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SEAFIRE

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CARIBBEAN PRINCE

The cruise ship *Caribbean Prince* had left St Thomas, in the United States' Virgin Islands, at just after six in the evening, with its passengers looking forward to two days at sea before reaching Miami.

The act of piracy took place during dinner, just after eight that evening. Later, the company, Tarn Cruise Lines, Inc., maintained that the men involved had slipped aboard at St Thomas and hidden away until the ship's very wealthy passengers had started dinner. The rest happened quickly. Two of the intruders had gone to the bridge and held the ship's Officer of the Watch and his men at gunpoint. Two more had secured the areas where most of the crew could be found during dinner. This left six men who charged into the large dining room, their faces covered with ski masks, and their hands holding Uzis and pistols.

Two of the Uzi-toting bandits fired short bursts into the ceiling – which brought screams from the ladies and muttered protests from the men – while their leader shouted loudly, telling people that nobody would get hurt if they did exactly what they were told. This man immediately began to make his way around the tables, demanding that the diners take off all jewelry and empty their pockets and evening bags of other valuables – including wallets. Everything was taken and dumped into a big plastic garbage bag, held by the sixth man, and there was no doubt that the intruders meant what they said. Anyone who refused, or tried to be clever, risked death.

The whole operation was carried out with the kind of calmness and planning that signaled careful, military precision.

James Bond and Fredericka von Grüsse were seated on the port side at a table for four people – the other two being a pleasant retired stockbroker and his wife from New Jersey. So, by the time the leader and his bagman reached them, Bond had already signaled to Flicka – using eyes and hands.

The stockbroker's wife was in near hysterics, but her husband stayed calm, telling her to do just as she was told. This caused a small delay, making the gunman more belligerent as he moved behind Bond, sticking his automatic pistol into the back of the agent's neck.

'If you want everything,' Bond said calmly, 'you'll have to let me stand up. I've a rather valuable fob watch attached to a chain which I can't unfasten while sitting down.'

'Well, get on with it. Do it quickly.' The leader retreated a pace, to let Bond push back his chair and get to his feet. The gunman kept his right arm stretched out, holding the pistol. Wrongly, for it is a golden rule never to leave your weapon too close to the person you are threatening.

Few were actually able to see what Bond did. It was so fast that most of the diners became more agitated, thinking that reprisals were imminent from the men with the Uzis. Bond spun around on the outside of the extended arm which he caught with both hands and jerked violently. He could feel his back pressed hard against the gunman's back, but it took only a small, vicious chop with the cutting edge of his right hand to grab the pistol which he tossed, almost nonchalantly, across the table to Flicka. Then, turning again, he twisted the arm high up his victim's back, using his left hand. There was a cry, followed by an unpleasant crack as the arm broke and Bond's right forearm snapped hard around the leader's neck, giving it a lot of pressure, so that the fellow was near to lapsing into unconsciousness.

The bagman dropped the garbage sack and went for the gun

that was pushed into his waistband. Bond was a fraction faster. His left hand dropped the thug's broken arm, fingers slipping into his right sleeve. On a voyage like this, he had not brought a gun, but he seldom went anywhere completely unarmed. Strapped to the inside of his right arm, high up and hidden by his sleeve was a scabbard containing an Applegate Fairbairn fighting knife. Though this knife throws better from the blade, there was no time to waste on such niceties – a split second and the knife appeared in his hand, a quarter of a second later it shot through the space between him and the bagman. Six inches of slicing tempered steel buried itself in the man's throat. He was dead long before he even began to sway.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of the Uzi-carrying men turn on the balls of his feet, lifting the muzzle of the weapon, swinging in his direction.

'James!' Flicka shouted, the pistol pointed in the direction of the danger. In the double-handed grip she fired twice. As the Uzi clattered from dead fingers, Bond shouted, 'Enough. I don't want anyone else hurt, and I'll kill your leader if you don't drop those weapons.'

