



TRIGGER MORTIS

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Racing Uncertainty

The Communications Room of the Secret Service occupies the seventh floor of the building, although it used to be in the basement. It was forced to relocate as a result of one of the first directives sent by M in the week after he had taken over as Head of Intelligence. It was M's desire to bring at least some aspects of the physical training of his agents into the building and he had twisted Civil Service arms to find funds for a sophisticated, modern shooting range and full-time staff. When it had been pointed out to him that the Communications Room occupied the space that he required, he had sent one of the terse signals that were soon to become his benchmark: *Move it*. And so it had gone.

Perhaps as a nod to the past, the Communications Room still retains much of its subterranean nature though. The blinds are always drawn and although there is some overhead lighting, it is kept almost deliberately low as if this will somehow lend itself to the secrecy of the work that is done here. The operators – they are predominantly female – prefer the more concentrated glare of the Artek flexible metal tube lights which are clamped to their desks. The only constant sound in the room comes from the banks of chattering teleprinters round the walls. A circular table stands at the far end and

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it is here that the Communications Duty Officer sits and reads through incoming traffic before having it sent out to the relative sections. Beside him, there is a bank of pneumatic tubes leading to the section offices and every now and then, as the signals reach him, he gives the instructions for them to be rolled up, put in a cylinder and for the cylinder to be placed in one of the pneumatic tubes which opens and closes with a hiss. A spare copy of each signal remains on his table.

The evening before, as Bond was leaving the building, one of the girls had come over to the Duty Officer and given him a signal that she had just decoded.

‘It’s Station P again, sir,’ she said.

The Duty Officer was called Henry Fraser, a darkly handsome man with the broad shoulders and solid features of a rugby player. He’d actually got his first cap at nineteen and he’d been a prized member of the Double O section until an assignment in Lisbon had gone badly wrong and he’d come home with a bullet in his spine. Now he was in a wheelchair. The British Secret Service is not good at looking after its wounded officers and the first inclination of the top brass had been to pension him off, somewhere out of sight. M had insisted otherwise – and once again he’d got his way. Now Fraser was an invaluable member of the team, a man of huge resource who had lost none of his good looks. All the girls wanted to mother him . . . although several of them had rather less wholesome thoughts.

Fraser read the signal and his lips pursed in a whistle. He nodded and the girl rolled it up and placed it in a tube that was set slightly to one side. ‘That’ll put the cat among the pigeons,’ he said.

Another hiss and the roll of information disappeared on

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the next stage of its journey that took it, in seconds, to the ninth floor.

And now, a day later, Bond followed it, making his way down the long, anonymous corridor that led to the door of M's staff office. There was nobody else around and the soft carpet swallowed up the sound of his approach. He reached the green door that stood one from the end, and opened it without knocking. It led into the office of Miss Money Penny, M's private secretary. She was watering a potted plant – an aspidistra – that was a recent addition to her desk and she looked up and smiled. She liked Bond and she didn't mind that he knew it.

'You never told me you had green fingers, Penny,' Bond said.

'I wish I didn't.' She scowled. 'It was my birthday last week. I notice, incidentally, that I didn't get anything from you.'

'What do you give a girl who has everything?'

'Not a potted plant. Some of the other secretaries clubbed together and I put it here in case they look in but I keep hoping it'll die.'

'Then why are you watering it?'

'I'm overwatering it. I'm trying to drown the bloody thing. But it doesn't seem to care.' She put the watering can down. 'You're to go straight in.'

Bond went through the adjoining door, closing it behind him. M was sitting hunched over his desk, a pipe resting in one hand, the other holding a fountain pen, which scratched noisily across the bottom of a sheet of paper coloured pink for *Most Immediate* as he appended his signature. He was not alone. Bill Tanner, his Chief of Staff, was with him and nodded as Bond came in – a signal perhaps that this was not a life-and-death situation: war hadn't been declared. The

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atmosphere in the big, square room with its dark green carpet and desk, centrally placed, was relaxed, almost informal. Bond had known it otherwise.

