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1

PASSENGER FOR FLIGHT 154

The man who entered the airport washroom had light hair, cut neatly to collar length. Stocky, and around five feet three inches in height, he wore crumpled jeans, a T-shirt and sneakers. A trained observer would have particularly noted the piercing light blue eyes, above which thin brows arched in long curves that almost met above the slim nose.

The man's face was thin in comparison with his body, and the complexion a shade dark in contrast to the colour of the hair. He carried a small brown suitcase, and, on entering the washroom, walked straight towards one of the cubicles, stepping carefully past a dungareed cleaner who was mopping the tiled floor with a squeegee, though without enthusiasm.

Once inside, the man slid the bolt and placed the suitcase on the lavatory seat, opening it to remove a mirror which he hung on the door hook before starting to strip as far as his white undershorts.

Before removing the T-shirt, he slid his fingers expertly below the hairline at his temples, peeling back the wig to reveal close-cropped natural hair underneath.

With a finger and thumb he grasped the corner of his left eyebrow and pulled, as a nurse will quickly rip sticking plaster from a cut. The slim eyebrows disappeared – together with what seemed to be some of the flesh – leaving black, untrimmed, thick lines of natural hair in their place.

The man worked like a professional – with care and speed, as

though he was trying to beat a clock. From the suitcase he took a canvas corset, wrapping it around his waist, pulling tightly at the lacing, giving the immediate twin effect of slimming the waistline, and an illusion of more height. Within a few seconds the latter illusion was strengthened. Carefully folding the jeans and T-shirt, the man pushed his socks into his abandoned sneakers, and pulled on a new pair of dark grey socks, followed by well-cut lightweight charcoal grey trousers and black slip-on shoes, into which were built what actors call 'lifts': adding a good two inches to his normal stature.

Adjusting the mirror on the door, he now donned a white silk shirt, and knotted a pearl grey tie into place, before opening an oblong plastic box that had been lying – held in place by the shoes on either side – directly beneath the corset, socks, trousers and shirt, in the suitcase.

The plastic box contained new components for the man's face. First, dark contact lenses, and fluid, to change those distinctive light blue eyes to a deep, almost jet, black. Next, he inserted small, shaped foam rubber pads into his cheeks which fattened the face. While they were in place he would not be able to eat or drink, but that mattered little compared with achieving the desired effect.

The pièce de résistance was a tailor-made short beard and moustache, sculpted from real hair on to an invisible, adhesive, Latex frame – genuine bristles overhanging the flexible frame which, when he set it correctly in place on his chin and lower lip, gave the impression of complete reality, even at very close range. The beard had been made specially, in New York, by an expert who dubiously claimed distant kinship with the famous nineteenth-century Wagnerian singer, Ludwig Leichner, inventor of theatrical greasepaint.

The man smiled at the unfamiliar face now looking back at him from the mirror, completing the new picture with a pair of steel-framed, clear-glass lensed, spectacles. Leichner's unproven relative apart, the unrecognisable person looking out from the

mirror was a make-up expert and disguise artist in his own right. It was part of his stock-in-trade – probably the least lethal part – and he had studied under top men and women in Hollywood, as well as being almost encyclopaedic in the personal knowledge he had culled from all the famous works, such as Lacy's *Art of Acting*, the anonymous *Practical Guide to the Art of Making Up*, by 'Haresfoot and Rouge', and the other standard works by Leman Rede, C. H. Fox, and the great S. J. A. Fitzgerald.

Now he closed the oblong box, removed a jacket, which matched the trousers, from the case, filled his pockets with an assortment of items – wallet, passport, travel documents, handkerchief, loose change and notes – and took a final look at himself in the mirror. He then packed everything with extreme care, clipped a gold digital watch around his left wrist and removed a final item from a pocket in the lid – a tightly fitting cover, which, when slipped into place over the suitcase, gave it an outer skin: changing the colour from brown to a glossy black. Lastly, he closed up, slid the new skin around the case, and spun the numbered safety locks.