The remaining three men hesitated for a tense ten seconds before they realized that, while they might kill some of the people in the dining room, they would all end up dead very quickly. None had the stomach for the result of what had begun as simple work for bully boy tactics. Slowly they dropped the Uzis and raised their hands, Flicka von Grüsse swinging her pistol slowly between the possible targets.

Bond pulled the leader's head close back to him, so that his lips almost touched the man's ear.

'If you want to live, friend,' he whispered, 'you'd better tell me if there are any other clowns on board.'

'On the bridge and in the crew quarters,' the man croaked, his voice constricted by Bond's forearm.

'How many?'

'Four. Two on the bridge and two below.'

'Goodnight.' Bond squeezed harder, cutting off the blood supply to his victim's brain so that he slumped heavily and unconscious to the deck, helped into a longer sleep by a swift chop to the back of the neck.

He distributed the Uzis to the stunned headwaiters and the sommelier, leaving Flicka in charge as he slipped out, carrying the bagman's pistol, making his way quickly to the bridge. The two men holding the hostages there did not really have too much fight in them. Theirs had been reckoned as an easy job, and they did not expect the fury which Bond unleashed on them – cracking the first one over the head and winging the second armed man in the leg.

The couple who were looking after the crew were taken out by the Captain of *Caribbean Prince* and two of his officers. The dead were eventually laid out in the small mortuary next to the Sick Bay, while those left alive were locked in one of the two 'Secure Cabins' designed to take any violent or malcontented member of the crew. These two cabins had been on the list of specifications when the ship had undergone a complete refurbishment a couple of years before.

Back in the early 1980s the M/S *Caribbean Prince* had been one of the flagships of a major cruise line, ploughing its way between Miami and the islands that litter the Caribbean. With a gross tonnage of around 18,000, and a capacity for some seven hundred passengers, plus a crew of four hundred, she was an admirable proposition. But as the decade filtered into the 1990s, *Caribbean Prince* had become a liability. With the advent of the larger cruise ships – the huge floating hotels which carry over two thousand passengers – *Caribbean Prince* was not economically viable. That is, unless you had the entrepreneurial foresight of someone like Max Tarn.

Tarn had purchased *Caribbean Prince* in 1990, together with two other ships of a similar size, and begun a major overhaul, his sights set on wealthy passengers who longed to experience the kind of cruises they had either read about, or experienced,

during the days when cruises were for the rich and famous only.

The refit and refurbishing of *Caribbean Prince* had cost millions, but it was done with care, turning the ship into a floating art deco palace, outfitted with the latest in comfort and luxury. The basic interior had been virtually taken apart. First, the cabins on the Main Deck, and the two decks below that, were ripped out. In their place was a mall of glittering shops, a new theater with state-of-the-art equipment, a cinema, a beautiful indoor pool and saunas – complementing the newly enlarged pool up on the Sun Deck – and four luxury lounges.

Now, *Caribbean Prince* only catered for around seventy passengers whose large and beautiful staterooms all ran along the Promenade Deck, each stateroom being a small suite, complete with bathrooms which contained both shower and Jacuzzi. In its new, sumptuous state, *Caribbean Prince* started its series of fourteen day cruises in December 1992. By late February of 1994, she was showing a healthy profit with her passengers paying up to almost three or four hundred per cent more than people who took their seven day vacations on the massive liners.

Tarn Cruise Lines – like the other small and particularly exclusive cruise lines in which individual millionaires invested – had made a huge profit out of the venture. Like everything else in big business, it had been a gamble, but the famous Max Tarn had banked on there still being people around who were prepared to pay anything for a different – even snobbish – kind of holiday.

Obviously that was why *Caribbean Prince* had been a ripe target. Passengers of that kind came on board with a lot of valuables, while some even brought small fortunes to play at being high rollers at the gaming tables.

The excitement of the attempted robbery did not die down for a long time. Those who had handed over much in the way of precious jewels, money and credit cards retrieved their property,

and Bond and Flicka were soon the center of attention. In the main bar, they could have been drunk for nothing for the rest of the journey. But, in the event, there was no further journey.

