slightly sweaty, emerged from the bathroom. He held a towel over his front and was grinning, calling out something in Arabic that Bond interpreted as being a lewd comment. When he saw Bond he stopped still, initial recognition blending with fear as the

reality of his situation dawned. Bond's finger jerked on the trigger and the crash of the salvo of shots sounded loud in his ears. The thump as they sank into the man's fat fleshy chest and belly was buried under the sudden explosion of sound that shook the building as his three cohorts opened fire outside. The fat man collapsed, screaming, but not yet dead. Bond silenced him with a bullet to the head.

Below him Bond heard the crash of the front door being kicked open. He saw Ali Abbas entering the villa, gun in hand. He gave Bond a nod, indicating he had dealt with the sentry outside. Abbas headed towards the living room, his back against the protecting wall on the left.

Bond walked purposefully along the landing. The gun shots echoed up to him from all around the house. He concentrated hard, trying to separate the sounds, listening for any noises upstairs. He checked each of the first two rooms. They were both unoccupied. Bond moved slowly to the third door. It was already ajar and he pushed it with the tip of his toe. The door swung inwards. Bond heard the chunky clang of an empty cartridge being disposed of. It was immediately followed by the snappy click as a new one slammed into the breach of a gun.

Bond cautiously peered into the room. The sunlight made him wince, shining straight through the open terrace doors, the net curtains blowing in the breeze. The sound of gunfire was louder here. There was a figure crouched in the far doorway, his back to Bond, his gun arm resting limply by this side. He was dressed in a white singlet and shorts, which were now splattered with red. He breathed hard and fresh blood soaked his shooting arm, dripping onto the floor.

Bond edged forward, taking careful aim. The man at last realised he was not alone. His head swivelled and he raised the gun, turning towards Bond. He was a bearded man and flecks of blood and spittle nestled in his moustache. Bond smiled grimly as he squeezed the trigger. The figure jerked backwards through the doorway, new wounds exploding on his chest and face. His gun didn't even fire.

The girl was prostrate on the bed. She was nude, her legs splayed. The sheets were stained and dirty and there was more mess on her skin. As Bond drew closer he caught the stale stench of sweat and semen. All her orifices had been assaulted and there were welts and bruises across her back, buttocks and arms. Her face was relatively unspoilt, but a black eye was starting to form and her cheeks were both red. Her mouth was bleeding from cut lips. The vivid red marks on her wrists, ankles and face suggested she had been bound and gagged. Bond could see bloodied skin congealed under her nails. She must have fought like an alley cat, desperately, hopelessly, but eventually the fight must have evaporated out of her.

As he knelt beside her, his feet brushed two hoops of jewellery. There were blotches of blood on the sheets, from a wound where the rings had been torn from her belly. The serpent tattoo no longer excited him, seeming to snake away from the filth.

The girl groaned, moving her head a little. She didn't seem to recognise Bond, only that someone else was in the room. He bent down close to her and whispered in her ear: "Karlyn, darling, it's me. It's James."

Her bloodshot eyes seemed to focus on his face and then they closed. She could only just say the word: "No..."

The gunfire had died down from outside. Bond hoped to God his team had won the day. Bond went to the terrace, crouching and inching his way on hands and knees past the dead man and up to the

fringe of the balcony, where he peeped over the parapet. He saw a scene of carnage. The guards had been caught in a three way crossfire; Abbas and his men had made an exceptionally thorough job of it. The sleeping man hadn't even made it off the chair, his back now featuring a gaping black hole.

There were four more dead bodies strewn across the lawn and the patio while the man with the limp was floating in the swimming pool, blood spreading like an oil slick around his body. Abbas and Saad appeared below him, both splattered with blood, but otherwise unharmed. Bond stood up and the three men exchanged waves.

"We need a car. Quick!" called Bond.

He went back inside and tore one of the net curtains down. He folded it and then gently he wrapped the girl's unresisting body inside the netting. He slipped his Walther into his waistband and then lifted the girl into his arms. He carried her down the stairs, her head lolling against his shoulder. Saad was already holding the front door and Bond carried Karlyn out to the same BMW X5 that had carried her to this dreaded house.

