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A JAMES BOND ADVENTURE

fiction By Raymond Benson

Murder at a mansion west pajama party --

007 investigates with the help of the proprietor and two irresistible playmates

Painting by John Rush

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Midsummer Night's Doom

Chapter 1

Five minutes into the briefing, M turned her chair to face him and asked, "What do you know about *PLAYBOY*, 007?"

James Bond blinked. "Ma'am?"

"The magazine, 007, how much do you know about it?"

Bond shrugged and said, "Only that some people have been known to read the articles, and that I need to renew my subscription."

M was not amused. Although she was opinionated and could speak freely about nearly anything, Barbara Mawdsley appeared to be somewhat embarrassed at the notion of a "men's magazine."

"I don't suppose you know Hugh Hefner, do you?" she asked. "You seem to have a lot in common with him."

Ignoring the implication, Bond said, "As a matter of fact, I met him once, in Jamaica. It was a long time ago and I doubt he would remember me. He was on a yacht with an entourage and a beautiful woman. *PLAYBOY* was scouting locations for a club and casino at the time. I was fishing with a Jamaican friend when they pulled up alongside our boat and Hefner invited us aboard for cocktails. He asked my opinion of choice spots on the northern side of Jamaica. I'll never forget the girl, she was one of his Centerfolds —"

"Humph," M grunted, sounding much like her predecessor, Sir Miles Messervy. "It looks as if—"

"I think her name was Donna Michelle," Bond continued, lost for a moment in a private reverie. He snapped out of it to ask the inevitable, "Why?"

"It's the bloody leak in the Ministry of Defense again," she said. "There is a river of information flowing out of there, and it's apparently changing hands at parties being held at the Playboy Mansion West, Hugh Hefner's home in Los Angeles."

"Why would Hefner be involved in something like that?" Bond asked.

"He's not. Mr. Hefner has claimed to be completely unaware, and he's almost certainly telling the truth. But there are many guests at those parties. We've had three reports of sensitive material showing up for sale on the black market that seem to link to the Playboy Mansion. The latest is a set of designs for a new class of infrared focal plane arrays, FPAs, as they're called. These new ones will be known as smart FPAs because they imitate human eye capabilities, such as focusing, visualization and processing."

"I've heard about them," Bond said. "They can preprocess data at the sensor itself in image-processing applications such as, oh, say, target detection, and then pass somewhat refined information to dedicated signal processors. They can make advanced military applications affordable because of significant reductions in size, weight and power consumption. I didn't realize the designs had been completed."

"Thank heaven you understand them, because I don't," she said, glancing upward. "Anyway, MI5 have handed over the investigation to us because they believe the designs were copied onto miniature microfilm and smuggled out of the UK to America."

"Do we know who did that?"

"Yes. Martin Tuttle."

"Martin Tuttle?" He had to think. "You mean the rock musician?"

"That's right. It seems Mr. Tuttle's former wife works at the Ministry. Or rather, she did, before she was arrested yesterday. You remember how public their divorce was a couple of years ago?"

"Not really, ma'am," Bond said. He remembered that the famous rock star from Clapham had married a girl from Glasgow, but the honeymoon had been spoiled by messy accusations of drunken orgies on the road. Bond couldn't care less. He wasn't a fan of rock music and he despised the rock star lifestyle.

