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The Red Carpet

There are moments of great luxury in the life of a secret agent. There are assignments on which he is required to act the part of a very rich man; occasions when he takes refuge in good living to efface the memory of danger and the shadow of death; and times when, as was now the case, he is a guest in the territory of an allied secret service.

From the moment the BOAC Stratocruiser taxied up to the International Air Terminal at Idlewild, James Bond was treated like royalty.

When he left the aircraft with the other passengers he had resigned himself to the notorious purgatory of the US Health, Immigration and Customs machinery. At least an hour, he thought, of overheated, drab-green rooms smelling of last year's air and stale sweat and guilt and the fear that hangs round all frontiers, fear of those closed doors marked **PRIVATE** that hide the careful men, the files, the teleprinters chattering urgently to Washington, to the Bureau of Narcotics, Counter Espionage, the Treasury, the FBI.

As he walked across the tarmac in the bitter January

wind he saw his own name going over the network: BOND, JAMES. BRITISH DIPLOMATIC PASSPORT 0094567, the short wait and the replies coming back on the different machines: NEGATIVE, NEGATIVE, NEGATIVE. And then, from the FBI: POSITIVE AWAIT CHECK. There would be some hasty traffic on the FBI circuit with the Central Intelligence Agency and then: FBI TO IDLEWILD: BOND OKAY OKAY, and the bland official out front would hand him back his passport with a 'Hope you enjoy your stay, Mr Bond.'

Bond shrugged his shoulders and followed the other passengers through the wire fence towards the door marked US HEALTH SERVICE.

In his case it was only a boring routine, of course, but he disliked the idea of his dossier being in the possession of any foreign power. Anonymity was the chief tool of his trade. Every thread of his real identity that went on record in any file diminished his value and, ultimately, was a threat to his life. Here in America, where they knew all about him, he felt like a black man whose shadow has been stolen by the witch-doctor. A vital part of himself was in pawn, in the hands of others. Friends, of course, in this instance, but still . . .

'Mr Bond?'

A pleasant-looking nondescript man in plain clothes had stepped forward from the shadow of the Health Service building.

'My name's Halloran. Pleased to meet you!'

They shook hands.

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‘Hope you had a pleasant trip. Would you follow me, please?’

He turned to the officer of the airport police on guard at the door.

‘Okay, Sergeant.’

‘Okay, Mr Halloran. Be seeing you.’

The other passengers had passed inside. Halloran turned to the left, away from the building. Another policeman held open a small gate in the high boundary fence.

‘Bye, Mr Halloran.’

‘Bye, Officer. Thanks.’

Directly outside a black Buick waited, its engine sighing quietly. They climbed in. Bond’s two light suitcases were in front next to the driver. Bond couldn’t imagine how they had been extracted so quickly from the mound of passengers’ luggage he had seen only minutes before being trolleyed over to Customs.

‘Okay, Grady. Let’s go.’

Bond sank back luxuriously as the big limousine surged forward, slipping quickly into top through the Dynaflo gears.

He turned to Halloran.

‘Well, that’s certainly one of the reddest carpets I’ve ever seen. I expected to be at least an hour getting through Immigration. Who laid it on? I’m not used to VIP treatment. Anyway, thanks very much for your part in it all.’

‘You’re very welcome, Mr Bond.’ Halloran smiled and offered him a cigarette from a fresh pack of Luckies.

‘We want to make your stay comfortable. Anything you want, just say so and it’s yours. You’ve got some good friends in Washington. I don’t myself know why you’re here but it seems the authorities are keen that you should be a privileged guest of the Government. It’s my job to see you get to your hotel as quickly and as comfortably as possible and then I’ll hand over and be on my way. May I have your passport a moment, please.’

Bond gave it to him. Halloran opened a briefcase on the seat beside him and took out a heavy metal stamp. He turned the pages of Bond’s passport until he came to the US visa, stamped it, scribbled his signature over the dark blue circle of the Department of Justice cipher and gave it back to him. Then he took out his pocket-book and extracted a thick white envelope which he gave to Bond.

‘There’s a thousand dollars in there, Mr Bond.’ He held up his hand as Bond started to speak. ‘And it’s communist money we took in the Schmidt–Kinaski haul. We’re using it back at them and you are asked to co-operate and spend this in any way you like on your present assignment. I am advised that it will be considered a very unfriendly act if you refuse. Let’s please say no more about it and,’ he added, as Bond continued to hold the envelope dubiously in his hand, ‘I am also to say that the disposal of this money through your hands has the knowledge and approval of your own Chief.’