‘Come in 007,’ M grunted. ‘Take a seat. I’ll be with you in a minute.’ He signed a second document and slid both of them into his out tray. Then, noticing that his pipe had gone out, he tamped the tobacco with his thumb and lit it again. Finally he looked up with the clear grey eyes that demanded absolute loyalty and which would know, instantly, those who could not deliver it. ‘I seem to recall you used to be interested in motor racing. Done any lately?’

Bond was taken unawares but he was careful not to show it. When M asked you a question, he expected an answer, not another question. ‘Nothing serious, sir,’ he said. ‘But I like to keep an eye on the form.’

‘Well, then, you know all about this Russian racer they’ve turned out. Understand they’re running it for the first time on that German track – the Nürburgring – in the European championship.’

‘The Krassny?’ Bond had the gift of good recall, an essential part of his psychological armoury, and he dredged up what he’d read, at the same time wondering where this was going. ‘It’s a bit of a beast from what I’ve heard. The Red Rocket they like to call it. Sixteen cylinders in two banks of eight. Two-stage super-charger, disc brakes, all the latest gimmicks. Sounds as if it ought to go.’

‘How would you fancy its chances at Nürburgring?’

‘Well, it all comes down to the driver – particularly in a tough race like that with plenty of cornering. I’d say that we and the Italians, and perhaps the Germans, should see them

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off. But you can't tell with the Russians. They've got big sleeves and quite a lot up them.'

'Just so. And they don't like having failures in public.' M puffed at the pipe and Bond recognised the smell of Capstan Navy Flake, the same tobacco that M had always smoked since he'd picked up the habit as a young officer serving in the Dardanelles. The grey-white smoke curled around his head. 'Would it surprise you to know that SMERSH has been called in to try and improve the odds for the Russian cars?'

SMERSH. *Smiert Spionam* – or Death to Spies. It was a secret department of the Soviet government but one that Bond knew well. How many *konspiratsia* had started life on the second floor of the drab building on the Sretenka Ulitsa in Moscow? Everything they touched brought ruin and death. And yet it was almost impossible to imagine them getting involved in the bright, modern world of motor racing. It was a clash of cultures.

'Good heavens, sir!' Bond startled. 'What have SMERSH got to do with it? Are they going to sabotage all the opposition or what?'

'Well, it's an odd business,' M admitted. 'But apparently the Russian team's been practising in Czechoslovakia and the atmosphere in their camp is completely cloak and dagger. No journalists allowed anywhere near. Out on the track at the crack of dawn. Almost as if they're preparing for a war rather than a race.'

'We got word from one of the pit staff,' Bill Tanner chipped in. 'He fought with the RAF over here during the war and he became curious about what was going on. He kept in touch with Station P.'

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‘That’s right. He found out the Russians are utterly determined to win. They’ve studied the field and they’re pretty confident of beating everyone except our own chap, the British champion Lancy Smith in his Vanwall. Fair enough, and I suppose that’s the usual gossip you’d get in the pits. But our source, this Czech, became interested in one driver in particular. Number Three. He isn’t a regular member of the Russian team but he’s the one who’s been calling the shots and everyone seems to be afraid of him. With good reason.’

‘Who is he?’

‘Ivan Dimitrov.’ Tanner took out a file. There was a photograph attached, taken with a concealed camera. It showed a gaunt, scowling man standing beside a racing car with one arm raised. His eyes were two black slashes that were staring straight at the lens. ‘He was a first-class racer until he was banned from the circuit two years ago. He deliberately forced another driver off the track, pushing him off at a corner. He said it was an accident but the officials thought otherwise. The other man ended up in hospital in a critical condition. He was lucky to pull through. Dimitrov hasn’t raced since.’

‘So where’s the link with SMERSH?’

