

ZERO MINUS TEN



RAYMOND BENSON

IFP

Zero Minus Ten

By Raymond Benson

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Besides writing official James Bond fiction between 1996-2002, **RAYMOND BENSON** is also known for *The James Bond Bedside Companion*, which was published in 1984 and was nominated for a Edgar. His first two entries of a new series of thrillers, which *Booklist* called “prime escapism,” are *The Black Stiletto* and *The Black Stiletto: Black & White*. As “David Michaels” Raymond is the author of the NY Times best-sellers *Tom Clancy’s Splinter Cell* and *Tom Clancy’s Splinter Cell - Operation Barracuda*. He recently penned the best selling novelizations of *Metal Gear Solid* and its sequel *Metal Gear Solid 2-Sons of Liberty*, as well as *Homefront: the Voice of Freedom*, co-written with John Milius. Raymond’s original thrillers are *Face Blind*, *Evil Hours*, *Sweetie’s Diamonds*, *Torment*, *Artifact of Evil*, *A Hard Day’s Death* and the Shamus Award-nominated *Dark Side of the Morgue*. Visit him at his websites, www.raymondbenson.com and www.theblackstiletto.net.

*This novel is dedicated to
Randi and Max,
and to the people of Hong Kong*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The architecture and layout of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank is as described in Chapter Eleven. The events and action contained therein, however, are totally imaginary, as the corporation's highly effective security system would realistically prevent such a scenario. Furthermore, the company EurAsia Enterprises Ltd. is entirely fictional and is not intended to represent any existing trading or shipping firm. Lastly, the actual location for the handover ceremony has not been decided upon at the time of writing. (In fact, China has not yet even agreed to a joint ceremony!) My choice of Statu Square as the site is based on its historical significance and geographical importance to the city, as well as speculation by Hong Kong associates.

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20 JUNE 1997, 9:55 P.M., JAMAICA

Someone long ago had called it the “Undertaker’s Wind” but hardly anyone in Jamaica referred to by that name anymore. The Undertaker’s Wind was supposed to blow the bad air out of the island at night. In the morning, the “Doctor’s Wind” would come and blow the sweet air in from the sea. The Undertaker’s Wind was certainly at work that night, whipping the long red strands of the Englishwoman’s hair around her head like the flames of a torch.

The woman was dressed in a skin-tight black diving suit and stood on the cliff above the grotto looking out to sea. Forty stone steps cut into the cliff led down to the grotto, in front of which was a small, sandy beach. It was very dark in the grotto, for the cliffs blocked the moonlight. Up above the grotto was just bright enough for every tree, plant, and stone to emit an eerie glow.

The woman glanced at her watch and tapped the button to illuminate the time. He would not be late. He never was.

The grotto and its private beach faced the Caribbean, not far from Port Maria on the North Shore of the island. The small community of Oracabessa was just along the coast to the west, and Cuba was a hundred miles to the north. The area was considered Jamaica’s most lovely coastal country. The woman had never been here prior to this evening, but she knew the layout of the place inside out. It was her job to know. The land was private property and a modest, three-bedroomed house had been built above the grotto near the top of the stone steps. If her plans were successful, the house would later be the location for an evening of unbridled passion and pleasure. The man with whom she hoped to share the pleasure had a reputation which preceded him. Other women who had known him had indiscreetly prepared her for the man’s intense sexual allure. Although accomplishing the Primary Objective was her main goal tonight, one of her motives for participating in the evening’s escapade was a rather selfish Secondary Objective—the physical rewards she would give and receive after the job was done. She couldn’t help it. Danger stimulated her sexually. It was why she had sought a career as a mercenary, a contemporary Boadicea. It was why she liked to play with fire.

“I’m here,” a male voice whispered behind her.

“You’re on time,” she said.

“Of course I am,” the blond man said in a thick Cockney accent, moving closer to stand beside her looking out to sea. He, too, was dressed in a black diving suit. “You know what to do?” He gazed at her, taking in the shapely body.

The woman knew she was beautiful and that men found her attractive. She enjoyed being able to manipulate them. As she looked at the man, she wondered again if the night would end as she desired.

He had blond curly hair, a muscular build, and classical Roman features. Most women, she thought, would gladly follow him anywhere.

“When he arrives, I get him to come up to the house. You’ll ‘surprise’ us and kill him.”

The man smiled. “Too right.”

They were both in their mid-twenties and had trained for weeks to get this far, but already possessed the skill and expertise required by any assassin to perform a simple execution. The job in hand tonight was anything but simple, their target a formidable one.

“Leave the first part to me, Mr. Michaels,” she said, smiling and rubbing her hand across the man’s chin. “Give us a little time, and I’ll have him thoroughly distracted.”

“Well, don’t get carried away. I don’t want to have to take you out with him.”

“You sound pretty sure of yourself. Remember who he is.”

“He’s history.”

As if on cue, a Royal Navy jet suddenly appeared, passing about half a mile from them, heading north out to sea at about 200 knots. They could just see the figure jumping from it.

“There he is,” the blond man said. “Right on time.” They clasped hands and he kissed her roughly on the mouth. “See you later, love ... when we’re done.” And then he was off as she began to walk down the steps into the darkness of the grotto.

The man who made the low-altitude jump from the plane had opened his SAS Modified XL Cloud Type Special Forces rectangular parachute before exiting the aircraft and the jump master threw it out of the plane behind him. It served as not much more than a brake in the short fall, an extremely dangerous manoeuvre over water; but the jumper was a pro who knew what he was doing. He was one of the Double-Os.

The woman reached the bottom of the steps and peered out to sea. The man hit the water hard, and for a few moments only his dark parachute could be seen floating on the surface. Then he emerged and divested himself of the parachute. She walked to the edge of the water so that he could see her. The tall well-built man swam steadily until he was able to stand and walk towards her. He tore off the face mask and snorkel and tossed them aside, and then he stepped out of his fins.

Like the blond man, he had a sexual presence that was so overpowering she had to catch her breath before she spoke.

“The bad air is blowing out tonight,” she said.

“But the sweet air will surely come in the morning,” he replied as agreed.

