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Written by John Gardner

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SCORPIUS

John Gardner



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THE LONGEST MILE

At exactly ten minutes after midnight the girl stepped from the train, pausing for a moment, surprised at the newspaper poster in front of the closed kiosk: PRIME MINISTER CALLS GENERAL ELECTION – JUNE 11th. Now she knew why they had been given the orders, and why she had, instinctively, refused to stay.

It was not until she got outside the main concourse of Waterloo Station that she realised it was raining. Badly in need of help she went back into the station, trying three public telephones before finding one that was not vandalised. She dialled the 376 Chelsea number and waited as the ringing tone went on and on, reading the graffiti with only a small part of her mind – scrawled telephone numbers next to girls' names offering unspecified services; the occasional morsel of crude wit. At last, knowing the call was not going to be answered, she replaced the receiver. He was out, or away from London. She thought she would faint, or cry. He would never have lectured her. He would have understood and helped – advised. But now there was only one option. Home.

And home was the last place she wanted to go, but there was no really safe alternative.

There were no taxis, and the rain had turned into a fine drizzle: par for the course in May. Thank God it was not far to walk. The longest mile. What made her think of that? A song – 'The longest mile is the last mile home'.

She threaded her way down from the station into York Road,

then over onto Westminster Bridge. Crossing to the far side she saw that County Hall was still illuminated, looking more like a luxury riverside hotel than a battleground for the capital's politics. Traffic and pedestrians were sparse now. Three cabs went by with their signs switched off. Odd, she thought, that in London as soon as it rained cabs seemed to be either heading home, or were occupied by very small people.

She reached the far end of the bridge and turned right into Victoria Embankment. Across the road, behind her, Big Ben rose triumphant, while the sinister black statue of Boadicea in her war chariot loomed over her right shoulder, a dark blotch against the sky.

The apartment was less than ten minutes' walk away, and she now wondered how her parents would take the unexpected arrival. That part of her which remained stubborn revolted against returning home. There would be the inevitable recriminations, but, as they had tried every trick in the book to get her back, they would at least show some relief and happiness. Her problem was having to admit that they had been right all along.

As she turned onto Victoria Embankment, she became suddenly alert. For a moment she realised that her guard had been down during the walk across the bridge. People *were* looking for her. That was as certain as night followed day. So far she had taken precautions. They would have people at Paddington Station, for that was her most likely place of arrival. The journey had taken several hours longer than necessary, changing trains and taking a bus so that her entrance to London had been Waterloo and not Paddington. But they would also be watching the building in which her parents lived, she had no doubt about that.

Just as all this crossed her mind, two figures stepped from the shadows into the pool of light thrown across her from the street lamps.

'What we got 'ere, then?' The first one to speak had a drunken

slur in his voice. She wrapped the thin white raincoat around her as though it afforded some kind of protection against them.

As they came near, she realised these were not the type to have been sent after her. This pair wore jeans, bomber jackets studded and hung with chains, while their hair was spiked and dyed – one red and orange, the other pink and blue.

‘Well, you on your own, darlin’?’ asked the larger of the pair.

She took a step back, one hand going out to the wall behind her. Somewhere, she knew, there was an opening, with steps leading down to the little mooring platform used during the summer for the tourist pleasure boats that plied up and down the Thames.

It was irrational, but there was hope she could escape that way.

‘Come on, darlin’. No need to be scared of us.’ Their voices were similar, both of them ragged with drink.

‘Nice girl like you wouldn’t refuse a couple of beautiful fellas like us, would you?’

Slowly they moved nearer. She even thought she could smell the drink on their breath. Almost safe and this had to happen – muggers, or worse.

The latter thought was immediately confirmed.

‘‘Course, you’d have a lie down with us, wouldn’t you?’ The wolfish grin was clear in the diffused light.

The other one gave an unpleasant drunken giggle. ‘She’ll lie down, even if we has to ‘old ‘er down.’

As they lurched forward, she found the gap in the wall. She turned, almost falling down the steps towards the river, one hand clutching her tote bag, with its strap around her shoulder, terror like a bright light in her head which seemed to make breathing difficult and caused her stomach to churn in a butterfly roll.

They were following, their boots noisy and heavy on the broad steps. Then she smelled the water, and fear became panic. There was no escape. Not across the water, for she could not swim.

There was no pleasure boat on which she might hide, only the short metal poles joined together with chains.