‘Moscow put pressure on the FIA to allow this man back,’ M said. ‘And they certainly wouldn’t do that just for the hell of it. Anyway, there’s something else. Our Czech friend sent in his last report three days ago. He said he’d seen Dimitrov staging crashes and that he was convinced they were planning to put Lancy Smith and the Vanwall out of the race – crash him. He wanted to get closer to this driver, Number Three, and find out more about him. I was inclined to dismiss the whole thing. I agree, it doesn’t sound like SMERSH. But last night we got another signal. Our man is dead. He was

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killed in a car accident. The local police are saying it was a hit-and-run but it seems too much of a coincidence. I think we have to accept that Lancy Smith could be a target.' M fell silent for a moment. 'What do you think? Would it be possible to arrange an accident at those speeds? Could they do it and make it look innocent?'

Bond considered for a moment. 'There are quite a few ways they could do it, sir,' he said. 'But it wouldn't be easy. Smith won at Monaco last year – and Monza. He's not going to let himself be outmanoeuvred.'

'So what's the most likely bet?' Tanner asked.

'Well, I suppose Dimitrov could try and hedge him in on a corner but he's already tried that once and it's too obvious. It would be better to come up behind Smith just as he was starting to go into a middle-speed curve, say at eighty or ninety mph. My guess is he'd do it fairly early in the race when everyone is close together and fighting for position. If he nudged Smith's inside rear wheel just as he was starting into the turn, it would make Smith's car oversteer and he'd almost certainly be a goner.' Bond shook his head, imagining the impact, the spinning metal, the possibility of devastation.

M lowered his pipe, resting his fist on the surface of the desk. For a moment his eyes were fixed on the bowl as if he could somehow divine the future in the smoke and the glowing ash. His face gave nothing away but Bond knew that he would be weighing up every possibility. Would the Russians engineer a crash, possibly involving the death of a champion driver, not to mention any number of innocent bystanders – simply to demonstrate the superiority of Soviet engineering? Bond had no doubt of it. It was just one more

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example of the utter cold-bloodedness and contempt that seemed to be built into the Slavic race.

‘And I suppose, 007,’ M went on, ‘that while Dimitrov is trying to do this to Smith, if we had the right man in the right car, he could do the same thing...’

‘...crash him before he got to Smith,’ Tanner added.

Bond saw at once where this was going. And this time, he didn’t hesitate. ‘Yes, it could be made to work that way. Given the right car and the right man.’

M and his Chief of Staff exchanged a look but they had both made up their minds. ‘I seem to remember you used to race that old Bentley of yours,’ Tanner said. ‘Do you think you’d be any good in a modern car?’

‘They run about twice as fast these days,’ Bond replied. ‘But if you’re thinking of something like a Vanwall or a Ferrari, of course the safety factor’s gone up with the speed. Better brakes, better steering, better alloys in the frame. Given a bit of practice, I suppose I could last some of the distance if I was lucky.’

‘You’re going to need more than luck,’ M rasped. ‘The race is a week away and I want you to put in some serious training. We’ve got someone who’s agreed to help. A professional racer, name of Logan Fairfax, works at a track near Devizes.’

‘You can get three or four days’ hands-on experience,’ Tanner went on. ‘Nowhere near enough but better than nothing – and if, as you say, Dimitrov tries something early on in the race, maybe you can come up with a trick or two that allows you to keep up with the pack. Anyway, the important thing is to protect Lancy Smith. The man’s something of a national hero and the press like him too. He’s got something of the dash of those Battle of Britain pilots we all remember

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so well and, frankly, these days we need our heroes alive and well.' He smiled. 'Girls swarm all over him too.'

The last remark was a cue for M to weigh in. 'I understand you still have that young woman staying with you,' he said, not disguising the gruffness in his voice. For M, the private lives of his agents were their own affair – until the moment they became entangled with the reports that crossed his desk.

'Miss Galore?' Bond feigned innocence. 'I felt I had to put her up for a while until she sorted herself out, sir. She was quite useful to me.'

