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Written by John Gardner

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ROLE OF HONOUR

John Gardner



***For
Beryl and Gil***

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ROBBERY WITH VIOLETS

The robbery of security vans can take place at any time of the day, though, as a rule, the Metropolitan Police do not encounter hijackers attempting a quick getaway during the rush hour. Neither do they expect trouble with a cargo that is sewn up tight. Only a privileged few knew exactly when the Kruxator Collection would arrive in the country. That it was due to come to Britain was common knowledge, and you had only to read a newspaper to discover that March 15th was the day on which the fabled group of paintings and jewellery were to go on display – for two weeks – at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The Kruxator Collection is called after its founder, the late Niko Kruxator, whose fabulous wealth arose from sources unknown, for he had arrived penniless in the United States at about the time of the Wall Street Crash in October 1929. By the time he died in 1977, most people thought of him as the Greek shipping magnate, but he still held his interest in Kruxator Restaurants, and the great international chain of Krux-Lux Hotels. He was also sole owner of the Kruxator Collection, which he left to the country of his adoption – all 300 paintings and 700 fantastic *objets d'art*, including three icons dating back to the fifteenth century, smuggled out of Russia at the time of the Revolution, and no less than sixteen pieces once owned by the Borgias: a collection beyond price, though insured for billions of dollars.

The two-week London showing of the Kruxator Collection

would be the last in its tour of European capitals before the whole consignment was returned to New York. Niko had been shrewd enough to leave an endowment for a gallery in which these priceless objects could be displayed. He wanted to be remembered, and had taken steps to make certain that his name would be linked with those of Van Gogh, Breughel, El Greco, Matisse, Picasso and others. Not that he was knowledgeable about art, but he could sense a fair bargain which would appreciate in value, and had acquired the collection as an investment.

A private security firm looked after the precious paintings, drawings and gems on a permanent basis, though host countries were expected to provide extra cover. Nobody was in any doubt that the two armoured vans that carried the exhibits were at constant risk. When the collection was on display, an elaborate system of electronics protected every item.

The cargo came into Heathrow on an unannounced 747 at six minutes past four in the afternoon. The Boeing was directed to an unloading bay far away from the passenger terminals – near the old Hunting Clan hangars, which still display the name of that company in large white letters.

The armoured vans were waiting. They had arrived by the sea route after depositing the collection the previous evening at the Charles De Gaulle airport in Paris. Two unmarked police cars, each containing four armed plainclothes officers, were now in attendance.

The loaders were trusted employees of the Kruxator Agency who knew their task so well that the entire cargo was off the aircraft and packed into the vans in less than an hour. The unremarkable convoy, led by one of the police cars, the other taking up the rear, set off to make a circuit of the perimeter before joining the normal flow of traffic through the underpass and out on to the M4 motorway. It was just after five-fifteen and the light was beginning to go, with traffic starting to build up both in and out of the capital. Even so, within half an hour the

procession would arrive at the end of the motorway where the road narrows to two lanes, taking vehicles on to what is dubiously known as the Hammersmith Flyover, and then into the Cromwell Road.

Later reports from the police cars – which were in touch by radio with the armoured vans – showed a certain amount of confusion during the early part of the journey. An eye-catching black girl, driving a violet-coloured sports car, managed to come between the leading car and the first van just as the convoy climbed the ramp on to the Flyover; while an equally striking white girl, in a violet dress, driving a black sports car, cut in between the second van and the police car in the rear.

At first nothing alarming was reported over the radios, though the police vehicles and the armoured vans were being separated even further by the manoeuvres of the two girls who had tucked the violet Lancia and the black Ferrari neatly into the convoy. The trailing police car made two efforts to overtake and get back into position but was thwarted by the Ferrari. Each time it either swung out to prevent the police car from getting in, or pulled over to allow other vehicles to overtake. The Lancia was carving up the front part of the convoy in a similar way. By the time they reached the Cromwell Road not only had the gap widened between the police cars and the armoured vans, but the two vans had also been parted.

The route had been chosen to ensure maximum security. The convoy was to swing left off the Cromwell Road and proceed into Kensington High Street, then turn right before Knightsbridge, reaching Exhibition Road via the one-way system so as to gain access to the rear of the Victoria and Albert Museum, well away from the exposed main entrance.