“Right on time, Double-O Seven. I’m 05, but you can call me Stephanie. You okay?” She pronounced the number “oh-five.”

“I’m fine, thanks, and my name’s Bond. James Bond.”

“It’s pretty dangerous, isn’t it, jumping at such a low altitude?” she asked, taking his outstretched hand.

“So long as the parachute is already open when you leave the plane, it’s okay. Did you bring the transmitter?”

In the dim light, his features looked harsher than Stephanie had remembered them. The first time she had seen him was two weeks ago, at the funeral, when she had been struck by his air of casual selfconfidence. Dark and handsome, he had piercing blue-grey eyes. His short black hair had just a hint of grey at the temples, was parted on the left, and carelessly brushed so that a thick black comb fell down over the right eyebrow. There was a faint three-inch scar on his right cheek. The long, straight nose ran down to a short upper lip, below which was a wide and finely drawn but cruel mouth.

“It’s up in the house, Mr. Bond. Come, I’ll show you.” She took his hand and gently pulled him towards the stone steps, then dropped it and walked on ahead. Bond followed her, eyes and ears alert.

She had been told to observe him at the funeral, at which he had remained stubbornly stoic. Commander Bond, like the other pallbearers, was dressed in Royal Navy uniform with three rows of ribbons. Everyone who was anyone had been there, including Sir Miles Messervy, the recently retired “M,” head of SIS; the new “M,” a woman only just beginning to take command of the Secret Service; Sir Miles’s faithful secretary, Money Penny; Major Boothroyd, the Armourer; and even the Prime Minister. When a country loses someone of the stature of Admiral Derek Plasket, all the important people are sure to be there to pay their last respects.

Admiral Plasket was something of a legend. A war hero, he had organized a commando assault team that specialized in raiding Nazi bunkers, collecting intelligence to be passed on to the Allied forces. After the war he had been Special Advisor to the Secret Service, and a personal friend of the old M.

As she had been instructed, Stephanie Lane had kept her eye on Bond throughout the ceremony. If

had performed his duties with military precision, standing to attention and displaying no emotion whatsoever. Only afterwards, when she saw him embrace Moneypenny, did she detect some semblance of warmth.

Stephanie had continued her surveillance of 007 for two more weeks, taking note of his daily habits. She had followed him to his flat off the King's Road in Chelsea, where he lived alone. She tailed him to Blades, that exclusive gentleman's club which had only recently begun to admit women. She observed him enter the gaudy building across the Thames from the Tate Gallery, which was the SIS headquarters. Finally, after fifteen days, the operation had been arranged and the time had now come. Stephanie had a lot riding on the outcome of this mission, for James Bond was the target in tonight's Objective and she and her partner must anticipate his every move.

When the attack came, it surprised her—she had thought Michaels would wait until she and Bond were in the house, but he appeared at the top of the stone steps from out of darkness. With a perfectly executed manoeuvre, the man spun and jump-kicked Bond full in the face. The assault surprised Bond as well, for he fell backwards down the steps. Stephanie stood aside while the blond assassin, who was armed with an ASP 9mm semi-automatic handgun, ran down the steps after him.

Bond had rolled halfway down the steps and then stopped. He didn't move. He lay on his back at a grotesque angle, his head lower than his legs, his shoulders twisted unnaturally.

Michaels raised his gun and pointed it at the still body. "Wait," Stephanie whispered. "I think he's broken his neck!"

Cautiously, the man moved down to Bond's body and crouched to examine him more closely.

It was then that Bond made his move. He jackknifed out of his frozen position, thrusting both forearms into the blond man's face. In a split second, he formed a spear-hand and slammed it down on the man's right wrist, knocking the ASP on to the steps.

Recovering quickly, Michaels butted Bond in the stomach. Both figures tumbled down to the bottom of the steps and rolled out on to the sand, ending up with the younger man on top with his hands around Bond's throat.

This boy's strong, Bond thought.

Stephanie ran down the steps and stood waiting, feeling the adrenalin surge through her body as the two men fought. It gave her a thrill to imagine they were fighting over her. Her breathing became shallow and she felt weak at the knees.

With a superhuman effort, Bond thrust his arms between the other man's elbows and delivered two lightning sword-hand chops, which made Michaels loosen his grip. Then, with split-second timing, Bond jerked his head forward against the man's nose, breaking it and causing him to cry out in pain.

Then they were both on their feet, each waiting for the other to make the next move.

Bond's Walther PPK was in a waterproof holster attached to the belt round his diving suit. Unfortunately, that was tightly buttoned and it would take more than two seconds to retrieve the weapon. Bond knew he didn't have two seconds. The young man was good—a bit inexperienced perhaps, but not someone to underestimate. Bond was ready to concede that the other man was the stronger since, although he was in excellent physical shape, Bond was no youngster anymore.

The blond man made a move. With a shout, he leaped in the air and delivered a *Yobi-geri* kick to Bond's chest, knocking him back. The blow was meant to cause serious damage, but it landed too far to the left of the sternal vital-point target. Michaels was momentarily surprised that Bond didn't fall, but he immediately drove his fist into Bond's abdomen. That was the assassin's first mistake—mixing his fighting styles. He was using a mixture of karate, kung fu, and traditional western boxing. Bond believed in using whatever worked, but he practised hand-to-hand combat in the same way as he gambled: he picked a system and stuck with it.

By lunging at Bond's stomach, the man had left himself wide open, enabling Bond to backhand him.

to the ground. Giving him no time to think, Bond sprang on top of him and punched him hard in the face, but Michaels used his strength to roll Bond over on to his back, and, thrusting his forearm in Bond's neck, exerted tremendous pressure on O07's larynx once again. With his other hand, the young man fumbled with Bond's waterproof holster, attempting to get at the gun. Bond managed to elbow his assailant in the ribs, but this only served to increase his aggression. Bond got his hands round the man's neck but it was too late; Michaels deftly retrieved the Walther PPK 7.65mm from the holster and jumped to his feet.

"All right, freeze!" he shouted at Bond, standing over him, the gun aimed at his forehead. "I hit you in a vital point earlier but you didn't go down," he said with incredulity, looking at Bond as if he were a ghost.