They were almost on her and she turned again, determined to fight back if she could. Purity. Purity mattered. They all said so. Father Valentine said so. At all costs she must keep herself pure.

She backed away, and the chain touched her behind the knees making her cry out, stumble and jump. In that moment she lost her balance, shoes slipping on the damp stone, legs caught for a moment in the dangling safety chain, so that she seemed to be held upside down. Then she fell, and the water was everywhere, black, filling her mouth, nostrils and clothes, the rain-coat ballooning around her, the weight of her clothes and bag dragging her down. She could hear someone screaming, then realised it was herself coughing, choking and spluttering as she thrashed around, hands hitting the water, her body cloaked in terror.

From a long way off she heard the voice of her old PE teacher, the sadistic one who had tried to teach her to swim by throwing her bodily into the pool. 'Come on girl, don't flap about! You're like a pregnant pelican! Get control of yourself! Come on you stupid girl . . . girl . . . girl . . . girl . . . gir . . . !'

The darkness took over. She felt a terrible, yet soothing, weakness. Panic gave way to a kind of serenity. She stopped struggling, as though overcome by an anaesthetic, and dropped into an endless sleep.

THE FLOATER

M really had too much on his mind to see the man from Special Branch, and the loyal Miss Money Penny knew it. Within the headquarters building which overlooks Regent's Park they were going through a period of unpleasantly complicated and time-consuming housekeeping and housecleaning. The auditors had been in for a week, inconveniently taking up much-needed office space, checking and rechecking the accounts of each department, and severely cutting into the working time of a number of senior officers.

The Audit was a serious disruption that took place every two or three years. Eventually the auditors would return from whence they came – under stones near The Long Water in Kensington Gardens, if you were to believe M – but that would not be the end of the business.

In three months' time the Audit would have been studied by a select number of people, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Foreign Secretary who would put the figure of the Secret Vote before the Cabinet, and from there to the Treasury.

The Secret Vote was M's lifeblood – the financial allotment with which he had to run his Service: the hard cash to pay for everything, from the salaries of officers under his command to the funding of agents in the field, the satellite costs, research, and a hundred and one other items, right down to the paperclips and staplers here on the eighth floor where M had his suite of offices.

The Audit was a time of strain, and now a further tension had been added by the announcement of a General Election. In less than a month, M would be working for the same masters in the Foreign Office – for governments come and go, but the mandarins of Whitehall go on for ever. Yet emphasis on the kind of work carried out by M's Service might alter drastically should a government of a different political colour sweep into power. Changes of government, even *possible* changes, set the chief of the Secret Service's mind on a knife-edge of anxiety. That very day he had a crammed diary, which included five top-level meetings and lunch – at Blades – with the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee.

The officer from Special Branch had said it was urgent: M's ears only. Moneypenny glanced at her watch and saw the policeman had already been kept waiting for nearly an hour. He had arrived, without warning, only ten minutes before M returned from lunch. Moneypenny took a deep breath and buzzed through on the inter-office line.

'Yes?' M growled.

'You haven't forgotten that Chief Superintendent Bailey's still waiting, sir?' She tried to sound brisk and efficient.

'Who?' M had lately taken to his old habit of side-stepping issues by feigning a sieve-like memory.

'The officer from the Branch,' Moneypenny tactfully reminded him.

'Hasn't got an appointment,' M snapped back.

'No, sir, but I put the memo from Head of the Branch on your desk before you got back from lunch. His request *is* rather pressing.'

There was a pause. Moneypenny heard the crackle of paper as M read the memo.

'Head of the Branch can't get away himself, so he's sent a lackey,' M grumbled. 'Why us? They usually bother our brethren in Five. Why doesn't he trot over to Curzon Street, or wherever the Security Service hangs out these days?'

Though Special Branch often work with MI5, at the latter's request, they are not the overt mailed fist of the Security Service. They have even been known to turn down a request to assist Five, for they tread with care. They are answerable, not to some faceless men in Whitehall, but directly to the Metropolitan Police Commissioner. Rarely did the Branch make any approaches to the Secret Intelligence Service which was M's fief.

'No idea why us, sir. Just that Head of Branch wants you to see this officer PDQ.'

M made a strange tch-tching sound. 'Old-fashioned expression, Moneypenny – PDQ. Pretty Damned Quick, eh? What you say he was called?'