One police car had reached the Royal Garden Hotel, on the High Street side of Kensington Gardens, and the other was only just entering the far end of the High Street, when radio communications ceased.

The car in front broke all security regulations, activating its

Klaxon and U-turning across a blocked mass of traffic to make its way back along Kensington High Street. The rear car, also in some panic, began to move aggressively. A chaos of honking, hooting vehicles was suddenly smothered in a thick pall of choking, violet-coloured smoke. Later, the drivers and shotgun riders of the two vans gave identical accounts of what happened: 'The coloured smoke was just there. No warning, no bombs, nothing, just dense, purple smoke out of nowhere. Then everything in the cab went live, as though we'd developed some terrible electrical fault. When that happens you turn off the engine, but the shocks kept coming, and we knew we could be electrocuted. Getting out was a gut reaction . . .'

No one remembered anything after escaping from the vans, and all four men were later discovered, still in safety helmets and flak jackets, neatly laid out on the pavement. They were treated for respiratory problems, as were many others who had been in the vicinity, for the smoke had an unpleasant effect on the lungs.

The two vans simply disappeared, as though a hole had opened up in the road, engulfed them, and then closed over again.

The police officer in charge of the investigation appeared on News at Ten that evening saying that the robbery had been planned to the second. It must have been rehearsed again and again. In fact, as he confided to his colleagues beforehand, so precise was the timing that you might well suppose it to have been a computerised theft. The only clues were the two sports cars and the descriptions of their drivers. The Central Registry, however, soon revealed that the sports cars' number plates – noted accurately by police officers – had never been issued to any vehicle.

The Kruxator robbery was daring, exact, brilliant and very costly. The lack of progress made by the police investigating it remained in the headlines for the best part of a month. Even the sly comments suggesting a breach of security, and the sudden

resignation of a senior member of the Secret Intelligence Service – by name, Commander James Bond – were relegated to a corner of page two and soon lost altogether to the public eye.

OUTER DARKNESS

In the beginning, Standing Orders were quite clear. Paragraph 12(c) instructed that,

Any officer classified as being on active duty who is subject to any alteration in private financial status will inform Head of A Section giving full details and providing any documentation that is thought either necessary or desirable by him.

Section A is, of course, Accounts, but confidential information – such as James Bond’s Australian legacy – automatically went personally to M, Records, and the Chief-of-Staff as well.

In the ordinary commercial world, Bond would have received numerous warm expressions of congratulation on his unexpected windfall. Not so in the Service. Those who work for Records are tight-lipped by tradition as well as training. Neither M nor Bill Tanner would think of bringing the matter up, for both were of the old school which rightly considered details of private money to be of a personal nature. The fact that they both knew would never stop them pretending they did not. It was, then, almost a shock when M himself mentioned it.

The months immediately prior to Bond receiving the news of his legacy had been dull with routine. He always found the paperwork part of his job debilitating and boring, but that summer – now eighteen months ago – was particularly irksome, especially as he had taken all his leave early, a mistake which condemned him to day after day of files, memos, directives and

other people's reports. As so often happened in Bond's world there was absolutely nothing – not even a simple confidential courier job – to alleviate the drudgery of those hot months.

Then, early in the following November, came the legacy. It arrived in a thick manila envelope with a Sydney postmark, falling literally out of the blue with a heavy plop through his letter box. The letter was from a firm of solicitors who for many years had acted for the younger brother of Bond's father, an uncle whom Bond had never seen. Uncle Bruce, it appeared, had died a wealthy man, leaving every penny of his estate to his nephew James, who hitherto had enjoyed little private money. Now his fortunes were drastically changed.

The whole settlement came to around a quarter of a million sterling. There was one condition to the will. Old Uncle Bruce had a sense of humour and decreed that his nephew should spend at least £100,000 within the first four months, in 'a frivolous manner'.

Bond did not have to think twice about how he might best comply with such an eccentric proviso. Bentley motor cars had always been a passion, and he had sorely resented getting rid of the early models which he had owned, driven and loved. During the last year he had lusted after the brand new Bentley Mulsanne Turbo. When the will was finally through probate, he took himself straight down to Jack Barclay's showrooms in Berkeley Square and ordered the hand-built car – in his old favourite colour, British Racing Green, with a magnolia interior.

