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A RIOTOUS
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Blast from the Past

By Raymond Benson

Who'd want to kill James Bond's son?

After a bomb blast, a car chase, and an encounter with an old enemy, 007 finds the deadly answer.

Pictures by Gregory Manchess

James Bond Short Story, first published Playboy Magazine, January 1997, Volume 44, Number

1.

CHAPTER 1

The Fed Ex letter was delivered at 9:30 James Bond had completed his morning ritual of a cold shower, 20 slow push-ups, as many leg lifts as he could manage, 20 reps of touching his toes, and 15 minutes of arm and chest exercises combined with deep breathing.

He was sitting and reading The Times at his ornate Empire desk in the book lined sitting room of his flat off King's road in Chelsea when the bell rang.

Bond signed for the letter and took it back into the sitting room. It was from "J. Suzuki" in New York. He opened it and read:

DEAR DAD -- TERRIBLY URGENT

THAT YOU COME TO NEW YORK!

I NEED YOUR HELP! FAIL NOT!

WITH LOVE -- JAMES

He rarely heard from his son, a young man working as a banker in the U.S. James' mother, Kissy Suzuki, had died of cancer years ago. Bond had fathered the child while suffering from amnesia during a dark period of his life when he lived as a simple fisherman with Kissy on a small island in Japan. Bond had left her in search of his identity, unaware that she was pregnant with their son. It was much later, after he had recovered from what could clinically be classified as a mental breakdown, that he learned of James Suzuki's existence. Bond had helped Kissy support the child, even after she had moved to the States. She had succumbed to her illness when the boy was a teenager and Bond had put him through college.

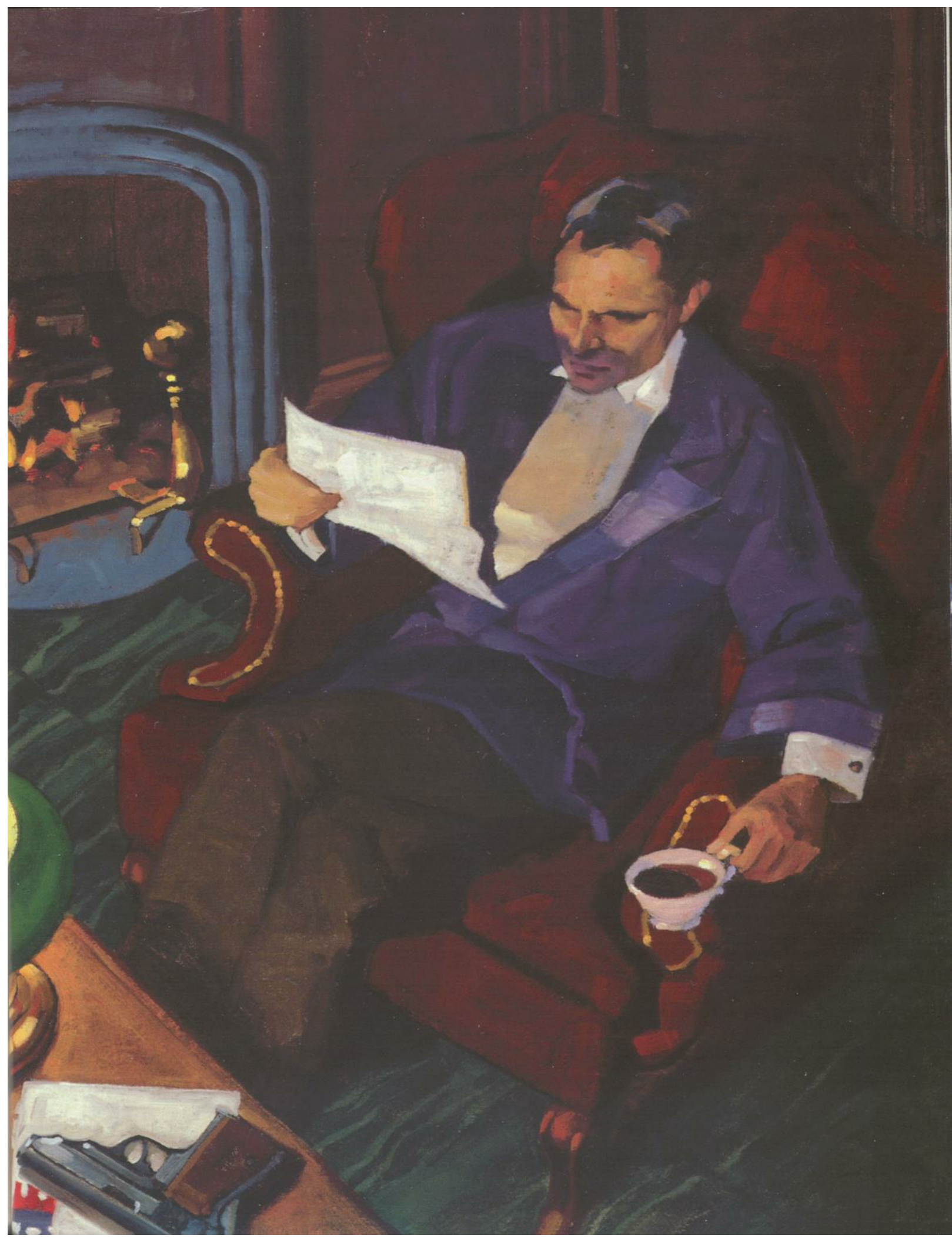
The memories of Kissy Suzuki and the island in Japan brought back other nightmares that Bond had pushed back into his subconscious. M had sent him to Japan in the hopes he would snap out of the depression he suffered after the murder of his wife, Tracy di Vincenzo, at the hands of Ernst Stavro Blofeld and his partner-in-crime, Erma Bunt. This was the main reason Bond had little contact with his son -- the links in the chain of memories always led back to Tracy.