Taking a final look around, the man checked his pockets and left the cubicle, completely unrecognisable as the person who had entered. He walked straight to the exit, then out, across the concourse, to the check-in desk.

Inside the washroom, the man who had been engaged in swabbing the tiled floor, leaned his squeegee against the wall and left. He also headed across the concourse, passing close to the check-in desk, and going to a door marked Private, which he unlocked with a personal key. Inside the small room there was a table, chair and telephone.

As the man with a new face was preparing to board Aer Lingus flight EI 154 from Dublin to London, Heathrow, the insignificant-looking cleaner was speaking rapidly into the telephone. The time was shortly before eight forty-five am.

2

THOUGHTS IN A SURREY LANE

James bond changed down into third gear, drifted the Saab 900 Turbo into a tight left-hand turn, clinging to the grass verge, then put on a fraction more power to bring the car out of the bend.

He was driving through a complicated series of country lanes – backdoubles as London cabbies would call them – following a short cut through the hedges, rolling fields and cathedral arches of trees threading the byways of Surrey. It was a cross-country route that would, finally, take him on to the Guildford by-pass and a straight run, on good roads, into London.

Bond was travelling much too fast. A glance at the head-up display of digital instruments, reflected in the windshield of this personalised Saab, told him the machine was touching seventy miles per hour. Decidedly dangerous for this kind of secondary road. The motor howled as he changed down again, then accelerated through a series of S-bends. Gently common sense took over, and Bond applied a touch to the brakes, reducing speed to a more realistic pace. He still, however, remained hot and angry.

Already that evening he had made the same journey, in the opposite direction, to his recently acquired and newly decorated country cottage. Now on this beautiful Friday evening in early June, he was driving at breakneck speed back to London.

The week-end had been planned for some time, and, as the builders and decorators had just moved out, this was to have

been his first free week-end at the cottage. Furthermore, he had planned to spend it with a girl friend of long standing – an agile, superbly nubile blonde he had known – as Bill Tanner, M's Chief-of-Staff put it – 'on and off for years'. The fact that she lived only six miles or so from the cottage had greatly influenced Bond's purchase. On that Friday, he had completed a mound of paperwork in record time, not even leaving the office for lunch, so that he could get out of the hot chaos of London traffic in good time, before the normal Friday evening snarl-up began.

The countryside was at its best; the mixed fragrance of a perfect summer filtering into the car, bringing with it a sense of well-being and contentment – something rare for Bond these days.

James Bond was not a superstitious man, but, as he neared the cottage that evening, he had noticed there seemed to be more magpies than usual. They flew low, rolling and fluttering across the roads and lanes like black and white dice in a game of craps. Bond thought of the old adage, 'One for sorrow, two for joy'. There were a lot of single magpies swooping near the car.

On reaching the cottage, Bond put a bottle of Dom Perignon '55 on ice, knowing that it would either be magnificent or the most expensive wine vinegar he had ever tasted.

He then went into the downstairs spare room, discarded the somewhat conservative business suit, and showered, first under a scalding spray, then with ice cold water, which seemed to cut into him like needles. After drying himself with a rough towel, Bond rubbed a small amount of Guerlain's Imperial Cologne into his skin before putting on a pair of lightweight worsted navy slacks, and a white Sea Island cotton shirt. He slipped into comfortable soft leather sandals and was just clipping the old and valued gold Rolex Oyster Perpetual on to his wrist when the telephone rang.

It was more of a purr than a ring. The red 'phone. His heart sank. Both here, at the cottage, and in his London flat off the King's Road, James Bond was required to have two telephones:

one for normal use, though unlisted; and a second, red instrument – a flat, angled piece of equipment, without dial or number punches. Called, in his trade, a 'wiretap trap', this secure, sterile, unbuggable 'phone was linked directly to the building overlooking Regent's Park, known as the headquarters of Transworld Export Ltd.

Before he had even put a hand to the 'phone, Bond experienced his first flash of mild annoyance. The only reason for a call from headquarters on a Friday evening could be some kind of emergency: or a state of readiness created by M for Bond's benefit. Bond's annoyance was, possibly, heightened by the fact that, of late, many emergencies had meant sitting in a control or communications room for days at a time; or going through a complex briefing which ended with orders to abort the planned mission. Times had changed, and Bond did not like some of the political restraints placed on the Secret Service, for which he had worked with fidelity for longer than he cared to remember.