'I read the report. But the Americans aren't happy about it. I had two men from the embassy in this office only yesterday. Well, that's what they said. Central Intelligence Agency, obviously. They have some questions for her and I'm not sure we can protect her if they want to bring her in.'

'I can speak to her.'

'I think you should, 007. The girl's a paid-up member of a criminal gang, let's not forget. It might not be a bad idea for her to make alternative arrangements.'

'Yes, sir.'

Bond was annoyed. But as he made his way back down to his office he had to admit the wisdom of what M had said and rather cursed himself for agreeing to let Pussy Galore travel with him. Incredibly, Loelia Ponsonby already seemed to know which way the wind was blowing. Perhaps she had picked it up on the powder-vine, the illegal conduit for information that began in the girls' restroom. At any event, she was more than usually attentive and as the day wore on Bond got a sense of everything being in its right place. This was his world. It was everything that mattered to him and anything else – friendship, even love – was extraneous. By the time he

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got into his car to drive back through London that evening, his mind was made up. He had a job to do and the girl had to go. It was time.

And yet, almost as soon as he arrived home he changed his mind. Pussy Galore was waiting for him when he walked in, dressed in a tightly cut jacket and short skirt. She looked just the way she had when he'd first set eyes on her in America. She had fixed two whisky sodas with plenty of ice and brought them over.

'I won't even ask about your day,' she said. 'Because I know you won't tell me. So here's mine. I went to Fortnum & Mason, then I had lunch at the Ritz. In the afternoon I went to that exhibition that's been in all the newspapers; that man, Klein. I didn't get it, if you want the truth. He seems to like blue an awful lot and slapping paint on a canvas – anyone can do that. Anyway, I hung around maybe an hour and then I left.' She took out a cigarette and lit it. 'There's something you should know ...'

'What's that?'

'Well, maybe there's nothing to it, but there were two men outside the gallery. I spotted them at once. You get used to keeping an eye out in my line of work, and these two apes stuck out a mile. Cheap suits, tough-looking, American. They were waiting for me, no doubt about it. They straightened up the moment I came out and one of them dropped his cigarette and ground it out.'

'What did you do?'

'For a minute, I thought of dealing with them myself. It wouldn't have been too difficult, even without a gun. But I didn't think you'd be too pleased if I left you two stiffs on the London sidewalk. Sorry – pavement.' She smiled scornfully.

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'So I pretended I'd forgotten something. I looked in my bag, then I turned round and went back into the museum. Hell, I'd spent enough time there already, but I'd noticed an exit on the other side and I just slipped away. But if they knew I was there, they could probably find me here.'

'Who do you think they were?'

'The Machine? The Mob? You tell me. We left behind quite a few unhappy people when we skipped New York, and quite a big heap of dead gangsters too. My girls will be wondering why I ran out on them and they won't be alone. They're gonna want answers to some questions and maybe they've sent over some muscle to get them.'

'I don't think you've got anything to worry about,' Bond said. He was remembering what M had told him. He'd had two men from the CIA in his office only the day before. The same two men? 'Nobody's going to try anything here in London and there's probably a perfectly innocent explanation for it. But I'll have a word with my people and make sure they keep an eye on you.' He drew a breath. 'I have to leave London for a couple of days.'

'Oh yeah?' There was a flash of anger in her eyes.

'It's a job. It's not very far away and I'll leave you the name and number of my hotel. I'm sorry. But that's how it is.'

She was going to argue, then thought better of it. She shrugged and managed to smile. 'Sure. I get it. Waving the flag for Britain while the little woman stays behind. Is that it?' She blew out smoke and crumpled the cigarette in an ashtray. 'Well, you promised me dinner and I've got an appetite like a horse. And maybe you can order those oysters of yours after all. I just remembered they're an aphrodisiac so tonight I want to see you swallow a plateful.'

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A little while later they left together and, maybe because Bond had other things on his mind, he didn't notice the two men sitting in the grey Austin, parked in the shadows. But they saw him. They saw the girl. They were prepared to wait. Their moment, they knew, would come.