Although they were buried deep within his psyche, recollections of the events of that era featured in Bond's dreams every now and then. Sometimes he would wake in the middle of the night with one of several recurring images lingering in his mind: Blofeld's bulging eyes as Bond strangled him to death, Fräulein Bunt slumping to the floor after Bond hit her with a staff, the castle exploding as Bond watched clinging from a helium-filled weather balloon and, most often, the blood on Tracy's golden hair as he cradled her in the front seat of the Lancia that spirited the couple away from their wedding.

Many years had passed and Bond had lived through further adventures and dangers. He had managed to bury those painful scars by committing himself to his work. The women he encountered along the way were diversions, to be sure, but none had touched his heart the way Tracy had. He couldn't help but feel that there was something still unresolved, something he had to accomplish before he could exorcise those demons.

Bond phoned his son, but there was no answer at James' home number. When he called the bank where James worked, they confirmed that James hadn't been in for days. Bond booked a flight to New

York.



CHAPTER 2

He arrived at Kennedy Airport at midday and took a taxi into Manhattan. The city was alive with the energy that made New York the premiere cosmopolitan city. It was a sunny, unseasonably warm spring day, and the Manhattanites were out in force. Horns bellowed and endless swarms of pedestrians darted across intersections.

Bond had dressed casually in a light-blue cotton short-sleeve polo shirt and navy-blue cotton twill trousers. He wore a light, gray silk basket-weave jacket, under which he kept his Walther PPK 7.65 mm in a chamois shoulder holster. The PPK was not standard issue anymore, but there was something about its history, its familiarity, that gave Bond a sense of security.

The taxi took him to the Upper East Side, where James Suzuki lived in a studio apartment at 75th Street and First Avenue, not far from the East River. Bond paid the driver and stepped out onto the pavement. The area was residential, made up of six-story brownstone apartment houses and small shops. Bond surveyed the street before entering the building. A mother pushed a pram, chatting with another woman as they walked, a toadlike bag lady, dressed in rags and waddling behind a stolen shopping cart filled with garbage and bundles, stopped in front of the door of James' building. Two teenagers threw coins against a brick wall a few yards away. Someone shouted across the street. The traffic was terribly noisy.

Bond moved past the bag lady blocking the door to the building and stepped inside. As he moved past her, Bond was perplexed by what he could see underneath the rags shielding her face, a strange skin condition with a waxen look. He shrugged and examined the building directory. He rang the bell marked J. SUZUKI and waited. The intercom remained silent. He rang the bell again. Nothing happened.

One bell was marked SUPER, and he tried it. A moment later, the intercom blurted, "Yeah, who is it?"

"I'm looking for James Suzuki in 3A. I'm his father. Can you let me in?" Bond barked into the speaker.

He heard some grumbling, and then the lock on the inner door buzzed. Bond pushed it open and entered a dingy corridor facing a flight of stairs. The super's door opened at the back of the hall. A fat man in an undershirt and boxer shorts peered out.

"You got ID?" the man asked. He had a fairly thick Bronx accent.

After looking at Bond's Ministry of Defense credentials, the man heaved himself up the stairs, far too slowly for Bond's patience, then wrestled with the key ring and unlocked the door.

Bond recognized the foul stench as soon as the door swung open. He bolted past the fat man into the small apartment. "Stay out!" he shouted to the super.

James Suzuki lay on his back in the middle of the floor, his body in an advanced state of putrefaction, its features bloated.

Bond knelt heavily beside the body of his only son.

CHAPTER 3

Special Agent Cheryl Haven scribbled in a small notebook as Bond spoke.

"You didn't touch anything? She asked in a northern England accent.

Bond shook his head, still stunned by his discovery.

He had contacted the city's British Secret Service branch after convincing the super, with the aid of a \$50 bill, that there was no need for the local police.

Within minutes, Cheryl Haven and an American investigative team had arrived at the apartment. The crime scene personnel -- a forensic specialist, a photographer and a medical examiner -- were already at work on the body and the room.