'Bailey, sir. Chief Superintendent Bailey.'

'Oh well.' Another sigh. 'Better wheel him up, then.'

Bailey turned out to be a tall well-groomed man in his middle thirties. His suit was of a conservative, and expensive cut, and M could scarcely fail to notice that he wore the tie of a much admired Cambridge college. Bailey's manner was pleasant enough. He could easily have passed for a young doctor or lawyer. Wouldn't be out of place in Five, either, M thought.

'We haven't met, sir. My name's Bailey.' The police officer came straight to the point extending his hand. 'The HOB sends his apologies, but he's going to be tied up all day with the heads of A11 and C13.'

A11 is better known as the Diplomatic Protection Group, bodyguards to politicians and royalty – visiting or permanent. C13 is the police Anti-Terrorist Squad which has strong links with MI5 and the Secret Intelligence Service, as well as C7, their own Technical Support Branch, and D11, the 'Blue Berets', Scotland Yard's firearms department, within which a squad of elite specialists is always at the ready for a serious incident.

'Bit pushed now the PM's gone to the country, sir.' Bailey smiled.

'Aren't we all?' M did not smile. 'Not your usual happy hunting ground, this, is it, Chief Super?'

'Not normal, sir. No. But it's a bit special. The HOB thought it best to approach you personally.'

M paused, looking up at the younger man, his face betraying nothing. At last he waved towards a chair.

Bailey sat.

'Come on, then,' M said quietly. 'Haven't got all day, either of us. What's it about?'

Bailey cleared his throat. Even experienced police officers do not always throw off the habit, born of giving evidence in many courtrooms. 'Early this morning we got what, when I was a young copper, we called a "floater".'

'Body recovered from water,' M murmured.

'Exactly, sir. Picked up by the River Patrol near Cleopatra's Needle. No press release as yet, but we've been on the case all morning. VIP. The Head of Branch himself broke it to the family. It's a young woman, sir. Twenty-three years of age. Miss Emma Dupré, daughter of Mr and Mrs Peter Dupré.'

'The financier? Merchant banker?' M's eyes flashed, as though interest was only just aroused.

Bailey nodded. 'The same, sir. Chairman of Gomme-Keogh. Impeccable merchant bank, beyond reproach. I understand that the Foreign Office sometimes borrow their very senior people for special audits.'

'Yes. Yes, they do.' M wondered if this young man knew that a member of the Gomme-Keogh Board was in the building at this very moment, working on the Audit. 'Suicide?' he asked – his face blank – not even the most experienced interrogator or police observer could have divined what might be going on in his mind.

'Don't think so, sir. They've carried out a post-mortem. Death by drowning. The body wasn't long in the water – six, seven hours at the most. Appears accidental. I've seen the report. But there are one or two interesting things. The girl was recently weaned off heroin. Within the last couple of months, according

to family friends, if you see what I mean. We haven't taken it up with her mother and father yet.'

M nodded, waiting for the police officer to go on.

'You heard of a religious group – bit cranky – calling themselves the Meek Ones, sir?'

'Vaguely, yes. Like the Moonies, eh?'

'Not really. They have a religious philosophy, but that's very different to sects like the Moonies. For instance, the Meek Ones got her off drugs – the deceased, I mean – there's little doubt about that. They put a premium on morality. Won't have people living together within their community. They have to go through a form of marriage, followed by a Register Office ceremony. Very big on old values, but they do have some exceptionally strange ideas once you get out of the moral area.'

'Look, Chief Super, what's this got to do with me and my Service? Funny religious groups aren't much in our line.'

Bailey raised his head, mouth opening for a second, closing and then opening to speak. 'The young woman, sir. Miss Dupré. We found at least two strange items on her. She was pulled out of the Thames still clutching one of these tote bags that girls carry around, filled with everything from a Filofax to the kitchen sink. It was a good one – the bag – zipped tight, and no water damage.'

'And you found the "odd" items in the bag?'

The Branch man nodded. 'The Filofax, for instance. All the pages of addresses and telephone numbers had been removed, except for one – a telephone number scrawled across a page of this current week. My impression is that it was noted down from memory. One digit's been crossed out and the correct one inserted in its place.'

'So?'

'The number belongs to one of your officers, sir.'

'Indeed?'

'A Commander Bond, sir. Commander James Bond.'

'Ah.' M's mind ran through a number of possible permutations.