He picked up the red 'phone.

'James?' As Bond expected, it was Bill Tanner's voice on the line.

Bond grunted a surly affirmative.

'M wants you here,' Tanner said, in a voice flat as a billiards table.

'Now?'

'His actual words are not for the telephone, but he indicated that sooner than now would be more acceptable.'

'On a Friday evening?' Bond mused, the irritation building quickly inside his head as he saw an idyllic week-end filtering away, like an excellent bottle of wine being poured down the drain.

'Now,' repeated the Chief-of-Staff, closing the line.

As he reached the Guildford by-pass, Bond remembered the sound of disappointment in his girl friend's voice when he had telephoned to say the week-end was off. He supposed that should be some consolation – not that there was much to

console Bond these days. There had even been times, recently, when he had seriously considered resigning – to use the jargon, 'go private'. Argot changes. At one time the phrase would have meant defection; but not any more.

'Changing world; changing times, James,' M had said to him a couple of years ago, when breaking the news that the elite Double-O status – which meant being licensed to kill in the line of duty – was being abolished. 'Fools of politicians have no idea of our requirements. Have us punching time clocks before long.'

This was during the so-called Realignment Purge, often referred to in the Service as the SNAFU Slaughter, similar to the CIA's famous Hallowe'en Massacre, in which large numbers of faithful members of the American service had been dismissed, literally overnight. Similar things had happened in Britain, with financial horns being pulled in, and what a pompous Whitehall directive called 'a more realistic logic being enforced upon the Secret and Security Services'.

'Trying to draw our fangs, James,' M had continued on that depressing day. Then, with one of those rare smiles which seemed to light up the deep grey eyes, M grunted that Whitehall had taken on the wrong man while he was still in charge. 'As far as I'm concerned, 007, you will remain 007. I shall take full responsibility for you; and you will, as ever, accept orders and assignments only from me. There are moments when this country needs a trouble-shooter – a blunt instrument – and by heaven it's going to have one. They can issue their pieces of bumf and abolish the Double-O section. We can simply change its name. It will now be the Special Section, and *you* are it. Understand, 007?'

'Of course, sir,' Bond remembered smiling. In spite of M's brusque and often uncompromising attitude, Bond loved him as a father. To 007, M *was* the Service, and the Service was Bond's life. After all, what M suggested was exactly what the Russians had done with his old enemies SMERSH – *Smyert Shpionam*, Death to Spies. They still existed, the dark core at the heart of the KGB, having gone through a whole gamut of metamorphoses,

becoming the OKR, then the Thirteenth Department of Line F, and now, Department Viktor. Yet their work and basic organisation remained the same – political murder; kidnap; sabotage; assassination; the quick disposal of enemy agents, either after interrogation or as acts of war on the secret battlefield.

Bond had left M's office on that occasion in an elated mood. Yet, in the few years that had passed since, he had performed only four missions in which his Double-O prefix had played any part. A portion of his work was to kill people. It was not a facet of life he enjoyed, but he did it very well in the course of duty. There was certainly no pathological hankering after that kind of work. It was the active life that Bond missed; the continual challenge of a new problem, a difficult decision in the field, the sense of purpose and of serving his country. Sometimes he wondered if he was falling under the spell of that malaise which seemed, on occasions, to grip Britain by the throat – political and economic lethargy, combined with a short-term view of the world's problems.

Bond's four most recent missions had been quick, cut and dried, undercover operations; and, while it would be wrong to say that James Bond yearned for the danger, his life now seemed, at times, to lack real purpose.

He still kept in the peak of condition: each morning going through a rigorous workout of press-ups, leg-raising, arm and breathing exercises. There was a 'refresher' on combat and silent kills once a month, at the firm's training establishment; the weekly small arms shoot in the sophisticated electronic range far below the Regent's Park headquarters; and the monthly all-weapons shoot at the Maidstone Police Range. Twice a year he disappeared for a fortnight to the SAS headquarters in Herefordshire.