Bond gestured toward the kitchen counter. "There's an envelope addressed to me. I haven't opened it."

Agent Haven said, "We'll make it top priority." She turned to the forensic specialist. "Dan? Dust the envelope on the counter so we can see what's inside. Paul, could you take some photos of the kitchen before Dan dusts that envelope?" She turned back to Bond. "He was due to check in next week." Family members of all secret service personnel residing in foreign countries were required to contact the local branch once a month. "I know, because he usually spoke with me. He was a nice young man. I'm sorry."

Bond nodded abruptly and averted his eyes.

She quickly returned to business. "We still have time to go by his bank. You have no idea why you received the Fed Ex?"

"No."

The medical examiner cleared his throat. "I have some preliminary results. We still need to do an autopsy, of course."

"What did you find?" she asked.

"He's been dead for four days, give or take 12 hours. From the looks of it, he was poisoned. Look at this wound on his arm here."

Bond and the woman stood and looked closely at the corpse. There was an incision about an inch long on James' left forearm. It was swollen and dark.

"A very sharp, thin blade. That's where the poison entered the bloodstream. A razor blade, perhaps. You can see the edema around the wound. There's dried blood on his shirt there, see? It must have been powerful stuff. He died of respiratory paralysis. Some kind of inebriant, I imagine, something exotic."

The forensic man finished dusting the envelope and handed it to Bond. Bond carefully opened it and emptied the contents onto the counter. A small silver key fell out. The number 366 was embossed on it.

"Looks like a safe-deposit key," Agent Haven said. She named a well-known Japanese bank. "It's got their logo on it."

"My son's employer," Bond said.

He needed to get out of that apartment and clear his head. He had to think. Who would want to

kill his son? Was it an attempt to get at him? Bond rubbed his brow, forcing his mind to go back over the past few weeks. Had there been any kind of warning? Had he any reason to suspect someone? Anyone? He couldn't think of a single thing that was relevant. Maybe James had been in trouble. Perhaps the contents of the safe-deposit box would provide the answers.

CHAPTER 4

"It'll be faster if we walk," Agent Haven said, grabbing her purse. Once on the pavement, Bond and the woman walked briskly south.

It was the First time Bond had actually looked at her. She was in her late 30s or early 40s but had the figure and complexion of a woman in her 20s. She was tall, with long, strong legs, revealed by the short, slim skirt of a light-weight worsted wool business suit. Her thin but silky blonde hair blew behind her as they walked, and her full breasts moved beneath her jacket. Bond thought she was quite attractive.

"Where are you from, Agent Haven?" Bond asked. "I detected a northern England accent. Blackpool?"

"You got it right," she said, increasing the speed of her stride. "Call me Cheryl, please, Mr. Bond."

"Only if you call me James," he said, matching her pace. "How did you get to be station branch head in Manhattan? What happened to Forbes?"

"Alan got rich playing Lotto. Can you believe it? He retired early and went to live in Texas," she said, laughing. "I was second-in-command and got the promotion. I'm surprised we never met before."

"I am, too," he said. "So tell me about James. Was he all right? Did he ever sound like he was in trouble?"

The two had to stop for a red light at a busy intersection.

"Never," Cheryl said. "He called on time every month and we chatted for a minute or so." She grinned. "He asked me out once. He was a flirt."

Bond smiled ruefully. The sins of the fathers

"I never received any indication that he was into anything but his work at the bank, the girls he dated and the Knicks," she continued. The light turned green and they continued.

They reached an intersection just across from the bank. Immediately to their left, a street vendor selling hot dogs shouted and cursed, waving away a short woman dressed in rags and pushing a shopping cart.

"Poor old lady," Cheryl said.

Bond was staring at her back when he heard Cheryl say, "Come on, the Light's green."

They crossed the street and went into the bank. Inside, they sought out the bank manager to inform him of James Suzuki's death and explain the situation. Mr. Nishiuye, the manager, expressed appropriate words of dismay and sympathy, then led them downstairs to the safe-deposit area, a small room protected by a barred gate. There was a long table in the center, surrounded by four chairs on rollers. Number 366 was nearly eye-level on the wall. The manager stood in the doorway and watched Bond insert the small silver key into the lock. Once engaged, the key wouldn't turn.

"Oh dear," Mr. Nishiuye said, apologetically, "I'm afraid we have been having trouble with some of those locks lately. That's the third one this week."

Bond struggled with it, withdrew the key and reached for his belt buckle. "I have a lock pick

here, let me try that."

"That's from our old friend Major Boothroyd, I take it?" Cheryl asked.

"I have one, too, but it's the ladies' model."

"Wait," the manager said. "We have a maintenance man. He is the locksmith. He opened the others easily. Let me find Sam."

"Hurry," Bond said. After he had left, Bond shrugged and said to Cheryl, "I probably could have had it open by the time he returns."