'Bond is out of London at the moment.' He paused. 'I can get him back if you want to speak to him. If you think he can help you with your enquiries – as they say in the press.'

'He could very well be of help, sir. Though we do have a couple of other things as well. For instance, I believe Lord Shrivenham – also of Gomme-Keogh – is working in this building, on a temporary basis. I'd like a word with him.' He saw M's eyebrows twitch slightly. 'You see *his* daughter – the Honourable Trilby Shrivenham – was one of Miss Dupré's close friends. She has had similar drug problems, and she's also a member of the Meek Ones. I gather Lord Shrivenham's rather cut up about it.'

'You want to see Shrivenham here? On these premises?' M asked, his agile mind already working on how he could possibly be of assistance to Basil Shrivenham. Some little favour might be useful when it came to the Secret Vote.

'I'd rather like to have a word with Commander Bond first.' Bailey's face was blank. 'Depending on what he has to say, there's another matter we might have to talk about – with Lord Shrivenham present.'

M nodded, reaching out to pick up the telephone. 'Money-penny, get Bond back to London in double-quick time, would you? And let me have his ETA as soon as you know it. I'll wait in the office until he arrives. Even if it means being here until the wee small hours.'

He replaced the receiver, frowning slightly. Bond's lifestyle had changed drastically over the past few months, and any changes in 007 made M a shade nervous – even when the changes appeared to be for the best.

In the outer office, Miss Moneypenny picked up the red scrambler telephone and dialled an unlisted number. The area code was 0432 – the code for Hereford.

THE CROSSROADS INCIDENT

James Bond could not recall the last time he had felt so completely exhausted. Every muscle ached; fatigue seeped into his bones like some pernicious poison; his legs felt like lumps of lead so that each step forward was a conscious effort, while his feet seemed to burn inside the usually comfortable DMS boots; his eyelids drooped, and it was difficult to concentrate on more than one thing at a time. On top of it all, he felt unclean from the sweat that had collected under his clothing, dried, then collected again. The sight of the Bedford RL four-tonne truck parked on the road below him was like an oasis to a man who had spent days in the desert with little food and less water. But Bond had been in no desert; quite the contrary. For the last ten days he had been taking part in a survival and endurance exercise with 'The Regiment' – as those familiar with the Special Air Service always call it – working out of the 22 SAS Regiment base: Bradbury Lines Barracks, Hereford. M had called it 'a nice little refresher course'.

For nine of those days he had been up before four o'clock in the morning, in a truck by five, kitted out in combat gear, a heavy Bergen pack on his back, other equipment slung around him, and one hand clutching a rifle – the so-called IW (Individual Weapon) XL65E5.

Each day, together with seven other officers from various branches of the armed forces, he had been dropped from the back of the truck, somewhere on the edge of the wild and rugged

countryside around the Brecon Beacons, alone and with a map reference shouted at him as he went. Each night he, like the others, had been briefed on the following day's work.

Sometimes that map reference simply meant he had to beat the clock, arriving at the designated point in a certain amount of time; on other occasions he had to evade being spotted on the way by regular SAS officers, NCOs and troopers – still within a strict time limit. If caught, he would be subjected to intensive and humiliating interrogation.

Bond had not been caught on the two occasions he had been assigned to this exercise, but twice he had failed to beat the clock – on both times it was the fourth map reference of the day, for these operations seldom ended by reaching the first given point. The survival course demanded much more – other map references which had to be reached while spotting and 'killing' hidden targets; or retrieving an extra heavy load hidden at a predetermined point.

Back in Bradbury Lines at night, kit and weapons had to be cleaned before a session which usually included a swingeing criticism of the day's work, and collecting orders for the next morning. Now, on the tenth day, Bond had just taken part in the most gruelling and shattering exercise which is a regular feature of SAS selection and training – the forty-five-mile endurance march, to be completed in twenty-four hours, carrying a 50lb pack, 12lbs of other equipment and an 18lb rifle (handheld, for no SAS weapons are fitted with slings).

The march follows a route straight across the Brecon Beacons – wild, rocky and mountainous terrain, and the test is treated with great respect even by the most hardened professional and elite members of the Special Air Service. In bad weather expert men have died on the endurance march, and, given the relatively good conditions of this late May – gusting low winds and drenching drizzle – the exercise had been, to quote most of those who took part, 'a right bastard'.