FIRE DOWN BELOW

The explosion took place shortly after eleven, ripping out two plates under the waterline, flooding one of the crew mess decks, and causing several injuries.

That *Caribbean Prince* did not heel over and begin to sink immediately, said much for its overall design, and the standard of building in the Italian shipyards where she had been launched in 1970.

Just before the incident, James Bond and Fredericka von Grüsse had slipped away from the bar, looking for some solitude.

They leaned close against the guard rail, aft on the Sun Deck, surrounded by a velvet night, watching the boiling plume of white water scarring the dark sea behind them.

'Well, at least that was different.' Flicka leaned her head on his shoulder. 'Old Sir Max Tarn has cleverly turned a potential loss into a big business gain, but this won't do his publicity much good.'

'The point is,' Bond said quietly, 'Tarn was, rightly, convinced that there were people out there who would still pay a lot of money to go on exclusive cruises. Others have done it, but have you noticed how the program is so carefully chosen? A new show in the theater every other night, with big name entertainers, while everywhere we've visited has been on days when no other cruise ship is in port – Jamaica, Curaçao, Venezuela, Barbados, Martinique, Puerto Rico, St Thomas. Not another cruise ship in sight. No other crowds of tourists . . .'

'James.' She held up a hand to stop him. 'James, we had enough of that kind of talk during the courses, and the fine print of economics isn't really you, darling.' Flicka turned, smiling up at him.

The courses of which she spoke had lasted for a little over a year. They included such relatively dull subjects as Accountancy (With Special Reference To Fraud); Fraudulent Conversion; Methods of Gathering Financial Intelligence from Offshore Banking; Smuggling and Laundering Money; Breaches in International Arms Control; Monitoring Illegal Arms Controls in the 1990s; The Role of Terrorist Organizations Concerning Finance and Illicit Arms Shipments, together with other such allied subjects, like large-scale drug and art smuggling.

Officers of the British Intelligence and Security Services bemoaned these subjects as a far cry from the training sessions they had undergone during the Cold War, only to be quickly reminded that the Cold War was over. Now they were engaged in what might be called a Tepid War: one in which even their allies were suspect, and their former enemies required watching like viruses under a microscope.

Of the twenty-eight men and women who took the series of courses, only twelve were considered suitable following a rigorous amount of testing. James Bond was one of these, while, to his delight, Flicka was another.

Fredericka von Grüsse, formerly of Swiss Intelligence, had worked with Bond on the case concerning the infamous Dragonpol, and both of them had run foul of the Swiss authorities. Therefore, when the last strings had been tied on the Dragonpol business, Bond had been as surprised as Flicka when M offered her a place in the British Service. He was also astounded at the warm way M had accepted the fact that they were living together. This last was definitely out of character. Perhaps, they thought, the Old Man was desperately trying to keep in step with the times. Even possibly clinging to the office which he

held, though everybody knew that his days as Chief of that particular Service were numbered.

When the courses were completed, and the reorganization explained – in an exhaustive briefing – Bond and Flicka took a couple of weeks' leave with M's blessing.

'You're both going to need it,' the old Chief told them, gruffly. 'If this new Double-O Section is going to work properly, you might get no more leave for a long time.'

The new Double-O Section bore no resemblance to the old department of that name which, at one time, included a licence to kill.

The Two Zeros, as the newly organized Section came to be known and which was now under Bond's command, consisted of highly trained men and women who could act as a trouble-shooting group, dealing with cases concerning breach of international law and treaties which had a bearing on Intelligence and Security matters.

Two Zeros could be invited into a case by either the Intelligence or Security Services, or even the police. They were answerable, not to their old Chief, M, but to a Watch Committee, dubbed MicroGlobe One, which consisted of the chiefs of both the Intelligence and Security Services, their Deputies, a senior Commissioner of Police, and a new Government Minister who held the ambiguous title of Minister of Related Home and Foreign Affairs – an idiot title which had come in for much ribaldry from the Press. Nobody had missed the fact that this relatively small office was basically run by the government, for the government. The Double-O Section was not a nonpartisan organization – like the Intelligence and Security Services – divorced from the center of political power.