"Relax, Mr. B., I mean, James," she said. "I don't think we're going to solve this in one night, and I'll make sure you're allowed to stay as long as you need."

Bond sat down uneasily in one of the chairs and stared at the safe-deposit box.

"What is it?" she asked. "You look tired. Do you feel jet-lagged?"

Bond said, "No, it's the homeless woman we saw outside. There's something, I don't know"

"What?"

"I'm quite sure I saw her earlier outside James' apartment. When I first got there."

"Well, that was hours ago. She could have wheeled her little cart this far in that time."

"I know," Bond reflected, "but there's something else. She reminds me of something, or someone."

Cheryl sat down beside him and placed her smooth, warm hand on his.

"Listen, James," she said. "You've had a shock -- not that you're not handling this remarkably well. But still . . . take it easy."

The manager returned with another man who was dressed in overalls and carrying a tool kit.

"Number 366, Sam." Mr. Nishiuye pointed to the wall of box fronts.

The man set his tool kit on the floor and removed a screwdriver.

"May I offer you anything?" the manager asked them. "Coffee?"

"No, thank you," said Bond, "but I would like to see my son's desk. Can I do that while our man works on the lock?"

"Certainly," the manager said. "Follow me."

James Suzuki's desk was clean and uncluttered. A photo of his mother was framed and sitting on top of a computer monitor. Adjacent to it was a framed color snapshot of him as a boy with Bond. It had been taken when James was about 12 years old, during a rare visit to London. They were posing in front of one of the Trafalgar Square lions. Kissy had taken the photo. It could very well have been the only photo James had of his father.

Bond did a quick pass through the desk and found nothing of interest.

The manager asked, "How is James' aunt doing?"

Bond looked at him. "What?"

"His aunt. She was here a couple of days ago and used the safe-deposit box," the manager said. Bond stared at him, incredulous. "She showed me written authorization---"

Before the man could finish, Bond and Cheryl bolted for the stairs and ran back to the safe-

deposit room. They stepped through the open door just as Sam said, "I think I have it," and turned the lock.

A tremendous noise and blinding flash of white light shook the room. The force of the explosion knocked Bond and Cheryl from the doorway and onto the floor of the corridor outside. Smoke began to fill the place, and alarms sounded immediately.

"Are you all right?" Bond shouted to Cheryl.

"Yes!"

"Wait here!" He jumped up and into the next room. A large gaping hole in the wall marked where the safety-deposit box had once been.

He dashed to the corridor and took hold of Cheryl. "We have to get out of here or we'll suffocate."

Together they found the stairs up to the ground floor, and outside. Mr. Nishiuye was helping a couple of employees when he saw them.

"I thought you were dead!" he exclaimed. "What about Sam?"

Bond shook his head. "He took the blast intended for me, I think," he said.

The fire engine's siren screamed in the distance, Bond and Cheryl joined the crowd of people in front of the bank. They both had dark smudges on their clothes and faces. Then he saw her. The bag lady was standing on the other side of Park Avenue, watching. Bond could swear she was not looking at the bank and the pandemonium in front of it -- she was staring straight at him.

"Stay here," he said to Cheryl and started to cross the avenue. As soon as the woman saw Bond approaching, she moved quickly around the corner onto a one-way street heading west. Bond began to run. He reached the other side just in time to see her step into the backseat of an idling black town car. He rushed to it, leaped and reached for the door handle. The driver stepped on the gas, Bond fell back and immediately jumped up. By then, Cheryl had crossed the street and was running after him.

He reached Madison Avenue, but the car had already crossed it and was continuing west. He ran against the red light, dodging around cars moving up Madison. A taxi almost hit him and the horn blared.

"James! Wait!" Cheryl called, and she caught up to him on the other side of Madison.

An empty taxicab was idling in front of a delicatessen about 100 feet west of them. The OFF DUTY light was on; the driver had stepped out and gone inside the deli. Bond sprinted toward it and jumped into the driver's seat. Cheryl ran to the passenger side. As Bond drove off, the cabdriver ran out of the delicatessen, shouting.

"I'm not sure what you just did was entirely legal," Cheryl said.

"They do it in the movies all the time," Bond said, speeding toward Fifth Avenue. The car had crossed Fifth and was heading toward Sixth Avenue, but traffic had brought it to a halt. Bond crossed the intersection and pulled into the line of traffic on the narrow street. Four vehicles were between the cab and the other car. Suddenly, it tore out of the line of stalled traffic, pulled onto the pavement, and then sped along the shop fronts toward Sixth Avenue. Scared pedestrians screamed and jumped out of the way. The town car pulled down a canopy in front of a shop as it raced recklessly toward the intersection.

Bond cursed and drove the cab onto the pavement as well. He floored the gas pedal and took off,

following the town car. Cheryl was too stunned to scream.