All Bond wanted, now he had reached the final reference

point, was to be taken back to Hereford in the truck, followed by a shower, food and sleep for around twenty-four hours before reporting back to London. But this was not to be. He sensed it when he saw the adjutant walking towards him from the parked truck.

‘Your CO telephoned.’ The adjutant was a tall, bronzed SAS captain – a matter-of-fact soldier who had long since learned that economy of words communicates unpleasant news with greater force than an involved explanation. ‘You’re wanted back in London, fast as a bullet.’

Bond cursed. ‘Playing more games are we, Adj?’ He tried to grin.

‘Sorry.’ The adjutant did not return the smile. ‘This is for real. Seems your lot has a flap on. I’ll give you a lift back to barracks.’

Only then did Bond see the adjutant’s car parked behind the truck, and realised this was truly not another of the sometimes almost sadistic tricks with which SAS refresher courses abound.

As they made the journey back to Bradbury Lines, the adjutant suggested – a shade strongly, Bond thought – that it would not be wise for any man just off the endurance march to drive himself from Hereford to London, a journey of roughly two hours. ‘Sergeant Pearlman hasn’t got much to do. Good driver. Get you there fast and in one piece.’

Bond was too tired to argue. ‘Whatever you say.’ He shrugged. ‘Sergeant Pearlman can drive the bloody thing, but he’ll have to make his own way back.’

‘You’d be doing him a favour. He’s due on leave tonight and wants to get to London anyway.’

Back in his quarters, Bond showered, retrieved his personal handgun – the 9mm ASP – from its hiding place in a sliding compartment of his suitcase, changed into a pair of casual slacks, soft leather moccasins, a comfortable shirt and a raw silk jacket made for him by his favourite tailors in Hong Kong – *Bel Homme*. He then returned the military gear to the Quartermaster’s Stores, picked up his case and made his way to where the Bentley

Mulsanne Turbo stood, immaculate in its British Racing Green, parked outside the Officers' Mess.

Sergeant 'Pearly' Pearlman awaited him, also in civilian clothes – a broad-shouldered, big, almost thuggish-looking man, with dark hair worn longer than would be allowed in most crack British regiments. 'Ready for the off, boss?' His tone was casual – another convention of the SAS.

Bond nodded. 'Mind if I curl up in the back, Pearly? Bit knackered to tell you the truth.'

The sergeant grinned. 'It's a swine, the endurance march. I've no love for it myself. Sleep away, boss. I'll wake you when we get into the London area.'

Bond made himself comfortable on the soft leather of the rear seats, while Pearlman started the car and drove off past the famous SAS memorial clock tower. Near the base of the tower a large plaque commemorates the names of SAS officers and men who have failed to 'beat the Clock' – the SAS synonym for staying alive in action or training. The clock tower is collapsible and portable, something which says much about the flexible attitude of 'The Regiment'.

As they whispered through Hereford to follow the main road to the M5 motorway – which in turn would give access to the M4 and London – James Bond closed his eyes and surrendered to a deep, dreamless sleep. He had no idea how much time had passed before he was wakened by Pearlman shouting loudly, 'Boss? Come on, boss! Wake up!'

Bond struggled up through the unconscious darkness, like a man half drowned, reaching towards light on the surface. At first he imagined they had reached London. 'Wha . . . ? Where?'

'You awake?' Pearlman asked loudly.

'Yea . . . Yes. Just about.' Bond shook his head as if to clear his brain.

'In the land of the living, are we?'

'What's up?' Gradually he was adjusting to the car and its surroundings.

'Would you ever expect surveillance?'

'Why?' He was now more alert.

'Just would you? Don't know your line of business, boss. Don't want to shout wolf, but in your line would you expect surveillance?'

'Sometimes.' Bond had straightened himself out in the spacious rear of the car, leaning forward so that his head was close to Pearlman's left ear. 'Why?'

'May be nothing, but I get the distinct feeling we're in a mobile "box".'

'How long?' Bond was fully awake.

'I reckon from Hereford itself.'

'And where are we now?'

'Just come off the M5 and onto the M4. North-west of Bristol.'

'And?'

'There was a grey Saab that picked us up in Hereford. A 900 Turbo. Didn't take much notice, but he wouldn't let go. Then a light-coloured BMW – a 735i, I think – took over. Just before we skirted Gloucester there was the Saab again, ahead of us. He's behind us now – back two cars. The BMW's leading us, well ahead.'