O07 caught his breath and said, "That was your first mistake. You were a half-inch too far to the left."

The man straightened his arm, ready to shoot.

"And now you're making your second mistake," Bond said.

"Oh, yeah?" Michaels whispered. "Not from where I'm standing."

Bond snapped his legs up and kicked him hard in the groin. Michaels screamed, doubled over and dropped the gun, and fell to the ground.

"You were exposing a vital point, my friend," Bond said, getting to his feet and retrieving his Walther PPK. "And I do mean vital."

He leaned over the writhing man. "Who are you?" The man only groaned. "Are you going to talk?" Then he remembered the girl.

Stephanie stood behind them, by the steps. She was uncertain whether to run or drop to her knees.

"Come here," Bond commanded. She stepped forward, looking at the man groaning on the ground. "Do you know him?" Bond snapped.

She shook her head convincingly. "No."

Bond handed her the Walther. "Then retire him."

She looked surprised.

"He's an assassin. He came here to kill me," Bond said. "He knows I live here. I don't care who he is, just get rid of him."

She took the pistol and aimed it at her partner. The blond man's eyes widened. Bond watched her closely. She hesitated, staring at the man on the ground intently.

"05, I gave you an order," Bond said firmly.

The wind howled as the woman stood there frozen.

After ten tense seconds, Bond said, "All right. Relax."

Stephanie dropped her arm and looked dismayed.

"I couldn't do it," she said. "I just couldn't pull the trigger."

Bond walked over to her and took the gun. "If it's a matter of not blowing one's cover, a good agent may have to kill an ally or a friend. Don't ever forget that. You gave yourself away, 05. In the old days, if I had been KGB, or worse, I would have immediately perceived that you not only recognized 03 here, but knew him well."

"Yes," she sighed. "You're right. You really get the unexpected thrown at you in these training missions. I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd win the fight—it confused me."

"Double-Os must expect nothing *but* the unexpected," Bond said. He crouched down to the man now called 03.

"How are you, 03? You put up a bloody good fight, lad. You almost had me at one point," Bond said with good humour. "You blew the mission, Michaels, but you'll get good marks, don't worry."

The man groaned and then vomited.

“Yes, well, sorry about that, 03,” Bond said. “You’ll feel all right in a few hours. Sometime ~~Double-Os have to learn their lessons the hard way. Remember what you learned about vital-point~~ targets. God knows I did! Better luck next time.”

Bond stood, turned, and walked up the stone steps, and Stephanie ran after him.

“So did you *know* he was going to be here?” she asked.

Bond shook his head. “No, but I suspected something, especially when you didn’t try to help me. These Double-O training sessions you two are taking are also exercises for me. I’m unaware of your objectives and you are unaware of mine. Someone in London orchestrated the entire scenario. Apparently my challenge was dealing with someone who has penetrated the privacy of my home. And I take it you two had a mission to assassinate me?”

She laughed. “Yes, real kamikaze stuff, isn’t it? A Single-O agent assassinating a Double-O!” Bond smiled too.

“Is Agent Michaels going to be okay? Not that he was one of my favourite people. He was always chatting me up.”

“He’ll be fine. I don’t fight dirty unless I have to, but he left me no choice. Besides, he was careless. I didn’t hurt him badly—he’ll be up and on his way back to Kingston in no time. In any other situation he would have been killed. My kick was nothing compared to a carpet beater.”

“A what?” she asked.

“Never mind,” he said as he led her on to the top of the cliff. In contrast to the darkness below, up here the moon was very bright, flooding the grounds of the estate in a chalky white light.

Bond had purchased the property a year ago. Even though the heyday of a British Jamaica was long gone, Bond had always loved the island. For years, the memories and dreams he’d had of Jamaica haunted him. He had a compelling desire to be there. When a wellknown British journalist and author died, the property became available and Bond bought it. Thus, in addition to his flat in London, Bond now owned a secluded holiday home on his favourite island. Since buying it, Bond had spent all his available time between missions at the sparsely furnished house. He called it Shamelady, after a plant that grows wild along Jamaica’s North Shore, a sensitive plant that curls up if touched.

Stephanie Lane followed Bond inside. He immediately began removing his wet suit, stripping down to briefs. He seemed oblivious to the fact that a beautiful woman was watching him undress. “You know, you should be dead, too,” Bond said. “If you can’t hide convincingly behind a cover, then the cover’s no good.”

“I’ll remember that,” she promised. She watched him with increasing interest as she fingered the Walther PPK that he had placed on a coffee table. “Isn’t this gun a little old-fashioned?” she asked. “It’s not standard issue, is it?”

“No, it was once, though,” Bond said. “I was using an ASP for a few years, and I just recently got a urge to use the old one again. I don’t know, it feels very ... familiar, and I’ve decided to use the Walther again from now on. Old habits die hard.”

Stephanie picked up the gun and pointed it at him.

“So if I shoot you now, I will achieve my Primary Objective after all,” she said with no trace of humour.

Bond squinted at her. There was silence. His cold stare dared her to fire.

She pulled the trigger. It clicked empty. Her mouth dropped open.

Bond held out the clip in his hand. “You don’t think I’d put a loaded pistol down with a stranger in the room, do you? Sorry, 05. You flunked this one.” Bond walked into the bedroom. “I’m going to take a shower. Make yourself comfortable. But before you get too relaxed, turn on the transmitter and send me if there’s anything from London.”

Did Stephanie detect a hint of flirtation in his voice? She smiled. When she heard the shower

running, she opened an attache case she had left in the house earlier. Inside was a small black device that looked like an ordinary beeper. She flicked a switch and the code "33" appeared on an illuminated display. Bond would want to know this.

She stepped into the bedroom and called to him: "It says 33!"

Bond shouted back from the shower, "Damn! That means I have to go back to London as soon as possible. Some kind of emergency ..."

Stephanie was disappointed. Well, she thought, she had to take what she could get. She unzipped her wet suit, peeled it off, and stepped into the bathroom.