Bond eyed him narrowly and then grinned. He put the envelope away in his notecase.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘And thanks. I’ll try and spend it where it does most harm. I’m glad to have some working capital. It’s certainly good to know it’s been provided by the opposition.’

‘Fine,’ said Halloran, ‘and now, if you’ll forgive me, I’ll just write up my notes for the report I’ll have to put in. Have to remember to get a letter of thanks sent to Immigration and Customs and so forth for their co-operation. Routine.’

‘Go ahead,’ said Bond. He was glad to keep silent and gaze out at his first sight of America since the war. It was no waste of time to start picking up the American idiom again: the advertisements, the new car models and the prices of second-hand ones in the used-car lots; the exotic pungency of the road signs: **SOFT SHOULDERS – SHARP CURVES – SQUEEZE AHEAD – SLIPPERY WHEN WET**; the standard of driving; the number of women at the wheel, their menfolk docilely beside them; the men’s clothes; the way the women were doing their hair; the Civil Defence warnings: **IN CASE OF ENEMY ATTACK – KEEP MOVING – GET OFF BRIDGE**; the thick rash of television aerials and the impact of TV on hoardings and shop windows; the occasional helicopter; the public appeals for cancer and polio funds: **THE MARCH OF DIMES** – all the small, fleeting impressions that were as important to his trade as are broken bark and bent twigs to the trapper in the jungle.

The driver chose the Triborough Bridge and they soared across the breathtaking span into the heart of uptown Manhattan, the beautiful prospect of New York

hastening towards them until they were down amongst the hooting, teeming, petrol-smelling roots of the stressed-concrete jungle.

Bond turned to his companion.

'I hate to say it,' he said, 'but this must be the fattest atomic-bomb target on the whole face of the globe.'

'Nothing to touch it,' agreed Halloran. 'Keeps me awake nights thinking what would happen.'

They drew up at the St Regis, at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 55th Street. A saturnine middle-aged man in a dark-blue overcoat and black homburg came forward behind the commissionaire. On the sidewalk, Halloran introduced him.

'Mr Bond, meet Captain Dexter.' He was deferential. 'Can I pass him along to you now, Captain?'

'Sure, sure. Just have his bags sent up. Room 2000. Top floor. I'll go ahead with Mr Bond and see he has everything he wants.'

Bond turned to say goodbye to Halloran and thank him. For a moment Halloran had his back to him as he said something about Bond's luggage to the commissionaire. Bond looked past him across 55th Street. His eyes narrowed. A black sedan, a Cadillac, was pulling sharply out into the thick traffic, right in front of a Checker cab that braked hard, its driver banging his fist down on the horn and holding it there. The sedan kept going, just caught the tail of the green light, and disappeared north up Fifth Avenue.

It was a smart, decisive bit of driving, but what startled Bond was that it had been a black woman at

the wheel, a fine-looking woman in a black chauffeur's uniform, and through the rear-window he had caught a glimpse of the single passenger – a huge grey-black face which had turned slowly towards him and looked directly back at him, Bond was sure of it, as the car accelerated towards the Avenue.

Bond shook Halloran by the hand. Dexter touched his elbow impatiently.

'We'll go straight in and through the lobby to the elevators. Half-right across the lobby. And would you please keep your hat on, Mr Bond.'

As Bond followed Dexter up the steps into the hotel he reflected that it was almost certainly too late for these precautions. Hardly anywhere in the world will you find a black woman driving a car. One acting as a chauffeur is still more extraordinary. Barely conceivable even in Harlem, but that was certainly where the car was from.

And the giant shape in the back seat? That grey-black face? Mister Big?

'Hm,' said Bond to himself as he followed the slim back of Captain Dexter into the elevator.

The elevator slowed up for the twenty-first floor.

'We've got a little surprise ready for you, Mr Bond,' said Captain Dexter, without, Bond thought, much enthusiasm.

They walked down the corridor to the corner room.

The wind sighed outside the passage windows and Bond had a fleeting view of the tops of other skyscrapers and, beyond, the stark fingers of the trees in Central

Park. He felt far out of touch with the ground and for a moment a strange feeling of loneliness and empty space gripped his heart.