'Coincidence?' Bond suggested.

'Thought of that. Tried the usual. Sudden slow, letting the BMW overtake, giving this heap a bit of welly. They've maintained station nicely. I even went off at Junction 13 and did a bit of round-the-houses, but they're still there. It looks like a full box – there's a light blue Audi, and a nasty little red Lotus Esprit as well. They're pro, I'm pretty certain. Dead middle-management, though. Yuppie cars, all of them.'

Bond murmured, 'You're sure it's not just coincidence?'

'Doesn't look like it to me. I've done all the business and they're still in tow. Mean anything?'

Bond did not reply immediately. A mobile surveillance 'box' was a tried and true technique: one in front, one behind and a couple to left and right – in parallel streets in towns and cities;

hanging around to run interference on open stretches of motorways. All would be in radio contact, probably pretending to be taxis, using code phrases that would sound innocuous to the police or anyone else picking them up. In reality, they would be passing precise instructions, one to the other, regarding their target. Why, though? Why him? Why now? M running a little surveillance test with some of the novitiate? Unlikely.

Pearly was driving with skill and confidence, fast and very accurate, sliding from middle to outside lane, sashaying through traffic like a dancer.

'Let's give 'em another go round-the-houses. What's the next exit?' Bond asked.

'Seventeen, boss. Chippenham to the right, Malmesbury left.'

'Know the roads?'

'Know the Chippenham side best. Nice lot of country lanes around there. Narrow. Very difficult, those lanes.'

'Let's give them a run, then. Stop them if we have to.'

The traffic on the motorway was heavy, but, glancing back, Bond could clearly see the shape of the grey Saab, outlined by other vehicles' headlights. It stayed on station, a couple of cars behind them. 'You carrying?' he asked Pearlman.

'Not so's you'd notice. You?'

'Yes. There's a spare in the map compartment – a Ruger P85: solid and a stopper. I've been testing it for friends on your range. Full mag and one up the spout. You'll need the spare keys.' He passed them forward.

'How're we fixed legally?' Pearlman's tone was of one who was not particularly bothered, but neither was he completely disinterested.

'Don't honestly know,' Bond said, his brain still clicking away at the possibilities. Only three people at the Regent's Park HQ knew where he had been – M, Bill Tanner, his Chief of Staff, and the faithful Money Penny. If the surveillance was a genuine hostile operation against him, the information could only have come from inside Bradbury Lines, and people there were usually

as silent as deaf mutes, for they knew the necessity for secrecy as far as work was concerned. Their lives often depended on discreetly closed mouths.

Ahead the junction was coming up and Bond saw, with some pleasure, that the BMW – also holding station three cars ahead – swept past the turn. Pearlman signalled at the last moment, accelerated up the exit ramp, moving onto the big oval roundabout, cutting in on two slow-travelling cars and swerving onto the Chippenham road. A mile or so further on, he pulled off the main highway. Soon they were slowing to a slightly safer speed with which to negotiate the dark country lanes – trees and hedgerows black in the strong headlights.

‘We lost them?’ Pearlman muttered the question, pumping the brakes to take a tight corner.

‘Don’t know.’ Bond swivelled to look behind them into the darkness. ‘Certainly no lights, but that doesn’t mean a thing.’ He had been through surveillance routines like this himself, and knew that if he was doing the following his lights would have been doused as soon as they hit the minor roads of the countryside. From that point he would rely on luck and a sixth sense – or the use of night goggles – to get him safely behind his target. No lights followed them, yet he felt a cold sense of concern.

By now they had travelled some six or seven miles. If the surveillance vehicles were on their heels he should at least be able to see something.

Bond glanced forward as they rocketed through a village. He caught a glimpse of the shocked white face of some local by the side of the road – just a sudden face, contorted in horror or anger at their speed. There for the blink of an eye, then gone. A pub. Then a church. A lurching right-hand bend, and out of the other side, down a long straight hill.

Suddenly an oath from Pearly, and the judder of brakes being pumped violently.

Ahead there were two sets of lights – not coming towards them but streaming out from either side of the road.

In the blur of speed, Bond realised several things. The lights were flooding from the right and left of a crossroads some twenty yards ahead. Yet, as the facts slid through his mind, the twenty yards closed almost to zero. Two cars emerged from left and right; Pearlman clicked on the Bentley's main beams and the cars were caught, stationary, serrated, bonnet parallel to bonnet in the classic roadblock formation – a red Lotus Esprit and a blue Audi.