Bond returned to the villa, where Abbas met him in the lounge. Hamad was sitting on a chair, his gun and gaze focussed on the living area where two more guards sat, unhurt but shaken. Hamad was wounded in the arm, but he didn't seem to be complaining. There were two more bodies sprawled at his feet. One was dead, the other was barely alive: Muhammad Abdul Razzaq lay squirming and coughing blood.

Bond descended the few steps down into the seated area. He stood over the dying man, whose face and chest was a mass of blood. The once arrogant body looked helplessly pitiful.

"You bastard, Razzaq. Death's too good for you."

"And what have you achieved, Bond?" Razzaq's voice was a strangled croak. "Revenge? I don't think so. It wasn't that hard for her." He spat out some fresh blood, breathing hard from his damaged lungs. "The bitch even enjoyed the rough stuff."

Bond didn't hesitate. He pulled out the Walther and took aim at the grinning demented mouth, firing just once. It was over in a second.

There was a long silence, during which Khalfani Ben Salim entered the room, gingerly treading through the broken glass and debris on the floor. He carried the Kiparis sub-machine gun in his hands and momentarily everyone in the room froze, while he took in the scene in one sweeping movement of his eyes.

When he spoke he addressed Hamad. "You, tie those men. I'll deal with them later. I can't have any witnesses."

Hamad did as he was told and the guards' expressions registered joy, then panic and fear, as they realised Salim was not a saviour and their execution was to come the same way they had killed so many – a bullet in the back of the head.

"What's this all about, Salim?" asked Bond. "Why are you helping us?"

"I'm not helping you, Bond. I'm helping myself. And Farouk. Perhaps even Egypt, I don't know." Salim said the words carefully, as if he had only just thought of a good enough reason. "Razzaq's methods, his ideals also, are too old fashioned. We have to move on from fear."

Bond didn't know if the death of one lunatic would solve all the problems in Egypt's administration, but maybe it was a start that someone as respectable and respected as Salim was beginning to do something about it. Bond extended his hand to the new Head of the Outsiders. Salim's handshake wasn't warm. His deep, hooded eyes, peered at Bond, but seemed to bypass him completely. The last thing on Salim's mind was anyone's gratitude.

It came out in the papers as a sort of internal coup, although there was no suggestion that the security services had wiped out their own enforcer, or that Bond and Abbas had been involved. Khalfani Ben Salim did get appointed the next Head of the S.I.R.D. and took his place in the cabinet. He resolved to follow a code of practice unheard of in the Egyptian military and it made him unpopular. It was only a few months later that he too was usurped and assassinated. Bond read about that incident in the dispatches one morning. He felt a curious sense of loss. He probably owed Salim his life. The girl certainly did. The doctors in Aswan had been shocked by her condition. They passed less comment about the blood on the men's clothes and the wound to Hamad's arm. While the hospital staff could treat her wounds, Bond didn't want them or the police starting any investigation, so he got one of the diplomats down from Cairo, who took control of the situation. Before nightfall, Karlyn, with a British nurse escorting her, was airlifted to Cyprus.

Bond had reported back to M as soon as he could, but she was already aware of Razzaq's death; the wires were hot with conspiracy theories. When the girl was safely out of the country, Bond verbally went through the whole story, exactly as it happened, from start to finish. M was satisfied; but rebuked him for the recklessness of his gambling, which was a fait accompli she considered dangerous and clumsy, however it had turned out. She did ask about the money and Bond, who had hoped that detail might be overlooked, sheepishly offered to donate the winnings to the Service Benevolent Fund. Bond wrote his reports well into the night and fell asleep as the dawn rose. He had hoped to follow the girl to Cyprus, but M wanted him back in London for a full and frank debriefing.

Bond never saw Karlyn Foucart after that day. They hardly had any contact while she was in the hospital. When she left for the helicopter, Bond squeezed her hand and smiled. He said simply: "It's going to be all right, Karlyn, you'll be fine."

He wanted to say "just think of it like an episode from a movie" but the words seemed hollow and trite. The girl would recover from the physical wounds easily enough. But there would be months of tests for diseases and years of counselling. Her service career was finished. Her young capacious life had been shattered in one morning by an act of appalling violence.