She had failed in accomplishing her Primary Objective that evening ... but if she acted now she would have a little time. It was a shame that the night of pleasure she had anticipated earlier would not last until dawn. If she was lucky, though, she still had an hour or two.

At least she had got the right man. Secondary Objective accomplished! Naked, she pushed back the shower curtain, and got in with him.

17 JUNE 1997, 11:45 P.M., ENGLAND

Approximately seventy-two hours earlier, a large cargo vessel called the *Melbourne* sailed into the bay between the Isle of Wight and West Sussex, facing Portsmouth. She had travelled thousands of miles in the last few weeks. From Hong Kong, her point of departure, she went to Perth in Western Australia, unloaded cargo, picked up containers, and refuelled. From there, she sailed west through the Indian Ocean and around the southern tip of Africa into the Atlantic and on to New York. She stayed in New York Harbour for three days, then finally began the last leg of the voyage to the United Kingdom.

When word of the *Melbourne*'s arrival reached the desk of the Hampshire Constabulary Tactical Firearms Unit, Sergeant David Marsh picked up the telephone and called his Detective Chief Inspector. The TFUs, along with Firearms Support Teams, are tactical special weapons groups within UK police forces, available twentyfour hours a day. Many of the members of these elite police units are ex-British Forces personnel.

"She's here, sir," Marsh said when the DCI answered. Marsh listened closely to his instructions and nodded. "Consider it done, sir." He rang off and dialled a new number. If the tip they had received was correct, there could be trouble.

A lighter had already begun to deliver cargo from the *Melbourne* to shore. A group of four Chinese men unloaded the large wooden crates from the lighter as soon as it docked and used a forklift to transfer them on to a waiting lorry.

The two token Hampshire Police officers on duty that night, Charles Thorn and Gary Mitchell, walked along the dock area, noting that the weather was unusually pleasant for a June night. Unfortunately, due to a breakdown in communications, they were not apprised of the message that was received by TFU Police Sergeant David Marsh. Even more calamitous was the fact that neither of them was armed.

Thorn suddenly stopped in mid-stride and asked his partner, "Do you hear anything?" In the distance was the whirr of a hydraulic crane used to unload cargo.

Mitchell nodded. "Sounds like someone's unloading. I wasn't aware of a scheduled docking tonight, were you?"

Thorn shook his head. "Customs and Excise didn't tell me about it. Let's have a look, shall we?"

The two men hurried around a corner past a warehouse where they could get an unobstructed view of the harbour. Sure enough, four men were loading crates on to a lorry.

"Where are Customs and Excise? They should be supervising the unloading, shouldn't they?" Mitchell asked.

"Unless this is an unscheduled unloading," Thorn said. He quickly radioed his office to request additional officers. The Communication Centre Dispatcher informed them that the Hampshire Constabulary TFU was on the way and to stay put.

The Chinese were finished with the lighter and it was already pulling away. The lorry was nearly full—only two crates remained on the ground. They would be gone in minutes.

"We have to stop them," Thorn said. "Come on."

The two men stepped into view of the Chinese men. "Good evening," Thorn called out to them. "Like to tell us what you're doing?"

One of the Chinese stepped out of the truck and produced some papers. Thorn glanced at them.

“You know this is highly irregular, sir. Customs and Excise are supposed to clear your unloading. What have you got in those crates?” The Chinese man, who apparently spoke little English, pointed to the papers.

“Right,” said Sergeant Thorn, looking closely at the shipping numbers and comparing them to the crates. One was still on the ground, the other on the forklift. “That one has half a ton of tea, and the other one is what?”

The Chinese man smiled. “Toys. Made in Hong Kong.”

Mitchell whispered to Thorn, “Imports from the Far East generally come into Southampton.”

Thorn nodded and said aloud, “Let’s open ’em up now, all right?”

Mitchell took a crowbar from the side of the hydraulic crane and prised the lid off the wooden crate. It was filled with straw, styrofoam, and large bags labelled with Chinese characters. Mitchell opened one of the bags and found dozens of smaller bags inside marked with similar characters. He tossed one of the small bags to Thorn, who promptly used a pocket knife to open it. It was full of tea.

“Fine,” Thorn said. “Let’s open the other one.”

As the forklift was pulled in front of the officers, a fully marked TFU jeep containing four men including Sergeant Marsh, sped quickly into the cargo area of the dock and stopped.

“Sergeant Marsh,” Thorn said. “Good to see you. It seems these chaps aren’t aware of Customs and Excise standard operating procedures.”

“A word with you, Sergeant?” Marsh said, gesturing towards the jeep. Mitchell watched Marsh whisper to Thorn, then glanced over to the four Chinese men who had gathered near the fork-lift. They were all young, probably in their late teens or early-twenties.

The conference was over. Marsh took the crowbar from Thorn and slammed it into the side of the crate containing the tea, cracking one of the side panels. He then worked the panel off, exposing a mess of straw packing. Marsh dug into the packing with the crowbar, pulling it out.

“We have reason to believe you’ve got something hidden in here,” Marsh said to one of the Chinese. The sharp end of the crowbar struck a large canvas bag, bursting it. A white, crystalline powder oozed out of the tear. Having just completed a two-year tour of duty in the Hampshire Constabulary’s Drug Squad, Marsh hadn’t shaken the habit of carrying a drug test kit with him. He quickly retrieved a plastic vial from the kit, opened it, and scooped a bit of the white powder into the vial with his finger. He replaced the cap and shook the vial vigorously, mixing the white powder with a reagent. The clear liquid changed colour.

Marsh turned to the Chinese men. “I have reason to believe this is heroin. Now I’m going to have to place you under ...”

Fully automatic machine-gun blasts interrupted him. Taken by surprise, Mitchell and Thorn were the first to fall. Fortunately for Marsh, his team had come prepared.

Marsh hit the ground and quickly rolled behind the crate, shielding himself from the barrage of bullets. The three other officers also leaped for cover. Using MP5 Standard Operating Rifles, the TFU returned fire on the Chinese. Even though the weapons were singleshot only, the TFU were sharpshooters. One Chinese went down.