One month later, he visited the Rolls-Royce Car Division at Crewe and spent a pleasant day with the Chief Executive. He explained that he wanted no special technology built into the car apart from a small concealed weapon compartment and a long-range telephone which would be provided by the security experts at CCS. The Mulsanne Turbo was delivered in the late spring, and Bond, having put down the full price with the order, was happy to get rid of the remaining £30,000 plus by spending

it on friends, mainly female, and himself in a spree of high living such as he had not enjoyed for years.

But 007 was not so easily brought out of the doldrums. He longed for some kind of action – a craving that he tried to curb with too many late nights, the excitement of the gaming tables, and a lukewarm affair with a girl he had known for years; a small romance that sputtered out like a candle flame after a few months. His period of lotus-eating failed miserably to remove the unsettled edgy sense that his life had lost both purpose and direction.

There was one week, in the late spring, when he found some pleasure with the Q Branch Armourer, Major Boothroyd, and his delectable assistant Q'ute, testing a handgun the Service was toying with using on a regular basis. Bond found the ASP 9mm, a combat modification of the 9mm Smith & Wesson, to be one of the most satisfying weapons he had ever used. But then the ASP had been constructed to specifications supplied by the United States Intelligence and Security Services.

In the middle of August, when London was crowded with tourists, and a torpor appeared to hang over the Regent's Park Headquarters, there was a summons from M's secretary, the faithful Miss Moneypenny, and Bond found himself in his chief's office, with Bill Tanner in attendance. It was here, on the ninth floor, overlooking the hot, dusty park, that M surprised Bond by bringing up the matter of the Australian legacy.

Moneypenny was far from her usual, flirtatious self while Bond waited in the outer office. She gave the distinct impression that, whatever the cause of M's summons, the news could not be good. The feeling was heightened once he was allowed into the main office. Bill Tanner was present, and both the Chief-of-Staff and M looked wary, M's eyes not even meeting Bond's and Tanner hardly turning to acknowledge his presence.

'We have a pair of Russian ambulance chasers in town,' M stated baldly and without emphasis once Bond was seated in front of his desk.

'Sir.' There was no other possible response to this opening gambit.

'New boys to us,' M continued. 'No diplomatic cover, French papers, but definitely high quality ambulance chasers.' The Head of Service was talking about Russian operatives whose specific task was to recruit potential informants and double agents.

'You want me to put them on the first aircraft back to Moscow, sir?' Bond's spirits rose a little, for even that simple chore would be better than sitting around the office shuffling papers.

M ignored the offer. Instead he looked at the ceiling. 'Come into money, 007? That's what I hear.'

'A small legacy . . .' Bond found himself almost shocked by M's remark.

M raised his eyebrows quizzically, muttering, 'Small?'

'The ambulance chasers are high-powered professionals.' Bill Tanner spoke from the window. 'They've both had some success in other parts of the world – Washington, for instance – though there's never been hard evidence. Washington and Bonn. These fellows got in very quietly on both occasions, and nobody knew about them until it was too late. They did a lot of damage in Washington. Even more in Bonn.'

'The orders to expel arrived after the birds had flown,' M interjected.

'So, now you know they're here in the UK and you want some solid evidence?' An unpleasant thought had crept into Bond's mind.

Bill Tanner came over, dragging a chair with him so that he could sit close to Bond. 'Fact is, we've got wind at an early stage. We presume they think we don't know about them. Our brothers at Five have been co-operative for once . . .'

'They're here and active then?' Bond tried to remain calm, for it was not like M or Tanner to beat about the bush. 'You want hard evidence?' he asked again.

Tanner took in a deep breath, like a man about to unburden his soul. 'M wants to mount a dangle,' he said quietly.

'Tethered goat. Bait,' M growled.

'Me?' Bond slipped a hand into his breast pocket withdrawing his gunmetal cigarette case.

'By all means,' said M in acknowledgment that Bond might smoke, and he lit one of his H. Simmons specials, bought in bulk from the old shop in the Burlington Arcade where they were still to be had.