Bond had even managed to alter his lifestyle, very slightly, adapting to the changing pressures of the 1970s and early 1980s: drastically cutting back – for most of the time – on his alcohol intake, and arranging with Morelands of Grosvenor Street for a

new special blend of cigarettes, with a tar content slightly lower than any currently available on the market. At this moment twenty of these cigarettes, each one with the distinctive three gold rings just below the filter, lay in the gunmetal case, snug in Bond's breast pocket.

For the rest, the last few years for Bond had been the grind of an executive officer to M: planning paperwork, interrogating, de-briefing, analysis, dirty tricks and bugging operations, with his fair share of Duty Officer watches to stand. His only extra joys during this period had come from the purchase of the cottage and the new car.

He had fancied a small country retreat for some time, and found the right place five miles out of Haslemere, and a good mile from the nearest village. It fitted Bond's requirements perfectly and was bought within twenty-four hours of first viewing. A month later the builders and decorators had moved in with very precise instructions from the new owner.

The car was a different matter. With fuel costs running high, and the inevitability that they would continue to do so, Bond had allowed the beloved old Mark II Continental Bentley to go the way of its predecessor, the 4.5-litre Bentley.

Some eyebrows were raised at his choice of a foreign car, when all the pressure was on to buy British, but Bond shrugged it off by pointing to the fact that it was a British specialist firm which carried out the particularly complex and sophisticated personalisation – such as the head-up digital instrument display, the cruise control system, and several other pieces of magic, made possible by British know-how and the mighty micro-chip.

He did not mention the month during which the car had been taken over by the multinational Communication Control Systems (CCS) company, who added some of their own standard refinements – security devices that would make Q Branch's mouths water. Bond reasoned that it was his car, and he, not Q Branch – which was under severe financial restraint anyway – would decide what features should be incorporated. On several

occasions he had seen Major Boothroyd, the Armourer, nosing around the Saab; and it was now commonplace for him to catch members of Q Branch – the 'gee-whizz' technicians of the Service – taking a close look. None of them ever mentioned the things they could not fail to notice – such as the bullet-proof glass, steel-reinforced ram bumpers and heavy-duty tyres, self-sealing even after being hit by bullets. There were other niceties, though, which nobody in Q Branch could detect without bringing out specialist gear.

The Saab now suited Bond's purposes, and was easily convertible from petrol to gas, if the fuel situation became even more critical; the consumption was low in relation to speed; while the turbo gave that extra dynamic thrust always needed in a tricky situation.

Only a few people knew about the cottage, so there were no raised eyebrows or jokes about Bond having a country seat.

The London Friday evening rush was almost over by the time he reached Roehampton; so the Saab was in Bond's personal parking slot, in the underground garage of the headquarters building, before seven-thirty.

Bond would have put money on M having some inane and boring job waiting for him, and even made a mental wager with himself as the lift sped him silently to the ninth floor, at the top of the building, where M's suite of offices was located.

Miss Moneypenny, M's PA, looked up with a worried smile as Bond entered the outer office. This was the first sign that something important might be on the cards.

'Hallo, Penny,' Bond greeted her breezily, shrugging off the slough of irritation over the lost week-end. 'Not out with one of your young men? It's wicked Friday night, you know.'

Miss Moneypenny cocked her head towards the door of M's office as she spoke: 'And he's been wickedly waiting for you. Keeping me here into the bargain.' She smiled. 'Besides, the only man who could lure me out on the town seemed to be otherwise engaged.'

'Oh Penny, if only . . .' Bond grinned. There had been a special bantering relationship between them for years, yet Bond had never fully realised how much the able and neat Moneypenny doted on him.

'Tell Commander Bond to come straight in,' M's voice snapped metallically from the intercom box on Miss Moneypenny's desk.

Bond lifted a quizzical eyebrow and moved towards the door. Lowering his voice, he said, 'Did anyone ever tell you that Janet Reger started her business with you in mind, Penny?'