Marsh was armed with a Smith and Wesson 15 Mag Self Loading pistol. He peered around the container and got off a couple of shots before a hail of bullets tore into the side of the crate, forcing him back.

The Chinese were formidable opponents who knew how to use their guns, which to Marsh looked like MACH 10s. He knew that they were really COBRAYs, a 9mm machine gun modelled after the MACHs. Even though they were not well-made, criminal gangs favoured COBRAYs because they were sold and traded in pieces and were therefore easily concealed.

After a minute it was almost over. All but one of the Chinese were dead. There were no casualties.

on Marsh's team. The lone Chinese gunman realized the predicament he was in and attempted kamikaze stunt. He yelled something in Cantonese and ran towards Marsh, his gun blasting wildly. Marsh threw caution to the wind. He stood up, used both hands to steady his pistol, aimed at the running man, and squeezed the trigger. The man jerked back and fell to the ground.

Marsh breathed a sigh of relief, then ran to where Thorn and Mitchell lay. The TFU member everyone called "Doc" was attending to the two constables, but he turned to Marsh and shook his head.

Marsh frowned, then barked an order to one of his men. "Get Doc some help for these officers and get in touch with the DCI. Tell him the tip was good. Tell him the villains would have got away if they hadn't been detained by two brave Hampshire Police officers."

18 **JUNE 1997, 8:00 P.M., HONG KONG**

Of Hong Kong's many attractions, elegant restaurants on boats provide visitors not only with a superb dinner, but with one of the best tourist attractions of Aberdeen's Shum Wan Harbour on the South Shore of the island. Most of them are linked together by walkways, and their ornate gilded and painted façades look particularly glorious lit up at night. One such "floating restaurant," the *Emerald Palace* had been booked for a special event on 18 June and was closed to the public.

EurAsia Enterprises, an old-established shipping and trading corporation owned privately by a British family since the mid-nineteenth century, was holding a dinner for its chairman who was retiring after thirty years of service. A swing band, made up entirely of Chinese musicians, was playing surprisingly faithful renditions of Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman hits as the dance floor filled with formally dressed British men and women.

Guy Thackeray, the corporation's forty-eight-year-old CEO, had lived in Hong Kong all his life. His great-great-grandfather had founded EurAsia Enterprises in 1850, not long after Hong Kong was ceded to Britain. The family had steadfastly refused to allow the corporation to go public, and Guy Thackeray presently found himself the sole owner of 59 per cent of the company's stock. The remaining stock was held by other members of the Board of Directors, including John Desmond, the retiring chairman. All of them were present, sitting with their spouses at the top table.

Guy Thackeray felt out of place at his own company's events. The past month had been hell. As the first of July deadline approached, he was becoming more desperate and anxious. The secret burden he held on his shoulders regarding EurAsia Enterprises' future was taking its toll. He knew that very soon he would have to make public a fateful bit of knowledge, but it would not be tonight.

Thackeray surveyed the dance floor, catching the eye of a friendly face here and there and nodding his head in acknowledgement. He glanced at his watch. It was almost time for his speech. He took his last swig of his gin and tonic and approached the podium.

Back in the kitchen, the sixty-one-year-old Chinese cook, Chan Wo, grumbled to himself. He enjoyed cooking and considered himself one of the best chefs in Hong Kong. In fact, the *Emerald Palace's* reputation had been built on Chan's ability to create magnificent concoctions in the Szechuan, Cantonese, and Mandarin styles of Chinese cuisine.

Glancing at the new order brought to him by a waiter, he shrugged and walked over to the large metal refrigerator to fetch more previously prepared uncooked dumplings. Much to his dismay, they weren't inside. Had he used them all already? Chan Wo silently cursed his assistant. Bobby Ling must have forgotten to make more that afternoon.

"Bobby!" he called. The kid was probably in the storeroom. "Bobby!" he shouted again. Chan slammed the refrigerator shut and left the kitchen.

The storeroom was adjacent to the kitchen, conveniently soundproofed from the noise in the dining areas. Chan thought he wouldn't mind hiding in the storeroom for a while, too; he couldn't blame Bobby for taking a break. Chan entered the container-filled room. It was dark, which was odd. He

could have sworn Bobby was here. Chan flicked on the light switch. Nothing but boxes piled on other boxes, cans and containers. “Bobby, where the hell are you?” Chan Wo asked in Cantonese. Then he saw the tennis shoes.

Bobby Ling was out cold, lying between two stacks of cardboard boxes. Chan bent down to examine the motionless body. “Bobby?”

Chan never knew what hit him. All he felt was a lightning bolt in the back of his neck, and then there was blackness.

The instrument that broke Chan Wo’s neck was a heavily callused hand belonging to a man whose appearance was undoubtedly unusual, even in a densely populated area like Hong Kong. He was Chinese, but his hair was white as snow, his skin very pale—almost pink—and behind the dark sunglasses were pinkish-blue eyes. He was about thirty years old, and he had the build of a weightlifter.

The albino Chinese grunted at the two dead figures on the floor, then moved to the only porthole in the room. He opened it, leaned out, and looked down at the water where a rowing boat containing two other men was rocking steadily next to the larger floating restaurant. The albino loosened a coil of rope he had over his shoulder and threw one end out of the window. Next, he braced himself by placing one foot on the wall beneath the window, and clutched the rope tightly. One of the men from the boat took hold of the rope and swiftly climbed up to the window. The albino was strong enough to hold the rope and the other man’s weight.

The other figure appeared in the porthole and snaked through, dropping to the floor. He also had a full head of white hair, pinkish skin, and sunglasses, and was about thirty years old. While the first albino secured the rope to a post, the second opened a backpack, removed some instruments, and set to work.

Meanwhile, in the dining room, Guy Thackeray stopped the music and began his speech.

“My friends,” he said, “I’m afraid I don’t always give credit where credit is due. On such a special occasion as tonight, I must apologize for that oversight. Everyone who works for me and for EurAsia Enterprises is always deserving of praise. I want you to know that I am very proud of each and every one of you. It is because of you that EurAsia Enterprises is one of the leading shipping and trading establishments in the Far East. But it also took someone with superior management skills, leadership, and fortitude to guide this great ship of ours through sometimes troubled waters. For thirty years Bobby has been an inspiration and mentor to us all.” He looked straight at John Desmond and said, “And you’ve been something of an uncle, or perhaps a second father, to me personally, John.”

