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Cold

Written by John Gardner

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COLD

John Gardner



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BOOK ONE

Cold Front

1

DISASTER

Zulu Time is the military term for Greenwich Mean Time. It is Zulu Time which is used by NATO and Coalition Forces, the world over, when operating in the field and it pays no attention to things like Daylight Savings Time. It is the time also used by the Secret Intelligence Service, and on that evening it was just after 17.00 hours Zulu Time (5 p.m. to us lesser mortals) on Tuesday, 20th March when the disaster occurred.

In the tall anonymous building overlooking Regent's Park one shift of secretaries and deskbound officers was preparing for the end of the day's work. James Bond, irritable as ever when he was out of the field, was just putting his signature to the last page of a memo when the red telephone, his direct line to M's office, started to ring.

Later, he recalled feeling a second of dread for some unaccountable reason.

'Bond,' he said into the mouthpiece.

At the other end, M's PA, the faithful Moneypenny, sounded shaken and in tears. 'Bradbury Airlines flight to Dulles. Blew up on landing. James, I . . . I had a friend on board. I . . . Please get up here.'

M had a videotape running when a red-eyed Moneypenny buzzed him through: the video, soon to be seen all over the world, captured by a major network for a two minute spot with a sale to CNN, showed the arrival of Bradbury Airlines' inaugural flight into Washington Dulles International, some forty

minutes' drive from the centre of Washington DC. Stark, horrible and shattering in its dreadful images.

The Boeing 747–400, which was Flight BD 299, came sweeping in over the trees for the flare and touched down, the black, white and gold livery of Bradbury Airlines glinting as it caught the sun – a picture perfect landing on a picture perfect day.

The main gear caressed the runway, then came the dreadful sight. First a plume of fire and smoke seemed to break from the aircraft, just behind the flight deck. The flame swung back and a second explosion ripped through the cabin, close to the wing roots, then a final blast just forward of the tail. One wing sheared off completely; the remainder of the Boeing careered down the runway like some obscene firework, scattering fragments of burning wreckage and people as it went.

Bond realized that he had stopped breathing during these appalling few seconds, and knew he was standing grey-faced as M looked away from the screen. 'How d'you think they did that, James?' His voice shook with a mixture of anger and shock, but it turned Bond's mind inside out. Looking at his old chief he thought he could detect a glistening of the eyes that betokened tears.

'How . . . ?'

'Watch it again.' M rewound the tape and played it back in slow motion, keeping up a running commentary that made Bond think of the fractured voice of the film news commentator, heard so many times, on the surviving graphic footage which chronicled the final moments of the airship *Hindenburg* in 1937 – 'His gear touches down . . . God, look at it . . . the gear touches and there goes the first explosion, abaft the flight deck . . . Oh, God, James, it hasn't moved its own length before the main cabin explodes . . . The port wing crumples . . . Fire . . . Then the explosion for'ard of the tail.'

In the back of his mind, Bond calculated the fact that the loss of life in the *Hindenburg* disaster was, amazingly, thirty-six out of ninety-two passengers and crew. What he had just witnessed

would have blown apart or incinerated almost four hundred people. He was shocked and sickened by this obvious act of wanton carnage.

'So, how, James? If it was your job, how would you have done it?'

Bond shook his head. 'From Heathrow? It's not possible. Security's tied up tighter than a champagne cork.'

'So, how would *you* have got around that? Somebody did.' The old man sounded angry and stunned.

'I'd want . . .' Bond began, then the intercom buzzed on M's desk and Moneypenny's voice came through. 'I have the list you wanted, sir.'

M told her to bring it in, and Bond noted her eyes were still red, her manner, if anything, even more subdued.

'Poor girl.' M scanned the papers she had brought to him once she was out of the room again. 'An old friend of hers was one of the senior flight attendants on BD 299.' He paused as though about to say something else, then seemed to change his mind. 'You were telling me how you'd have rigged up explosives like that, James.'

His use of Bond's given name instead of the peremptory 007 signalled that he was in an almost fatherly mood. It also indicated his level of trust.

'I'd need to know how long the aircraft was actually on the ground between flights. Where it had come from on its last assignment. Who did the maintenance. All the usual things.'

'Walking back the cat?' M seemed to be proud of his knowledge of arcane terms.

'That's what I understand the Americans call it, sir.'

Almost immediately, M's mood changed from the whimsical back to the serious area of the disaster. 'And if you were the mad bomber, how would you fix it?'

'The first one I'd say was in the lavatories just behind the flight deck. I suspect the one in the rear would be similar, while the explosion from midships would have been set in the crew

station and galley between business class and economy. Unless Bradbury's people had a new configuration on their 747s.'

'Unlikely, even though the aircraft are new. Bradbury only bought two, I gather. His entire fleet consists of a couple of 747s, five 737s, two Lear Jets, a pair of Airbus 340s and four Shorts 360s for commuter flights in the UK.'