'Me?' Bond repeated. 'The tethered goat?'

'Something like that.'

'With respect, sir, that's like talking of a woman being slightly pregnant.' He gave a bleak smile. 'Either I'm to be the bait, or I'm not.'

'Yes.' M cleared his throat, plainly embarrassed by what he was about to suggest. 'Well . . . it really came to us because of your . . . your little windfall.' He stressed the word 'little'.

'I don't see what that's got to do with it . . .'

'Let me put a couple of questions to you.' M fiddled with his pipe. 'How many people know you've, er, come into money?'

'Obviously those with need-to-know in the Service, sir. Apart from that only my solicitor, my late uncle's solicitor and myself . . .'

'Not reported in any newspapers, not bandied about, *not* public knowledge?'

'Certainly not public knowledge, sir.'

M and Tanner exchanged glances. 'You have been living at a somewhat extravagant pace, 007,' said M, scowling.

Bond remained silent, waiting for the news to be laid on him. As he had thought, it was not good.

Tanner took up the conversation. 'You see, James, there's been some talk. Gossip. People notice things and the word around Whitehall is that Commander Bond is living a shade dangerously – gambling, the new Bentley, er . . . ladies, money changing hands . . .'

'So?' Bond was not going to make it any easier for them.

'So, even our gallant allies in Grosvenor Square have been over

asking questions – they do, when a senior officer suddenly changes his habits.’

‘The Americans think I’m a security risk?’ Bond bridled. ‘Damned cheek.’

M rapped on the desk. ‘Enough of that, 007. They have every right to ask. You *have* been acting the playboy recently, and that kind of thing always makes them suspicious.’

‘And if they get touchy, then there’s no knowing what thoughts are running through the minds of those watching from Kensington Gardens,’ said Tanner with a forced smile.

‘Rubbish,’ Bond almost spat. ‘They know me too well. They’ll ferret out the legacy in no time – if they’re interested.’

‘Oh, they’re interested all right,’ Tanner continued. ‘You haven’t noticed anything?’

Bond’s brow creased as he shook his head.

‘No? Well, why should you? They’ve been very discreet. Not a twenty-four-hour surveillance or anything like that, but our people on the street have reported that you’re under observation. Odd days, occasional nights, questions in unlikely places.’

Bond swore silently. He felt foolish. *Even at home, behave as though you’re in the field*, they taught. Elementary, and he had not even noticed. ‘Where’s this leading, then?’ he asked, dreading the answer.

‘To the dangle.’ Tanner gave a half-smile. ‘To a small charade, with you as the central character, James.’

Bond nodded. ‘Like I said, I’m going to be the bait.’

‘It seems resonable enough.’ M turned his attention to his pipe. ‘The situation is ideal . . .’

This time Bond did explode, voicing his feelings with some force. It was the most stupid ploy he had ever heard of. No recruiting officer from any foreign agency would seriously consider him – and, if any did, their masters would put a blight on it in ten seconds flat. ‘You’re not really serious about this, are you?’ he ended lamely.

'Absolutely, 007. I agree, on the face of it they'll steer clear of you. But we have to look at the facts – they *are* more than interested already . . .'

'Never in a thousand years . . .'

 Bond started again.

'We've already formulated the plan, 007, and we're proceeding with it. Do I have to remind you that you're under my orders?'

There were no options, and Bond, feeling the whole business was sheer madness, could only sit and listen to the dialogue as M and Tanner outlined the bare bones of the scheme, like a pair of theatrical directors explaining motivation to a rather dull actor.

'At an appropriate moment we haul you in,' said M with a sour smile.

'Enquiry *in camera*,' counterpointed Bill Tanner.

'Making certain the Press are tipped off.'

'Questions in the House.'

'Hints of scandal. Corruption in the Service.'

'And you resign.'

'Giving the impression that, in reality, we've cast you into outer darkness. And if that doesn't lure the ambulance chasers, then there's something else in the wind. Wait and do as I say, 007.'

And so it had happened – though not because of the ambulance chasers, as they had told him. Rumours ran along the corridors of power; there was gossip in the clubs, tattle in the powder rooms of government departments, hints to the Press, hints by the Press, even questions in the House of Commons, and finally the resignation of Commander James Bond.