Desmond smiled and shifted in his seat, embarrassed. He was nearly eighteen years older than Thackeray and unlike the CEO, Desmond had been born and raised in Britain, having moved to Hong Kong in the early fifties.

Thackeray continued, “If ever there was a person deserving of a distinguished service award, it was John Desmond. I, for one, shall miss him. He will be leaving us as of the end of June. What’s the matter, John, afraid the Communists will take away your health benefits come the first of July?”

There was laughter and applause.

“Anyway,” Thackeray continued, “without further ado, allow me to present you with this plaque. It reads ‘To John Desmond, in recognition of his thirty years’ distinguished service at EurAsia Enterprises.’ ”

There was more applause as Desmond left his seat and approached the podium. The two men shook hands. Desmond then turned to the room and spoke into the microphone.

“Thank you, everyone. It’s been a wonderful thirty years,” he began. “EurAsia Enterprises has been good to me. Hong Kong has been good to me. I don’t know what the future will bring after the first of July but I’m sure ...” Desmond hesitated. He seemed to be searching for the appropriate words. “... ”

will be business as usual.”

Everyone in the room knew that on 1 July Britain would no longer be in possession of Hong Kong. The entire colony would be handed over to the People’s Republic of China at 12:01 a.m. Despite China’s assurances that Hong Kong would remain a capitalist and free-enterprise zone for at least fifty years, no one could be sure.

“I wish you all the best of luck,” Desmond continued. “Thank you again. And to my good friend Guy Thackeray, the man who really guides EurAsia Enterprises, a very special thank you.”

During the applause, the two men shook hands again. Then Thackeray signalled the band leader and the room filled with the swinging rhythm of Glenn Miller’s “Pennsylvania Six Five Thousand.”

Thackeray accompanied Desmond back to the table. “John, I have to get back to Central,” he said. “I suppose I’ll see you at the office tomorrow?”

“Leaving so soon, Guy?” Desmond asked. “Whatever for?”

“I left some unfinished business at the office which must be taken care of. Listen ... enjoy your party. I’ll speak to you soon.”

“Guy, wait,” Desmond said. “We need to talk about things. You know we do.”

“Not now, John. We’ll go over it tomorrow at the office, all right?”

Guy walked away without another word. With concern, John Desmond watched his friend leave the room. He knew that the roof was going to cave in when the rest of the Board discovered what he had learned only two days ago. He wondered how Guy Thackeray was going to emerge unscathed.

Guy Thackeray stepped out of the dining room, on to the deck, and into a small shuttle motorboat. The boat whisked him to shore, where his personal limousine was waiting. In a flash it was off to the north part of the island and the panorama of buildings and lights.

By then, the two strange albino Chinese had finished their work. The first man slithered through the storeroom porthole, slid down the rope, and dropped into the waiting rowing boat. His brother followed suit, and moments later the boat was heading east towards a yacht waiting some two hundred metres away. The third man, the one rowing, also had a full head of white hair, pinkish skin, and sunglasses. Not only were the albino brothers the most bizarre trio in the Far East, they were also the most dangerous.

Exactly fifteen minutes later, the *Emerald Palace* exploded into flames. The brunt of the detonation enveloped the dining room, and the dance floor caved inward. It didn’t happen fast enough for the terrified people caught inside the death-trap. Those not burned alive were drowned trying to escape. Twelve minutes, the structure had completely submerged. Everyone was killed, including John Desmond and the entire Board of Directors of EurAsia Enterprises.

21 JUNE 1997, 11:55 A.M., WESTERN AUSTRALIA

At approximately the same moment that James Bond fell asleep on a red-eye flight from Kingston, Jamaica to London, the sun was beating down on the Australian outback. A young Aboriginal boy who frequented this area of the desert in search of kurrajong, an edible plant, was still frightened of the white men he had seen earlier. The men had driven to this isolated location in four-wheel drive vehicles which the boy knew only as “cars.”

The boy’s family lived at a campsite about a mile away and had done so for as long as he could remember. He knew that further south, more than a day’s walking distance, were towns populated by the white men. To the east, closer to Uluru, the mystical rock-like formation in the desert which the white men called “Ayers Rock,” there were even more encroachments on the Aboriginal homelands.

The white men had arrived early that morning in two “cars.” They had spent an hour at the site digging in the ground and burying something. Then they left, heading south towards the white man’s

civilization. They had been gone three hours before the boy decided to inspect the ground.

The dig occupied an area about six feet in diameter. The dirt was fresh but had already begun to bake and harden in the sun. The boy was curious. He wanted to know what the white men had hidden there, but he was afraid. He knew that he might get into trouble if he was seen by the white men, but now there was no one else around. He thought he should go and find a lizard for that evening's meal, but his desire to inspect the burial mound was too great.

If he had been wearing a watch, it would have read exactly 12 noon when the sun exploded in his face.

The nuclear explosion that occurred that day two hundred miles north of Leonora in Western Australia sent shock waves throughout the world. It was later determined that the device had roughly three-quarters the power of the weapon that destroyed Hiroshima: the equivalent of approximately 300 tons of TNT. The blast covered an area of three square miles. It was deadly, indeed, but crude by today's standards. Nevertheless, had there been a city where the bomb was buried, there would surely have been nothing left of it.

Within hours, an emergency session of the United Nations degenerated into nothing but a shouting match between the superpowers. No one knew what had happened. Australian officials were completely baffled. Inspectors at the site came up with nothing aside from the fact that a "home-made" nuclear device had been detonated. Everyone was grateful that it had been in the middle of the outback, where they assumed there had been no casualties.

What was truly frightening, though, was the implication of the location. It was, in all probability, a test. Someone—a terrorist group or a foreign power operating in Australia—was in possession of rudimentary nuclear weapons.