The other car reached the intersection at Sixth Avenue and shot out into moving traffic. Another cab rammed into its back fender, but it kept on going. Horns were braying as Bond's taxi burst out into the avenue. They managed to make it across without getting hit.

They were still traveling west on a one-way, narrow street, and there was now nothing between the town car and Bond's taxi. Bond bore down, gaining on it. Then he saw a figure lean out of the car's window, pointing back at them.

"Duck!" Bond yelled just as the windshield shattered above his head. He pulled out the Walther PPK, held it in his left hand out the window, and shot at the car. He knocked out a taillight. Bond was out of practice driving with the wheel on the left, and shooting with his left hand.

At Seventh Avenue, the town car turned left and headed south. Bond zoomed into the intersection doing 60 miles per hour and almost hit a bus. Cheryl gripped the dashboard and stared straight ahead, not saying a word.

The town car weaved in and out of traffic, scooting ahead and sailing through an intersection just as the light turned red. Bond, through his teeth, said, "Hold on!" He stepped on the gas and leaned on the horn of the cab. Cross traffic had already entered the intersection and another taxi pulled in front of Bond. He had to swerve to avoid broadsiding it, but nevertheless took off its back bumper and sent the cab spinning like a top in the middle of the intersection.

The town car turned right onto another one-way street, heading west. Bond followed, hot on its tail. The figure leaned out of the car once again and fired at them, but missed.

Cheryl suddenly snapped out of her deep freeze. "All right, that does it," she said, and pulled a Browning 9mm automatic pistol out of her bag.

"Christ, Cheryl," said Bond, "now you think of that?"

"Sorry, I was enjoying the ride," she said. She leaned out the passenger window. She fired twice. The man who was aiming at them dropped his gun on the street and withdrew into the car.

"There're three people in the car," said Bond.

"The driver, the woman and the man you just shot. Nice work."

"Thanks," she said.

Cheryl leaned out again to fire, but the town car reached Eighth Avenue, and turned south against the one-way traffic traveling north.

"They must be mad!" she shouted, but Bond followed them. Sirens shrieked behind them.

At 23rd Street, the town car turned right and drove west again. Bond sped after it across Ninth Avenue and onto Tenth. They were nearing the Hudson River.

The town car slowed and turned into a loading dock of an old four-story building on Tenth Avenue, and Bond pulled in a block away next to the curb. He jumped out and took cover behind his open door. Cheryl ran to the side of the building and flattened herself against it. Bond followed and stood beside her, watching and listening.

"What is this place?" he asked.

"Some kind of warehouse. No telling who it belongs to," she said. "There's nothing this far west in Chelsea but old warehouses."

Bond snaked nearer to the dock entrance, but a steel door barred the way to what appeared to be a parking garage. There was no visible way in on this side of the building. The sun was sinking fast, and an orange glow permeated the streets. The police sirens were lost in the distance, and this area of the city was deserted.

There was a fire escape on the side of the building. "I'm going to get in up there. Go find a phone and call for back-up or whatever it is you do here," Bond ordered.

"I don't think you should go in there alone," she said.

"Go on, please, Cheryl," he said with determination, and then he leaped up and grabbed the bottom of the metal ladder. It rolled down with his weight.

"All right," she said, "but I'm coming right back after you." She looked around, located a phone booth on the opposite corner, and ran for it.

Bond climbed to the second floor. He tried the window, but it was locked or stuck. Up another flight, the window inched up a bit. Bond put all of his strength behind the effort and opened it wide enough for him to slip through.

It was very dark inside. He stood still and allowed his eyes to adjust to the lighting. It was some kind of lounge area; chairs and couches dating from the Fifties dominated the room. He listened and could hear faint movement below him.

He slowly moved across the room to the open door, but the wooden floor creaked as he walked. Damn! If they didn't know he had already entered the building, they were aware of his presence now.

As soon as he stepped through the doorway, he felt a sharp pain on the back of his head and all light was extinguished.



CHAPTER 5

The jolt of three slaps on the face brought Bond out of the pit of darkness. He was propped in a chair in a different room, some kind of old office, with junky furniture piled next to the walls. A single overhead light cast a dull yellow glow over the floor.

The back of his head hurt like hell. His first reflex was to reach up with his right hand to rub his head, but the cold muzzle of a pistol jabbed his temple.

"Don't move," a man's voice said.

Bond groaned, squeezed his eyes twice, then focused on the blurry figure standing in front of him. It was the bag lady, but strangely changed. The rags were gone, and she was dressed in a black shirt and black trousers. Her face still seemed smooth, waxen, unreal. She was plump and short, probably no more than 5'2". The gray hair pulled back in a bun seemed fake -- it looked as if she wore a wig.

"You don't recognize me, Mr. Bond?" she said. "Maybe this will help."

The woman reached up to her hairline and gently began to peel off something stuck to her skin. No, she was actually peeling off her skin! She worked carefully, removing a thin mask of synthetic flesh that covered the right half of her face. Underneath was a grotesque skin condition that began on her right cheekbone and went up the side of her face and underneath the wig: the scarring of poorly executed plastic surgery. She was a female version of the phantom of the opera.