Miss Moneypenny was still blushing as Bond disappeared into M's office and closed the door. A red warning light blinked on above the door as it clicked shut. She stared into space for a moment, her head filled with the after-image of the man who had just entered M's inner sanctum: the bronzed good-looking face, with rather long dark eyebrows above the wide, level blue eyes; the three-inch scar which just showed down his right cheek; the long, very straight nose, and the fine, though cruel, mouth. Minute flecks of grey had just started to show in the dark hair, which still retained its boyish black comma above the right eye. As yet, no plumpness had appeared around the jowls, and the line of the jaw was as straight and firm as ever. It was the face of an attractive buccaneer, Miss Moneypenny thought, shaking herself out of a slightly improper reverie, and wondering if she should have warned James Bond that M was not alone in his office.

As James Bond opened the door to M's office, another door was opening, some five hundred miles to the north of London.

The man who had left Dublin so skilfully disguised, early that morning, looked up, rising from his chair and extending a hand in greeting.

The room in which he had been waiting was a familiar place to him now, after so many visits: book-lined, with a large military desk, comfortable leather chairs, the impressive cabinet containing, literally, priceless antique weapons – a pair of chased

silver flint-lock pistols, a matched set of American Kentucky hand guns, lavishly inlaid, a French wheel-lock with mother-of-pearl and gold wire stock decoration, a pair of cutlass pistols, and an Allen pepper-box with six revolving barrels. The artist of disguise knew the pieces and lusted after them on each viewing. The whole place had that air of solidity which comes with what is known as 'old money'.

The person who entered the room was its owner, playing host now to the man from Dublin. They shook hands, almost gravely, the guest waiting in silence until his patron had moved to the large upright chair behind the desk. He did not speak until he was seated.

'It's good to see you again, Franco.'

'Good also to see you. But I enjoy working for you; this always makes a difference.' The man called Franco paused, searching for words. 'You know, after all this time, I never know how to address you – your title, or scientific . . . ?' He made a small gesture with his hands.

The other man chuckled, his bulldog face creasing into a smile. 'Why not Warlock?'

They both laughed. 'Appropriate,' Franco nodded. 'Operation Meltdown, with you – its creative and directive force – Warlock.'

The man behind the desk laid his hands flat on the leather top. 'So be it.' He nodded his head in a quick, birdlike, manner. 'You had no trouble?'

'Nothing at all. Clean as your proverbial English whistle. The chopper was on time; there were no tails. By now you should know I always have care.'

'Good.' The birdlike pecking nod again. 'Then I trust, my friend, that this will be your last visit here.'

Franco gave a quirky little grin. 'Perhaps. But maybe not quite my last. There is the question of payment.'

The man behind the desk opened his hands, fingers splayed, palms upward. 'I mean, of course, your last visit until after Meltdown is completed. Yes, of course there is the question of

picking up your share. But first, location and the small detail. That's one of the things we have to discuss; one of the reasons you will be here for a slightly longer period this time, Franco.'

'Naturally.' Franco's voice took on a cold edge and the word came out in four syllables, spoken curiously like the slow, cautious footsteps of a man testing an ice bridge across a deep crevasse.

'There is much to talk about. Europe, I presume, is completely arranged?'

'Everyone ready, yes.'

'And the States?'

'Ready and waiting for the final instructions.'

'The men . . . ?'

Franco leaned forward. 'These *people*, as I've already told you, have been waiting for a long time. They always were the least of my worries. Each of them is dedicated, ready to give his or her life for his separate cause. To all purposes, they consider themselves martyrs already. But the various organisations that have provided the personnel for your operation – organisations outlawed by most Western governments, and regarded as terrorists – are anxious. They want assurances that they will receive their share of the money.'

'Which, I trust, you have given them, Franco.' From behind the desk the bulldog face had ceased to beam. 'Our commitment was clear. I seem to recall that we spoke of this, at great length, over a year ago. I provide the plan, the – how do you say it these days? – the know-how. I also arrange the means. You are the go-between, the contact man. Now, we have more interesting things to talk about.'