As Australia, the United States, Russia, and Britain combined forces to investigate the explosion and search for answers, they also waited for the imminent claim of responsibility and possible blackmail. It never came. When James Bond arrived in London in the early hours of the same day in London time, the nuclear explosion was still a total mystery.

ZERO *M*INUS *T*EN: 21 *J*UNE 1997, 10:15 A.M., *E*NGLAND

James Bond never had trouble sleeping on a plane, and the flight from Jamaica to England was no exception. He felt refreshed and alert when the office car pulled into the high-security SIS parking garage by the Thames. Things were so open now: Bond was one of the few veterans still around who could remember a time when SIS hid behind the front of Universal Export Ltd.

The British Secret Service had a relatively new leader. Her name was no longer a secret, but Bond would never dare address her by name, just as he had never addressed his irascible former chief, Sir Miles Messervy, that way. Since his retirement, Sir Miles had mellowed considerably. He often invited Bond to Quarterdeck, his home on the edge of Windsor Great Park, for a dinner party or a game of bridge. They still met from time to time at Blades. Once they were strictly a superior officer and a civil servant with mutual respect for each other; but now, after all the years, they were close friends. Even so, Bond had consciously to refrain from addressing the man as “sir.”

Bond couldn't say he was friends with the new M. He wasn't even sure he liked her, but he respected her. In her short tenure, she had already shown she was capable of being an effective leader. She wasn't afraid of proactive operations, something Bond had feared might be discontinued. If some dirty work needed to be performed, she had no problem with ordering Bond, or one of the other Double-Os, to carry it out. She wasn't squeamish, and she wasn't gullible. Bond felt he could say whatever he wanted to her, and he would receive an honest response. He also knew what the woman thought of him personally. Bond was a chauvinist and, in her words, “a coldhearted bastard.” She had said it one evening over a working dinner. Bond understood why the woman had called him that, and he didn't hold it against her because, for one thing, she was right.

He stopped in at his private office on the fourth floor before going up to see M. His Personal Assistant (Bond couldn't help still thinking of her as a “secretary”), Ms. (not Miss) Helena Marksbury, was busy holding the fort. Helena worked for all of the Double-Os, having been with SIS for about a year. Since the days of Loelia Ponsonby and Mary Goodnight, there had been a steady succession of lissome blondes, brunettes, and redheads occupying the front desk. As for Helena Marksbury, she was a brunette with large green eyes. She was bright, quick-witted, and damnably attractive. Bond thought that had she not been his Personal Assistant, the lovely Helena would have made an enjoyable dinner date ... with an option for breakfast the next morning.

“Good morning, James,” she said. She had a lilting Welsh accent, something Bond found extremely attractive.

“How are things, Helena?”

“I was called in the middle of the night. Again,” she said with a sigh.

Bond had been briefed about the Australian incident. By now every department was digging into the matter.

“It happens to the best of us,” Bond replied.

“I imagine you have no problem rising in the middle of the night,” Helena said with a twinkle in her eye.

Bond smiled and said, “Don't believe everything you hear, Ms. Marksbury.”

“Well, if you ever find that you *are* up and can't sleep, Mr. Bond, I have a very nice herbal tea that is very relaxing.”

“I avoid tea at all costs,” Bond said. “You should know that by now.”

“As a matter of fact, I have noticed. You don’t drink tea at all, James? How un-English of you!”

“I’d as soon drink a cup of mud.” He shrugged. “And besides, I’m half Scots, half Swiss.” He smiled warmly at her, then stepped into his office.

Bond had never been keen on office decoration. The one piece of artwork on display was an obscure artist’s watercolour of the clubhouse at the Royal St. George’s Golf Course. The one framed photograph on the desk featured Bond and his closest American friend, former CIA agent Felix Leiter sitting in a bar in New York City. It was an old photo, and the two men looked surprised and slightly drunk. It never failed to make Bond smile.

He had no urgent messages, so he picked up the phone and dialled Miss Money Penny’s line (one of the few women at SIS who still didn’t mind being called “Miss”). She answered after the first ring.

“Hello, James, welcome back.”

“Penny, you have a wonderful phone voice, did you know that?” he said. “You could start a second career entertaining lonely men with sweet nothings.”

“Hmmm, and I dare say you’d be a regular client. But I’d have to go the Chinese route and entertain you with sweet and *sour* nothings.”

“Now that’s an appetizing idea for a takeaway, Penny,” he said, chuckling.

She laughed too. “Listen, you’d better get up here right away. She asked for you just five minutes ago.”

“I’m on my way. Bill there?”

“He’s here too.”

“Right.” Bond hung up, left the sanctity of the one quiet place in the building, and took the elevator to the eighth floor.

Miss Money Penny’s manner was no-nonsense, but her blue eyes betrayed how pleased she was to see Bond. Throughout the years, their relationship had been a mutually flirtatious one, and it had settled into a comfortable friendship. Like most of Sir Miles’s staff, she had been reticent about working for someone new after such a long time, but for her the new M was a pleasure. They got along splendidly, and Miss Money Penny had decided not to transfer out but to stay on. It was a good thing for many believed that SIS wouldn’t function properly without Miss Money Penny’s vast knowledge of the entire organization and its history.

Bill Tanner, the Chief of Staff, was also a Service veteran who had been around even longer than Bond. He remained 007’s closest friend inside SIS and one of the few with whom Bond regularly socialized. They enjoyed the occasional game of golf, but the Chief of Staff’s forte was tennis. Tanner had originally resigned when Sir Miles retired, but he was asked by the new M to stay on during what was called the “transition period” of six months. Those six months became a full year, and now Tanner had no intention of leaving.

“Hello, James, welcome back,” Bill said.

“Bill ... Penny ...” Bond nodded with a smile.

“Sorry you couldn’t spend more time in Jamaica, James,” Money Penny said. “I received a report on the exercise. It went well, I heard.”

“I have no complaints,” Bond said, vividly recalling the sight of Stephanie Lane stepping into her shower. “This is about Australia, I suppose?”

“Isn’t that appalling?” Tanner exclaimed, shaking his head. “No one knows what the bloody hell is going on. Unfortunately, it’s not officially in our laps yet. Australia wants it handled her way for the moment and the PM has agreed to stay away for the time being. God knows, America and Russia are sticking *their* noses into it. Anyway, that isn’t what she called you in for.”