There was nothing he could say. He hadn't protected her when she needed him, for that he would always remain sorry. He didn't want to think of the beaten, stained, lifeless bundle of flesh and bone. He wanted to remember the excited, flirtatious and beautiful woman, whose eyes twinkled and whose body smelt of roses and who made love with a wild passion that brought tears to her lavender eyes.

Bond knew he was to blame and even the best of memories didn't erase the fact. He'd gambled her on the turn of the cards and in the blink of an eye, her world had changed forever.

Six:
December:
Epilogue

The ice cubes rattled against the edge of the thick tumbler. Swirls of water wrinkled the smooth amber glow of the whisky.

James Bond lifted the glass and tipped the contents down his throat in one swift gulp. A soft undercurrent of figs tickled his throat as the Oban single malt made its descent down his gullet. He raised a satisfied smile and winked at Alice, the coquettish barmaid he had been trying to entice into a kiss under the mistletoe. She was a blonde tease who revelled in the attention her short, tight skirts brought from the punters in Lotts. Today she was dressed as one of Santa's reindeer: a red mini-dress with fluffy white cuffs and collars, black stockings and a pair of illuminated antlers on her head. She was enjoying herself. She had every right to on 24th December.

Christmas, thought Bond, what a dreary time of year. Stolen embraces under a kissing bough and a few drinks were fine, but the false merriment, the infernal party music and the polite gestures for kith and kin wore Bond down. Even Penelope remarked on his foul mood, bless her.

Bond had left the office during the early afternoon, offering Penelope a kiss of catholic passion which she rejected with equal fervour. Along with some other service staff, he'd shared a few bottles of claret at Gordon's in Villiers Street. Bond and the hard core drinkers left the stragglers behind and walked the fifteen minutes to Cappuccetto's. There, perched on the edge of Soho, Bond ate the lightest bowl of linguine alle vongole followed by the tenderest saltimbocca, with the veal cooked in the richest Sicilian Marsala. He didn't remember what the others ate, but they all drank a splendid Salentina and sang Dean Martin tunes. He was exhausted with it all by ten and made his excuses, heading back to Chelsea and his favoured riverside haunt.

Glad not to keep up the jovial pretence, Bond snuck himself into the corner of the bar and caught Alice's eye. He asked which reindeer she was. He would have preferred Cupid, but she chose Vixen. Thunder and bloody lightning, Bond thought, Donner und Blitzen.

Ninety minutes and five whiskies later, Bond had taken about as much of the party atmosphere as he could. The only thing that stopped him going to the Clermont was the memory of a hawkish good-time-girl who had latched onto his arm with indecent haste on his previous visit. He had spoken to the Casino Director, asking when they'd begun to allow prostitutes on the premises. Would nowhere be held sacred at this time of year, he wondered.

"Definitely no chance of a kiss, then, Alice?"

"No chance, lover boy. Merry Christmas."

Bond blew her a half-hearted effort and she caught it on her lips and turned away with a swish of her tempting backside. Bond pulled on his overcoat and headed into the night.

It was quiet on Chelsea Embankment. Even the cars seemed to have stopped for Christmas. Bond paused for a moment to admire the strings of brilliant white that illuminated Albert Bridge, possibly, he thought, the most beautiful bridge over the Thames.

He expected there would be multicoloured lights and glittery decorations all over the big restaurant tomorrow lunchtime. Tariq Nijjar, Bond's office stable mate 009, had pulled the early Christmas Day shift, but he'd offered to swing by at one o'clock and take Bond with him to Harlington.

"The Pheasant's a huge barn of a restaurant, James," he'd enthused. "They serve wedges of deep fried camembert before the biggest turkey dinner you've ever seen."

Sensing Bond's reluctance, Tariq sought to and succeeded in reassuring him.

"Don't worry; my family will love to meet you. We're hardly the most devout of Sikhs. Dad eats at the Pheasant all the time, so we won't get kicked out. There'll be coffee and brandy and cigars and, if you're lucky, my cousin-sister might even give you a kiss."

"Will she bring me good luck?"

Tariq laughed.

"She takes after me. She's more likely to suck the tongue out of your head."

"Does it have to be my tongue?"