'Well, that's where I would plant the explosives; my best guess would be that's where they were.'

'And the method of detonation?'

Bond frowned. 'Could be a button right there at Dulles . . .'

'By a button, you mean remote control?'

He nodded and M quietly asked him to say the word – 'Yes or no, James.'

'This being taped, sir?'

'Yes.' Matter-of-fact, as though it were the most normal thing in the world. 'Go on, what other method?'

'The explosions detonated at the moment the gear touched the runway. I'd say some kind of trigger mechanism, like a very sophisticated mercury switch, phased to activate the bombs when the wheels bumped the runway at Dulles.'

'And what would you use? What kind of explosives?'

'Any good plastique. Semtex, C4, whatever. But there's something else bugging me, sir. Nobody's mentioned that Harley Bradbury was on the flight.'

'He wasn't.'

'Why not? The man's a great self-promoter. He's made a point of being on every inaugural flight since they first started flying.'

Harley Bradbury was a prime example of the self-made British multi-millionaire. At the age of forty-two, he seemed to have come from nowhere. In fact he had come from buying up remaindered books at a fraction of their cost, supplying them to libraries – both public and private – before his first major purchase, a small publishing house, which he saved from extinction by borrowing heavily. That was in 1982. By 1990 he owned three publishing houses, a chain of shops selling music CDs, a

recording company and an airline. Bradbury was one of the big success stories of the '80s, matched only by Richard Branson of Virgin fame. He had won the Heathrow-Dulles route against many attempts to block it. This was to have been a big day for Bradbury.

'Why not?' Bond repeated. 'Why wasn't he on board?'

'Last-minute change of plan. It appears that he was called to his headquarters for some important meeting only a few hours before 299 was due to leave. Flew up in one of his line's Shorts 360s.'

'The Bradbury Air HQ?'

M nodded. 'Birmingham. That's where he keeps the fleet.'

'Lower airport charges?'

'No room at Heathrow.'

After a short pause, Bond asked if there was anything M wanted him to do.

There was a silence while both men seemed to stare into space, the dreadful image of the aircraft touching down and then exploding playing again and again in their minds.

'Initially, I thought you could check up on Bradbury and those who helped fund the airline, from this end.' M cleared his throat, shaking his head as if to rid it of the pictures of disaster. 'Changed my mind. All the scavengers are dashing to DC – to Dulles.' M glanced again at the papers Moneypenny had brought in. 'The NTSB Go-Team are already there, as are the FAA, representatives from Boeing and ALPA. The FBI also has a team, of course.' The NTSB was the American National Transport Safety Board. The organization always had what they called a Go-Team ready for any major disaster. FAA was the Federal Aviation Administration; while ALPA – the Airline Pilots' Association – always had a representative at a serious crash site.

'As the flight originated here, and it's a British airline,' M continued, 'people're assembling here to join the fray.'

'Who in particular?'

'Well, Bradbury himself with a couple of his senior people.

A team from Farnborough, naturally, and a pair of people from our sister service, because it appears to be terrorist-related.' By Farnborough, M meant the Aircraft Research Establishment, that extraordinary team of aeronautical scientists who time and again had pieced together the reason for aircraft crashes. The ARE had been mainly responsible for tracking down the makers and planters of the bomb that had blown Pan Am 103 out of the sky over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988. Their sister service was, of course, the Security Service, often referred to as MI5.

'There'll also be a member of the British Airline Pilots' Association . . .'

'And, presumably someone from our own department just to balance out the folk from "Five." '

'Naturally.'

'And I'm the first choice?'

'You were.' M looked up from under his grey bushy eyebrows. 'Now there might be problems concerning that.'

'Problems?'

'Brace yourself, James. Moneypenny's not the only one to have lost a friend in this disaster. An old close companion of yours has also perished.'

Bond did not flinch. 'Who?'

M sighed. 'She still clung to her minor title and name even though her husband's long dead. Tempesta. Sukie Tempesta.'

The shock hit Bond in an amalgam of sudden sorrow and disbelief. The *Principessa* Sukie Tempesta dead. He had shared much danger with this golden girl, much danger and a lot of loving as well. In his mind he saw her very clearly: the mane of red hair and her habit of blowing the odd unruly strand out of her face, away from her brown, violet-flecked eyes. Like anybody hearing of a sudden death, he could not believe it and a jumble of thoughts crowded his mind.

Her maiden name had been Susan Destry. He recalled some raunchy pillow talk, her laugh and the words, 'Destry rides again.' A convent-educated girl, she had answered an ad on a

kind of whim and so became nanny to the grandchildren of *Principe* Pasquale Tempesta, sire of an old and respected Italian family, who was over eighty years of age when she married him. 'A marriage of convenience,' Sukie had called it, and the entire tribe had been anxious for the wedding to take place. Anything that would keep the old man happy. When Bond first met her there had been danger and violence, played out over several weeks of turmoil.