Pearlman was still pumping the brakes and veering left as the cars grew in the windscreen. The Bentley touched the grass bank, bounced slightly and they were on top of the cars.

From where Bond sat there appeared to be very little room between the roadblock and the left – ninety-degree – turn, but Pearlman handled the large car like a rally driver, moving in his seat to use the handbrake, his feet dancing on accelerator and footbrake.

The Bentley's tyres protested, screaming as the whole vehicle skidded, side on, then straightened, and gathered speed, brushing the hedge to the left, but clearing the Esprit's boot by what must have been less than an inch.

The road into which they had turned was overhung by trees, still with their stark winter look, the fresh buds and leaves of spring invisible in the car's headlights. It was like driving through a tunnel overhung with scaffolding, and its width would barely allow two cars to pass with ease.

As he looked back towards the diminishing tail lights of the Esprit, and the full beams of the Audi, Bond automatically ducked. A series of tiny blue flashes flared briefly in the darkness, and, above the whisper of the Bentley, he felt rather than heard the bullets that sprayed around them.

'Christ!' Pearlman muttered, edging up on the accelerator, and dragging the car around a long right-hand bend, leaving the roadblock cars out of sight. 'What's your real job, boss? Guinea-pig for the National Health Service?'

'The Audi'll come after us, Pearly. Better give them a run for their money.'

'What d'you think I'm doing – Sunday afternoon sightseeing?'

They appeared to be in open country now, and Bond expected the distant lights of the Audi to appear behind him at any second. He had the ASP out and his hand on the window button ready to try and take out the pursuers should they suddenly leap from the darkness.

'Any idea where we are?' He peered into the blackness, wishing there was a set of Nightfinder glasses in the car.

'I can get us into London if that's what's bothering you.' Pearlman's voice was taut with concentration. 'But I'm going by the scenic route. Best keep well away from any motorways.'

'Good . . . Hell!' Bond pressed down on the switch operating the rear offside window. With a dazzling blast from full-beamed headlights, the Saab which had been following them on the motorway seemed to come from nowhere, tucking itself in close behind them. 'Put your foot through the floor, Pearly!' he yelled, crouching close to the door, lifting the ASP, feeling the rush of cold air on his face and hand.

The Saab still clung on as he fired two shots, low and fast, in the hope of hitting a tyre. Pearlman was throwing the car through the narrow lane at around eighty, rising to an unsafe ninety. In the back, Bond bucked and rolled with the big machine, clinging to the door, attempting to get a clean shot, eyes narrowed against the ferocious blinding glare of the lights.

He fired again, and one of the Saab's headlights went dead. As it did so, the car veered sharply as though its driver was momentarily out of control, rolling right, then hard left, coming square into Bond's line of sight. He fired twice, two quick double shots, and saw the windscreen shatter. He also thought he could hear a scream, but it was just as likely that it was the wind rushing past, cold and fast into the Bentley.

The Saab seemed to hang close to their rear bumper then drop back, faltering before it swerved violently to the left. Bond had a

perfect view as the car mounted the bank. For a second he saw it poised almost in mid-air before it was lost in darkness. A moment later a plume of flame shot upward. The crump came only a finger-click after that.

'I think we should put a fair amount of distance between that wreck and ourselves,' Bond muttered.

'What wreck?' Through the driving mirror Bond could just make out the smile on Pearlman's lips.

Presently he asked if Pearlman had managed to get a make on the other cars. The SAS sergeant quietly repeated the registration numbers of all four cars then went through the makes and colours once more as Bond committed them to memory.

'Didn't notice what the drivers were wearing, by any chance?' Bond's face was creased in a grim smile.

'Wasn't paying all that much attention.' He knew Pearlman was also smiling, but none of this helped solve the question of why they were under surveillance, and by whom.

Bond was still puzzling over it when they pulled up in Knightsbridge and changed places, Pearlman retrieving his own gear from the boot and thanking Bond for what he called, 'An interesting ride home'.

'You want my telephone number, boss? Just in case?'

Bond nodded from the driving seat, and the sergeant ran through the digits. 'Any time I can be of help, it'd be a pleasure.' Pearlman nodded and, closing the window, Bond put the car into drive and drew away from the kerb, heading in the direction of Regent's Park and his Service's headquarters.