Dexter unlocked the door of No. 2000 and shut it behind them. They were in a small lighted lobby. They left their hats and coats on a chair and Dexter opened the door in front of them and held it for Bond to go through.

He walked into an attractive sitting-room decorated in Third Avenue 'Empire' – comfortable chairs and a broad sofa in pale yellow silk, a fair copy of an Aubusson on the floor, pale grey walls and ceiling, a bow-fronted French sideboard with bottles and glasses and a plated ice-bucket, a wide window through which the winter sun poured out of a Swiss-clear sky. The central heating was just bearable.

The communicating door with the bedroom opened.

'Arranging the flowers by your bed. Part of the famous CIA "Service with a Smile".' The tall thin young man came forward with a wide grin, his hand outstretched, to where Bond stood rooted with astonishment.

'Felix Leiter! What the hell are you doing here?'

Bond grasped the hard hand and shook it warmly. 'And what the hell are you doing in my bedroom, anyway? God! it's good to see you. Why aren't you in Paris? Don't tell me they've put you on this job?'

Leiter examined the Englishman affectionately.

'You've said it. That's just exactly what they have done. What a break! At least, it is for me. CIA thought we did all right together on the Casino job* so they

* This terrifying gambling case is described in the author's *Casino Royale*.

hauled me away from the Joint Intelligence chaps in Paris, put me through the works in Washington and here I am. I'm sort of liaison between the Central Intelligence Agency and our friends of the FBI.' He waved towards Captain Dexter, who was watching this unprofessional ebullience without enthusiasm. 'It's their case, of course, at least the American end of it is, but as you know there are some big overseas angles which are CIA's territory, so we're running it joint. Now you're here to handle the Jamaican end for the British and the team's complete. How does it look to you? Sit down and let's have a drink. I ordered lunch directly I got the word you were downstairs and it'll be on its way.' He went over to the sideboard and started mixing a martini.

'Well, I'm damned,' said Bond. 'Of course that old devil M never told me. He just gives one the facts. Never tells one any good news. I suppose he thinks it might influence one's decision to take a case or not. Anyway, it's grand.'

Bond suddenly felt the silence of Captain Dexter. He turned to him.

'I shall be very glad to be under your orders here, Captain,' he said tactfully. 'As I understand it, the case breaks pretty neatly into two halves. The first half lies wholly on American territory. Your jurisdiction, of course. Then it looks as if we shall have to follow it into the Caribbean. Jamaica. And I understand I am to take over outside United States territorial waters. Felix here will marry up the two halves so far as your government is concerned. I shall report to London through

CIA while I'm here, and direct to London, keeping CIA informed, when I move to the Caribbean. Is that how you see it?’

Dexter smiled thinly. ‘That’s just about it, Mr Bond. Mr Hoover instructs me to say that he’s very pleased to have you along. As our guest,’ he added. ‘Naturally we are not in any way concerned with the British end of the case and we’re very happy that CIA will be handling that with you and your people in London. Guess everything should go fine. Here’s luck,’ and he lifted the cocktail Leiter had put into his hand.

They drank the cold hard drink appreciatively, Leiter with a faintly quizzical expression on his hawk-like face.

There was a knock on the door. Leiter opened it to let in the bellboy with Bond’s suitcases. He was followed by two waiters pushing trolleys loaded with covered dishes, cutlery and snow-white linen, which they proceeded to lay out on a folding table.

‘Soft-shell crabs with tartare sauce, flat beef hamburgers, medium-rare, from the charcoal grill, French-fried potatoes, broccoli, mixed salad with thousand-island dressing, ice cream with melted butterscotch and as good a Liebfraumilch as you can get in America. Okay?’

‘It sounds fine,’ said Bond with a mental reservation about the melted butterscotch.

They sat down and ate steadily through each delicious course of American cooking at its rare best.

They said little, and it was only when the coffee had

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been brought and the table cleared away that Captain Dexter took the fifty-cent cigar from his mouth and cleared his throat decisively.

‘Mr Bond,’ he said, ‘now perhaps you would tell us what you know about this case.’

Bond slit open a fresh pack of King Size Chesterfields with his thumbnail and, as he settled back in his comfortable chair in the warm luxurious room, his mind went back two weeks to the bitter raw day in early January when he had walked out of his Chelsea flat into the dreary half-light of a London fog.