He could see her quite clearly now, the slim figure with drop-dead legs and a quirky sense of humour. Dead? Sukie Tempesta dead? It did not seem possible.

He realized that M was looking at him with the eyes of an inquisitor. 'I would have liked you on this one, James,' he said finally, 'but I fear you may be too personally involved.'

'Don't worry, sir. If Sukie was killed in this horror, it will make me even more determined.'

'Yes, but can you remain detached? You, of all people, know the problems that come with personal vendettas.'

'I'll be fine, sir.' Even as he spoke, Bond asked himself if he were being honest.

'Good man. Let me make some calls. After that I'll be able to brief you thoroughly.'

He waited for his old chief to work the phones, as they called it, and half an hour later he was being instructed on the situation he would have to face. An Air Transport Command VC-10 was to leave Lyneham that evening with a number of other people, flying straight to the crash site at Dulles International. Towards the end of the briefing M said they were also giving Bradbury and his own team a lift. 'They're my only definite no as far as contracts're concerned,' he told Bond. 'I don't want us getting our wires crossed with the Security Service. So keep your distance from Bradbury and his people. Understand?'

Bond nodded, and when the briefing was over, he left the building, went back to his flat off the King's Road, packed a bag,

readied a briefcase and waited to be picked up by one of the SIS cars that would drive him to Wiltshire and Lyneham.

Later that night he boarded the old VC-10 – still the Royal Air Force's main transport aircraft – settled himself in a seat towards the rear and promptly fell asleep.

He was wakened by a WRAF flight attendant offering him breakfast and saying they would be landing within an hour. During the meal he looked around, identifying his fellow travellers: a pair of men who had the look of specialists about them – obviously the couple from the Aircraft Research Establishment; a man and woman, sitting a few rows in front of him, both of whom merged into the background like chameleons, certainly the Security Service; one tall, big, silver-haired and clear-eyed man, undoubtedly from BALPA; and right forward, the unmistakable form of Harley Bradbury, accompanied by a knot of four PAs and secretaries, plus the VP of Bradbury Air. The group appeared to be hunched together, as though discussing the way in which they would be dealing with the catastrophe. It would mean certain financial disaster for Bradbury, Bond knew, and was quite pleased that M had given him the hands-off order concerning that particular group. Bond liked money-men about as much as he liked politicians, who were pretty well off his scale of people to be trusted.

As they swept down at Dulles, he was able to catch a short glimpse of the wreckage beside the runway, with people in overalls moving around it and the usual post-crash vehicles lined up at strategic points along the site.

The aircraft finally came to rest, parked on the far side of the midfield terminal from which the clumsy 'people mover lounges' ploughed to and fro to the main terminal buildings. Two sets of mobile stairs were driven into place and, seconds later, two men came up and into the main cabin.

One was from the British Embassy, the other did not specify his position, but had about him the look of a man of authority. Bond put him down as probably the overall leader of the crash

investigation team. Both were businesslike and brisk. All customs and immigration inspections were being waived; out of deference to some of those on board, they were parked at a point where neither press nor public could see faces or take photographs. Those who had no immediate business at the crash site would be bused out to a hotel some ten minutes from the airport. The team from ARE and Mr Bradbury's group would be taken straight out to the scene of the disaster. There would be a general briefing and a sharing of information at three-thirty that afternoon in the hotel.

Bond, the representative from BALPA, and the couple from the Security Service were bundled down the rear stairway and into a crew bus which drew away quickly, heading for the airport exit. Bond gave the people from MI5 what he considered to be a disarming smile and introduced himself, holding out his hand. 'Boldman,' he announced. 'James Boldman.'

'Yes, we know.' The man gave him a half-hearted handshake, while the woman merely smiled and said, 'Mr and Mrs Smith. John and Pam Smith.' She had lank off-blonde hair and wore outdated granny glasses, her ankle-length shapeless dress covered by a black coat that looked as though it had come from an Oxfam shop, the shoulders spotted with dandruff.

The BALPA captain nodded at them in turn, saying that he was 'Mercer, Edward Mercer.'

'One big happy family,' mused John Smith as the driver honked his horn loudly at a tourist-driven car that suddenly swerved in front of them.

At the hotel, Bond held back to let the others check in first so that the registration desk was clear before he took out one of his Boldman identity credit cards and filled in the form.

'There's a long fax for you, sir.' The young attractive black girl who was on the desk pushed an envelope towards him. 'I'll get a bell-boy to see you up to your room, and if there's anything I can do, just let me know.'

The name tag pinned to her uniform said *Azeb*. 'Thank you,

Azeb. I think I can manage to find the room, and I'm travelling light.' He lifted the garment bag and the briefcase to show her as he turned away.

He had just reached the bank of elevators when a voice behind him softly breathed, 'James. James, there you are. I've been waiting since Monday morning. Where've you been?'

He turned and stared in confusion.

'James, what's the matter? You look as though you've seen a ghost. I got a flight straight away, the moment I received your message,' said the Principessa Sukie Tempesta.