Bond was already concocting images of a beautiful, slim Indian princess with long brown hair and hazelnut eyes. He turned up Beaufort Street and into the King's Road. A small group of cheerful drunken boys and girls staggered towards him. Harmless, he considered, but Bond disliked obvious drunks and crossed the street.

When he made it back to his flat, he noticed the woman who lived in the basement studio was still awake. An ethereal meditative music floated up to him. She probably had her weird friends over for the season again. Thank god for Tariq, who provided him with an excellent excuse not to be dragged to one of her peculiar soirees, as had happened a few years before.

That was another reason Bond liked to get away at Christmas, if he wasn't on the duty rota. He wanted to avoid the neighbours. He used to visit his aging aunt in Pett Bottom, but since she had passed away, he had taken to spending the festive season with a girlfriend, new or old. When those alternatives ran out he escaped to Scotland where he decamped to the Balmoral Hotel in Edinburgh and preyed harmlessly on the bored wives and daughters of rich Americans out to discover their ancestral roots. Sometimes it wasn't that harmless. Bond smiled at a licentious memory.

Last year he had managed to get all the way to Australia, which was about as far from the neighbours as he could get. Bond chuckled to himself as he recalled Dougie Donovan's big smile and the wild pub crawls and wilder women in Cairns. Perhaps there was an escape net, thought Bond. Dougie had been one of the most dedicated Double 'O' operatives, but given an opportunity to start anew, he'd seized it with both arms and all of his heart. Bond felt happy for the rough Irishman. It had been a great few days on the Barrier Reef, drinking and joking and diving into the clear turquoise

sea that was as warm as a woman's embrace. He could almost sniff the salty clean air now. M had interrupted it all with that messy job in Singapore. There had been a good two weeks recuperating on Sentosa, but it didn't make up for a lost holiday.

There was a message on his answer phone. It was from Gabriella, the famous model, who Bond had met that summer. She wished him a happy Christmas and asked for him not to worry; everything was fine and she was spending a few days with friends in Shropshire. Bond was pleased for the girl. After Robert Van Rennsburg's death, she had inherited a huge slice of his estate. At her request, Bond had helped Gabriella with some solid advice during another intrusion into her private life. Sensibly she still kept her counsel about the past. When the time was right for her, he mused, she might write about it; for now, she was happy to donate some of the fortune to various charities for orphans, children's homes, battered wives, that sort of thing.

Bond stripped and showered. Yes, Van Rennsburg's past went with him to his grave. As did the secrets of Stafford Myerson and Anita Brookfield, two souls caught up in a world of espionage they didn't really want to understand. Myerson's demise caused something of a newspaper scandal. Bond wondered how Anita's family might feel if they learnt of her duplicitous behaviour and her unfulfilled love for a KGB officer. Shocked and perhaps a little saddened, mull'd Bond; sometimes it was best never to shatter people's illusions. The reality could hurt.

Karlyn Foucart had been wounded by real life. Bond sighed as he remembered the effervescent, exciting girl who had bewitched him in Egypt. She had befallen a tragic fate. Bond's drunken insides heaved at the memory of her odorous, sagging body as he carried it limp downstairs that terrible morning. The stench of violence, of rape and death which swarmed Razzaq's lakeside villa would haunt him forever.

Bond studied his tired fallow features in the basin mirror. Was this a ghost of time's past or a glimpse of his future? His reflection told a long journey. A thousand miles starts with one step, he mused. This year, Bond felt he had travelled a greater distance and at far greater cost, to him and others. His life, the life of a secret agent, a Double 'O' with a license to kill, always looking over your shoulder, coiled for action, never blinking for fear, was no real existence. Bond lived in society, but never considered himself part of it. He was propped up on its skirts, scaling the fringes until the next step knocked him back into the depths of the human soul. It was the toughest route a man could take.

Bond turned off the bathroom light, crossed the floor to his bed and settled under the sheets, his hand resting reassuringly under the pillow, curled around the butt of his Walther P99. Only one step, he told himself as he drifted into a contented slumber. And while he slept, James Bond wondered what journey awaited him the next time he took the lift to the top floor of Millennium House and walked towards M's oak panelled office door.