Bond was surprised. The atomic blast, even in the few hours since it had happened, had become international news.

Moneypenny picked up the phone and buzzed M. "007's here, ma'am." The green light above the door flashed, indicating that Bond should go in. Some things never changed.

On the other hand, M's office had changed drastically with the new regime. Sir Miles's domain had been the "captain's quarters" of a naval vessel, while the new look was more akin to a postmodern psychiatrist's office. Sparse, ultra-modern furnishings filled the place with a stark black-and-white color scheme that was surprisingly pleasing to the eye. There was a lot of shiny metal, glass, and black leather, as well as an array of artwork of all types, including an original Kandinsky on the wall behind the desk.

M sat at her glass-topped desk, looking down at an open folder. Bond stood in the doorway until she motioned to the black leather chair in front of the desk. Her eyes never left the page until Bond was sitting and facing her. Then she looked up at him. M's striking blue eyes were much like Bond's—very cool, with thin streaks of white in the irises. She was in her late fifties, had short greyish hair, and a rather severe face. Not a slender woman nor a tall one, M nevertheless possessed a charisma that commanded attention, due mostly to the obvious intelligence within her ice-cold blue eyes. The shape hinted at some distant Asian blood, but that was only speculation on Bond's part.

"Good morning, ma'am," Bond said.

"Hello, 007, how was your flight?" Her voice was calm, even, and soft.

"Fine, thank you."

"I understand the training exercise went well."

Bond nodded.

"Your report can wait," M said. "I'm sure 03 will fill us in. Or do you think 05 will have a more favourable view of events?"

M looked hard at Bond. He shifted uncomfortably. Sir Miles had never approved of Bond womanizing, and it was one of the bones of contention between the new M and 007. Bond swallowed and managed to say, "I'm sure either agent will give you an accurate reconstruction of the exercise."

M frowned but nodded briskly.

Bond quickly changed the subject. "What do we know about this explosion in Australia?"

"Never mind about that, 007," M said. "We've been told to stay out of it for the moment. Regardless of those orders, I have Section A doing reconnaissance. There's hardly any information at the moment. Until we hear from the party or parties responsible, I've got something else for you to look into."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Bond, do you know what's happening to Hong Kong on the first of July?" M asked.

"Well, yes ma'am," Bond said. "Didn't everyone? It reverts back to the People's Republic of China after a century and a half of British rule."

"That's less than two weeks away, 007."

Bond nodded, his brow creased. What was all this about? He vaguely remembered a report he'd read before leaving for Jamaica. Could it involve that solicitor who was killed in a bomb blast earlier in the month?

"Do you know what's happened there in the past few days?" M asked.

"There was a car bomb in the business district—what, a week ago?"

"On the eleventh of June, just over a week, yes. What else do you know about it?"

"It was a solicitor visiting from England, wasn't it? Someone in a large firm here."

"Gregory Donaldson, of Fitch, Donaldson and Patrick. A partner in one of our most prestigious law practices."

"Do we know who was behind the bombing, and why he was targeted?" Bond asked.

"An anonymous caller phoned Government House and claimed that the People's Republic was

behind it. Why Donaldson was targeted is still a mystery.”

“Why was Donaldson in Hong Kong?”

“I’ll get to that in a moment. You know about the two Red Chinese officials who were assassinated?” she asked.

Bond remembered. “Oh, yes. That was a few days later, wasn’t it?”

“The 13th.”

“Yes, ma’am, two officials from Beijing were killed in a shopping mall by a man dressed in military uniform.”

“A British army uniform, to be exact. The two men were working with the local government on last minute preparations for the changeover. They had taken some time off and were buying souvenirs or something to take back to China. Some loose cannon in uniform calmly walked up to the men, pulled out an automatic pistol, and shot them dead. Witnesses said the “officer” ran out of the store and disappeared into the crowd. All we know is that the man was certainly Caucasian.”

“There’s been a lot of tension over the past year. People have been waking up to what’s happening to them,” Bond said. “It had to come to a head eventually.”

“‘Waking up’ is only the half of it,” M said. “People are starting to panic. Something else happened in Hong Kong two nights ago that has escalated the problem.”

“What’s that?”

“A bomb exploded on a floating restaurant off Aberdeen, killing thirty-three people. All of them were important members of the British business community in Hong Kong.”

This was news to Bond.

“The report is probably on your desk. The first incident was disturbing, the second one was bewildering, but this third one has caused the PM to sit up and take notice. Something’s going on, 007, and it isn’t pretty. Fingers are pointing. There was another anonymous call to Government House the morning after the bombing.”

“China.”

“Right.”

“That’s it? Just ‘the People’s Republic of China?’ Nothing more specific?”

“There were allusions to some general in Guangzhou, north of the Hong Kong colony. His name was Wong. It was enough to get the rumour mill churning. The press got hold of it, and needless to say there is a lot of tension in the air. Anti-Communist groups are making themselves heard, and the democracy foes are just as loud. The PM has been talking with Beijing ...”

“But the official party line denies all knowledge of the actions?”

“Correct, 007. And they are just as quick to accuse us of killing their two officials in the shopping mall.”

“Sounds like someone is stirring up trouble just before the takeover.”

“Well, there’s going to *be* trouble. Chinese troops are massing along the border, just above the New Territories. The Hong Kong people are afraid that they’re going to invade and do away with the idea of a peaceful transition. It didn’t help when a group of Hong Kong teenagers threw rocks at the soldiers. There was gunfire but no one was hurt. There was also some kind of panic-induced incident in one of the tourist areas in Kowloon just yesterday. The memory of Tienanmen Square is still very vivid.”

“Isn’t this a job for the politicians?”

“Normally it would be,” M said. “But something else has come up that interests me.”

She waited until Bond asked, “And what is that, ma’am?” The new M tended to have a flair for the dramatic.

“The three incidents—the car bomb that killed Donaldson, the assassination of the two Chinese men, and the bombing of the floating restaurant—are all connected to a multi-billion dollar

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