"Hideous, Mr. Bond?" she said. "Take a good look. I want you to see what you did to me." She pronounced her Ws as Vs, like a B-movie Nazi.

What the hell was she talking about? Bond forced himself to look at her again, and this time the feeling of recognition he had earlier experienced returned. He looked past the horrible mask and saw a square, brutal face with toadlike features. No! He felt his heart race when he realized who she was. A report claiming that the woman had been seen in Australia received some attention shortly after the Japanese affair, but this information proved to have been false. It was seemingly impossible, but there she was in front of him. She was supposed to be dead!

"Irma Bunt," he said.

"Oh, so you recognize me!" she cackled. She carefully replaced the skin mask as she talked. "You thought I was dead, didn't you? Everyone thought I was dead. Well, I was. I was dead for many years, until now." She chuckled to her self, then said slowly and with menace, "Now I am more alive than I ever was. It's a pity you survived the surprise I left for you in the bank. Now I'll have to take care of you here, but that might be more entertaining after all."

Bond surveyed the situation. A man stood behind his chair and held a pistol to his head. Another man, the wounded one, was next to Irma Bunt. His shoulder was bloody, and he had crudely wrapped something around it. He was holding Bond's Walther PPK in his left hand. A third man was a few feet away, leaning against the wall and armed with what appeared to be an Uzi.

"You are wondering how I am still alive," Fräulein Bunt said.

Bond hoped he could stall her and keep her talking until Cheryl could arrive with the cavalry.

"You're right, Fräulein, I am wondering. The last time I saw you, you were lying on the floor of that castle with a bump on your head."

Her mask was once again in place. Bond couldn't decide which of her faces was more freakish.

"You thought I perished in the explosion, didn't you? I regained consciousness just as you were escaping on that balloon. I knew what was happening. I could hear the rumbling from below. I knew I had seconds to get out of there. You left poor Ernst in a heap on the floor, but there was nothing I could do for him. He was dead."

As she talked, the flood of nightmarish memories returned to Bond. Ernst

Stavro Blofeld had become a fugitive from the law after the Thunderball affair and the business in the Alps. With the demise of SPECTRE, Blofeld and his companion, Irma Bunt, had fled to Japan, where he had assumed the identity of a horticulturist named Dr. Shatterhand. Blofeld had purchased an ancient, abandoned Japanese castle and built a "research lab" for exotic, poisonous plants and dangerous animals. Mad as a hatter, Blofeld's true intention had been to entice Japanese citizens to commit suicide in his so-called "garden of death." Bond had infiltrated the castle's defenses, knocked out Irma Bunt with a staff, strangled Blofeld and rigged the underground geyser to explode.

"I was escaping in a small boat we kept for just such a purpose when it blew," Bunt continued. "I was hit in the head by debris and almost drowned. These men here saved me and have remained loyal. Like you, I lost my memory, I didn't know who I was. I was taken to a private German clinic near Kyoto, where I underwent several operations. There is a metal plate in the right side of my skull, and the skin on my face . . . well, my plastic surgeon could do very little with it. The damage was too great. I was in bed for a year, and rehabilitation lasted another two years of my life. It took another ten years for a psychiatrist to finally pull me out of the hole into which I had fallen. Then I remembered. I looked back at what I had lost, and forward to the years of suffering ahead of me. That's a long time to ponder one's future, Mr. Bond. At the time I didn't know exactly how, but I knew you would play a prominent role in it."

"Why did you have to kill my son?" Bond seethed.

"Ah, your son!" Bunt smiled. Her features were so distorted that the edge of her mouth lifted on only one side of her face. "My intelligence sources retraced your footsteps in Japan. I discovered your pretty little Kissy. There was a little boy living with her, about ten years old, when I finally found her, I kept watch and followed her all the way to America. I finally established that he had a link to you."

She took a barber's razor and a small vial of liquid out of her pocket. "This is what I used on him. I lined the blade with a little fugu poison, and ever-so-subtly cut him one day as he was entering his building. Did you like my disguise? It fooled even you, Mr. Bond, didn't it?"

Bond knew that fugu is poison extracted from a blowfish that lives in the waters of Japan. The Japanese have licensed fugu chefs prepare it in restaurants so that no mistakes are made. That explained the cut on James' arm.

"You killed my wife, too, you bitch," Bond said, "and if you think I'm going to let you live after today, you're as mad as ever."

"Oh, yes!" she gloated. "Your wife! The daughter of that criminal, the Corsican, Draco. That was an accident, Mr. Bond. Those bullets were meant for you. If you had died then, it would have saved us all a lot of trouble, no? It would have saved me my---"

Bunt's lower lip trembled. Her eyes grew fierce and she suddenly shouted, "Look at me! Look at what you did to me, English pig! You destroyed my face!"