Bond smiled sheepishly. 'You're right there, Fredericka.' He held her close, his face tilted as if to kiss her. 'You *have* enjoyed this bit of extra expensive luxury, though, haven't you?'

'Of course I have. You made a good choice, James. Wouldn't mind doing this for a honeymoon. I even quite enjoyed the little

set-to this evening. Quite like the old days.' This last remark delivered with a twinkling smile.

'Talking about the old days, I think we can find more excitement in our state room.'

'Mmmmm.' She nodded enthusiastically.

Bond and Flicka were just turning away, heading for their stateroom, when the ship shuddered and lifted as the explosion ripped through the metal plates on her starboard side.

The deck beneath them tilted violently and Bond swore as his feet slid sideways, knocking him off balance, Flicka falling almost on top of him.

'Did the earth move for you too?' She half choked. 'What the hell was that?'

Bond was on his feet, one hand holding the rail. 'Lord knows. Come on.'

The ship was listing badly to starboard, and the old, well-known scent of explosives was easily recognizable. By now the ship's siren was emitting the short series of blasts signaling abandon ship, calling all passengers to their boat stations – a drill which had been carefully rehearsed as they left Miami two weeks before.

The engines had stopped, but it was not easy to adjust to the slanting deck. Flicka threw off her shoes, as they crabbed along making slow progress towards their stateroom on the port side.

A disembodied voice was giving instructions through the ship's communication system, and there was a background of cries, edged with panic. As they came to the long row of stateroom doors and large curtained oblong windows set in the superstructure, they could see other passengers trying to keep upright on the slanting surface.

The deck was bathed in light from the emergency floods which had been turned on within seconds of the explosion. Beside the first door, an elderly man was trying to assist his wife who was sprawled on the deck, wailing in miserable alarm. Bond went to her immediately, telling the husband to get the

lifejackets from his stateroom and indicating that Flicka should do the same for them.

The elderly woman had obviously damaged her arm, probably broken it, and, a moment later, two of the ship's officers appeared, banging on the stateroom doors and calling for all passengers to muster by the boat station.

Bond was called to assist one of the crew members hacking at a stateroom door where they feared the occupants were somehow trapped, frozen in terror, as well they might be, for *Caribbean Prince* was listing even more violently. As he moved to help yet another passenger, he saw a deadly flicker of fire coming from the forward companionway.

'Get to the lifeboats!' he yelled, reaching for the nearest extinguisher, banging the nozzle against one of the stanchions and directing the foam down into the fierce flames which reached upwards like terrible claws.

Another of the ship's officers joined him in a battle they were rapidly losing. He crabbed his way aft and dragged another extinguisher to the companionway, once more pouring foam down onto the flames, hearing, in the background, the sound of the lifeboats being lowered. At the same time he was aware of people shouting to him, telling him to get off the ship, but he was already throwing the empty extinguisher to one side and moving for'ard to find a third.

He had gone scarcely two steps when he heard a great whoosh, and felt the heat on his back. As he turned, he saw the officer who had been beside him attacking the fire was enveloped in flames now gushing from below decks. The man had become a screaming walking torch, fighting his way towards the ship's rails, but falling before he could get to them. Bond flung his jacket off and leaped towards the doomed man, beating at the fire with the once elegant dinner jacket, but it was too late. The flames had eaten away at the man's body and his screams had stopped.

Bond, himself, was now starting to feel the effects of the flame

and smoke. His breathing was labored, and he knew that, if he stayed on board, there was a distinct possibility of the smoke and heat overcoming him.

He lunged towards the ship's listing rail, climbed over and leaped clear into the water below, immediately striking out for the nearest lifeboat.