"Fräulein Bunt," Bond said with venom, "you were never a beauty queen."

The woman stepped up to him and slapped him twice. She was shaking with rage and madness. Bond started to jump up from the chair, but the thug behind him thrust the pistol roughly into his temple.

"Don't move!" he commanded again.

Bond had to think. His hands were free. Surely there was some way he could gain an advantage.

Bunt stepped back, rubbing her palm, "My, my, Mr. Bond," she said, a bit more calmly. "You need a shave. You have quite a stubble. What do you think, Hans? Don't you think Mr. Bond needs a shave?"

The man standing behind Bond grunted affirmatively.

Irma Bunt opened the vial of fugu poison and poured it along the edge of the razor. "Now hold still, Mr. Bond. I think you would hate for me to slip and nick you. You know how fast this poison works? In five minutes, you become disoriented. In ten minutes you lose control of your muscles. In 15 you stop breathing. I understand the experience is excruciatingly painful. Hold his arms, Hans. Josef, cover him."

The man behind Bond holstered the pistol and grabbed Bond's wrists. He twisted them sharply behind the chair and held them in a vise-like grip. He was very strong. The man with the Uzi moved forward and held the barrel up at Bond. Irma Bunt stepped closer, holding the razor in front of her, Syrupy liquid dripped from the blade.

Bond refused to close his eyes as the woman pressed the cold razor against his right cheek. He stared into her yellow eyes as she slowly scraped the blade down his face and cleanly cut his beard.

"It's a little rough without lather, is it not, Mr. Bond?" she said. "But you like close shaves, don't you?"

Bond held his breath, willing his facial muscles not to jerk involuntarily. The woman brought the blade down again, finishing the job on the right cheek. She fingered the age-old, faint scar there.

"Looks like you weren't so careful one morning, eh?" she said. "Now lift your chin, please. We need to do the neck now."

She pulled his chin up and Bond stared at the ceiling. He felt the blade cut against the stubble. It was rougher going there, and he anticipated a sharp sting.

The woman concentrated intently on her job, breathing heavily.

A bead of sweat rolled down Bond's forehead and into his left eye. He winced and almost flinched away from the razor. The woman's breathing became even more pronounced. Bond glanced down at her and saw that her free hand was rubbing her breasts as she applied the razor. My God, he thought, she was sexually excited by this! The sadistic woman licked her lips, her eyes focused on Bond's vulnerable neck.

"Now the left cheek, Mr. Bond," she said. He leveled his head and stared straight ahead, past the woman and Josef, the man with the Uzi. To his amazement, Cheryl Haven was peering into the doorway of the room, gun in hand. Their eyes met. She gestured toward Josef with a slight nod of her head. Bond deliberately closed his eyes and opened them. Cheryl quietly stepped into the doorway and assumed the firing stance.

The blast hit Josef in the back and he fell forward. Bond simultaneously kicked up at Irma Bunt, knocking her away from him. The man holding his wrists released his grip and went for his gun, but

Bond leaped out of the chair and tackled him. Cheryl immediately turned her gun on the wounded man and yelled, "Freeze! Drop the gun!" The surprised man dropped Bond's Walther and held up his one good arm. Irma Bunt dashed from the room.

Hans delivered a blow to Bond's chin that knocked him onto the floor. With lightning speed, the man then drew his gun, but the blast from Cheryl's Browning hit him in the head, splattering his brains across the dirty wooden floor.

"Thanks," Bond said, rubbing his chin.

"Not a problem," she said, training her gun back on the wounded man. "The lady just took a powder."

"You watch him, I'll go after her," Bond said. He picked up his Walther and ran from the room into a large, open space. What he saw disoriented him. The dimly lit warehouse was full of the ancient remains of what must have been parade floats. A storybook castle made of papier-mâché sat on a flatbed with wheels. A large cartoon dog built out of wood and steel lay on its side, one leg broken off. Other dilapidated structures of various subjects, from a giant hot dog to statues of American presidents, were scattered about in a bizarre and otherworldly fashion.

Where had she gone? He listened to the room but heard no running footsteps. He ran toward the broken floats and began to search under, on and around them. She could be anywhere. The place was so full of junk she could easily blend in with the debris and not be noticed. He needed more light.

He was looking around the body parts of a giant papier-mâché Abraham Lincoln when a shot rang out. The bullet zipped past him and into Lincoln's head, shattering it into bits. The woman had a gun! Bond dove for cover, waited a moment, then peered out into the dark, open space. The shot had come from somewhere on the other side of the room.

After a moment, a door behind one of the floats opened and a figure ran through it. Bond bolted upright and ran after her. It was a careless move, for she immediately leaned in and fired the gun at him. Bond dived for the floor and, with both hands on his Walther, fired into the open doorway. Too late. The figure had disappeared, running into the next room.

Bond leaped to his feet, ran to the door and flattened himself against the wall beside it. Commando-style, he swung in and crouched, his gun ready. Again, his senses were assaulted by the surreal visuals. This small room was full of naked, broken male and female mannequins-loose arms, legs, torsos and complete bodies were piled together in a grotesque, frozen orgy. The image so confused Bond that he foolishly left himself wide open. The shot slammed into his left lower leg, shattering his fibula. Bond screamed and rolled over into a mass of plastic appendages. He unleashed a volley of ammunition toward the far side of the room, firing blindly at the mannequins. The noise was deafening, but Bond thought he heard a muffled cry.

His leg was burning like hell. He took a moment to examine the damage. Blood poured from a wound a couple of inches above his ankle. He pressed his left foot against the wall to test his strength and tremendous pain shot through him. Was he crippled? Would he be able to walk again?

Bond peered across the room at the mass of bodies and saw some movement. Pushing pieces of mannequins aside, Irma Bunt crawled out onto the floor. He had hit her after all. Her wig had fallen off, revealing the area where the metal plate had been implanted. The mask hung loose from her face as if an epidermal layer had been sliced away. She must have dropped her gun, for she used both hands to pull herself along the floor like a snail. Smeared blood trailed behind her. Bond watched in

fascination and horror as she got within a few yards of him and then stopped, completely drained of energy. She looked straight at Bond and snarled, "English pig"

And then she slumped forward and died.

Bond rolled over onto his back and drifted into unconsciousness, just as Cheryl Haven and her team entered into the room.

CHAPTER 6

James Bond gazed out the hospital window, enjoying another bright and sunny Manhattan spring day. His leg would be in a cast for the next few weeks. A pin had to be inserted to reinforce 007's broken fibula. He had no memory of the trip to the emergency room, where he had been for two hours the night before. Bond vaguely recalled the recovery room and a pretty nurse with a pleasant voice. It was now late afternoon of the following day. He had eaten a half-portion of bland, intolerable scrambled eggs, drunk a little tepid orange juice and picked at a cup of runny vanilla yogurt. Much to his surprise, the miserable meal had given him back some energy. He would have liked to stand up and walk around, but he had no crutches yet.

Bond mentally explored his mind and body, taking stock of the powerful instrument that had taken him so many times to the edge of disaster and back. All things considered, he felt good. Much of this, he knew, was due to the euphoria of victory. Seeing Irma Bunt die in front of him had been morbidly satisfying. He felt a closure on a painful epoch in his life, and the relief was exhilarating. The occasional bad dreams about Tracy, Blofeld and Japan would most likely cease now. He thought of James as well -- the boy he never knew, the son he never lived with. James hadn't deserved to die. Bond was aware he needed to grieve, and that it would happen sooner rather than later. He wouldn't allow himself to dwell upon it too long, lest he would start to blame himself. Save it all for another day, he ordered himself. For now, relish the victory. Not only had his son's death been avenged, but he had, he hoped, settled the score regarding Tracy.

"Well, look who's awake!" a woman's voice said, and he knew who it was by the Blackpool accent.

He turned his head from the window and was met by the lovely sight of Cheryl Haven wearing a white, sleeveless T-shirt and a pair of daringly short cutoffs. Her lack of a bra was obvious. Her golden hair glistened in the sunlight streaming in from the window. Her smile was one of the most beautiful things Bond had ever seen.

"Good morning," Bond said. "Er, good afternoon."

"How do you feel?" she asked, pulling up a chair beside the bed. She crossed her long, shapely legs.

"Now that you're here, I feel great," he said.

She reached out and placed her hand on his arm. "I'm glad you're OK. That was quite a night. You're going to have to come to New York more often. I don't get many dates like that." She playfully squeezed his arm.

Bond laughed and then asked, "What have you found out?"

"The wounded man sang the whole story. They entered the country six months ago. We're still checking on how Immigration missed them. All three of those men had been with her for years. They were loyal to the end. They were actually living in that old warehouse. Did you know that it used to be a storage center for Macy's? No one's ever cleaned it out."

"I want to thank you. You saved my life."

She laughed. "Oh, you don't know how many men I've longed to hear say that."

"I can't believe you don't have men lining up to say that," he said, taking her hand in his own.

"Oh, please stop it," she said, but her eyes betrayed that she appreciated the compliment.

"We never had that dinner," he said.

"Are you hungry now?" she asked.

"As a matter of fact, I'm famished," he said, staring into her warm, brown eyes.

Cheryl looked around, stood up and closed the door to the room. Next, she pulled the curtain around the bed, giving them a little privacy. Without saying a word, she pulled off her T-shirt, revealing large, firm breasts. Her nipples were extended and the skin below her neck was flushed. She unsnapped her cutoffs, but kept them on. She climbed onto the bed next to him, carefully avoiding the injured leg.

"If you're hungry, darling," she whispered, lifting her right breast to his mouth, "bon appétit."