The coxswain of one of the lifeboats spotted Bond in the water, and, in an act of great courage, turned back towards the crippled ship to help drag him from the water. Once aboard he looked for Fredericka, and to his relief, found her huddled in a corner of the boat.

The lifeboats were enclosed by tight orange colored tarpaulins stretched over a light alloy framework, with thick mica panels for the coxswain and as light sources along the side. There were some forty people – passengers and crew – in the one that had rescued Bond, and once the craft hit the water, the survivors had become aware that the sea was less friendly than it had seemed on board *Caribbean Prince*. The lifeboat bounced and rolled, churning through the water with a low, almost sullen hum from its engine.

By craning to look through one of the forward windshields, he was aware of two other small boats nearby, and he caught a glimpse of the cruise ship, lit up overall but seeming to be dangerously top heavy, and sparkling with the fire that at least one man had died fighting.

To his rear, a medical orderly worked on the elderly woman who had fallen close to her stateroom door. She was still groaning with pain, so Bond worked his way aft to see if he could assist.

'Broken arm, shoulder and maybe a leg also,' the orderly said with a distinct Scandinavian accent.

'Do we know what happened, yet?'

'She fell.'

'No, the explosion? Do we know what it was?'

The orderly shrugged. 'An officer said he thought this was

some mechanical problem. With the engines. An explosion with the engines. It never happened before. Could have been something those villains set to explode after making their getaway, though.'

Through one of the mica ports, he glimpsed *Caribbean Prince*, listing and wallowing, her lights and the fire blazing, throwing an eerie glow across the water.

Incongruously, an elderly female voice muttered, 'What waste. You'd think they'd have turned the lights off when we abandoned ship.'

'It never happened before,' the orderly repeated, as though he could hardly believe it had occurred now.

No, Bond thought. No, it certainly had never happened before and it certainly was not the engines. Over many years he had become sensitive to distinctive odors, and he was certain about this one. While he was fighting the fire, his nostrils had been full of the scent of explosives.

The same aroma, explosives and the stink of smoke, continued to hang around them, and was still there at five-thirty in the morning, as he stood beside Flicka von Grüsse at the rail of one of the larger cruise ships. Several ships – including two of the mammoth liners from another company – had hastened to the stricken ship. Passengers had been rescued by the two larger cruise liners, and now, in the dawn, other craft were standing off while two US Navy vessels were close by *Caribbean Prince*, having put out the fire, and were bent on taking her in tow, trying to keep her steady in the water.

'The ghost of Christmas past,' Flicka muttered, giving Bond a quizzical look.

He nodded, his mind obviously far away, though he knew what she meant: stubble on his chin, hair tousled, the pair of ill-fitting jeans and denim shirt they had found for him to replace his soaking wet clothes. 'You're not exactly a fashion plate yourself.' As he said it, Bond reflected that this was not altogether correct. Even with no make-up, and the white Bill Blass

evening gown – the one with the devastating slit almost to the left thigh – in a similar state to his own clothes, Flicka von Grüsse managed to remain stunning. ‘Girl of my dreams,’ he often called her, and the events of the past few hours seemed to have hardly touched her. In her current, dishevelled state, she could have walked into a reception for the Royal Family and still caused heads to turn at her poise and elegance.

The afterscent of the disaster dragged his train of thought away again. There had been no shots of battle, no urgency of attack, yet he felt as though the crippling of *Caribbean Prince* had been an act of war, the most likely explanation being the one suggested by the medical orderly – that the villains who had attempted to rob the passengers had set charges to explode after they left the ship – probably in one of the lifeboats, or even in a craft arranged and factored into their plan.

Later, he was to remark that the cruise ship incident was the true beginning of the dangers which were to come in the next few months. He could still hear the Captain’s voice coming through the speakers, giving the order to abandon ship, just as, in his mind, he saw the fragment of fear on the faces of officers and crew. In many ways, ‘Abandon Ship’ was an apt command. After years of working for his old Service, and his country, Bond felt he was abandoning ship by taking command of the Two Zeros and leaving a familiar world.