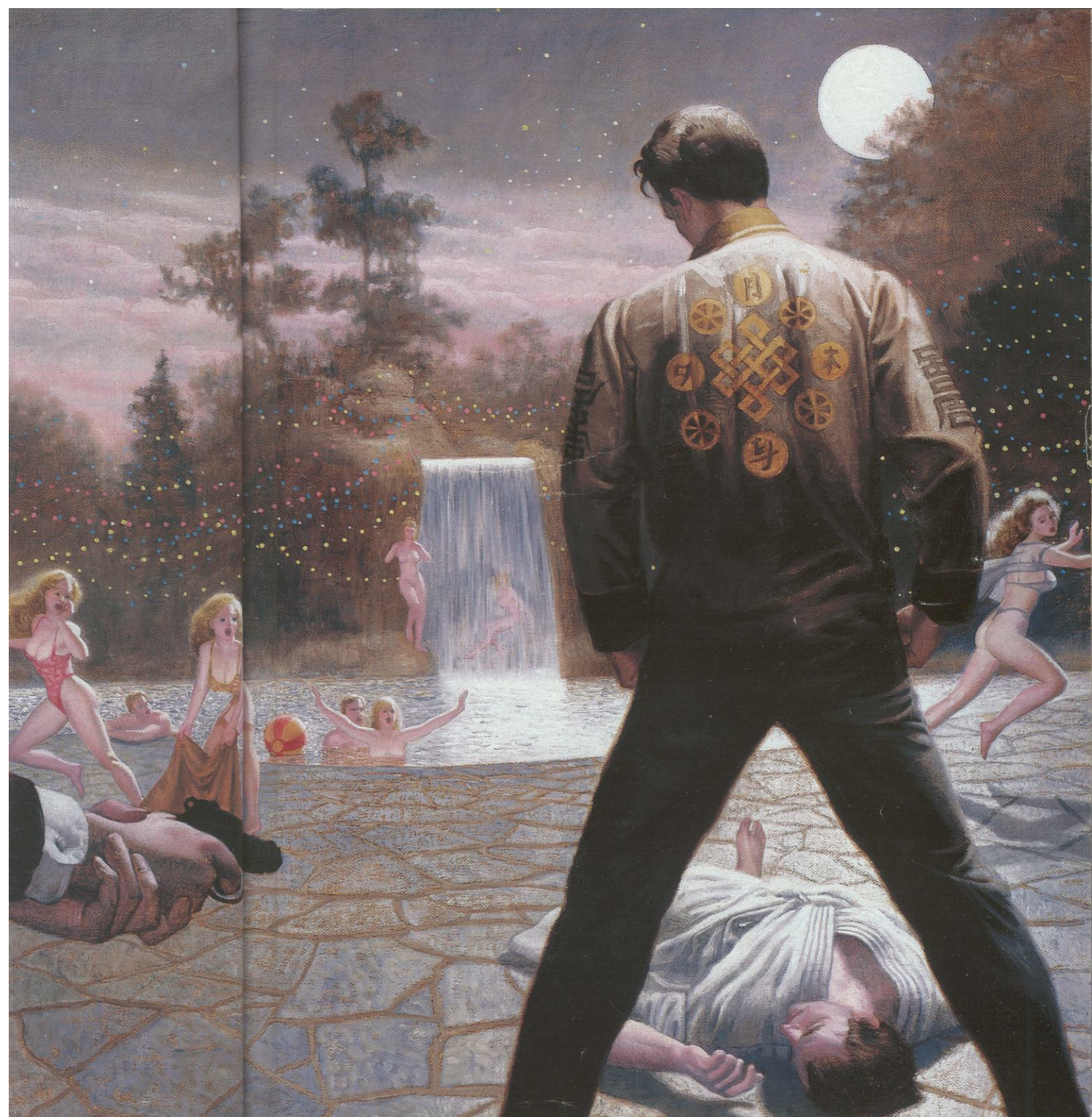
"Tuttle's wife had been under suspicion for some time. Although the Tuttles had publicly denounced each other, surveillance proved otherwise. They met on numerous occasions -- lunch together, that sort of thing -- and appeared to be perfectly cordial. Evidence was gathered. They had a pretty good swindle going between them. So she was arrested, just as Martin Tuttle hopped a plane from England to Los Angeles, where he currently lives. She confessed to supplying him with the documents that were missing over the past year. Apparently, he took them all to California. She claims the exchanges

took place at the Playboy Mansion every few months, whenever there were elaborate parties. She claims she doesn't know who his contact is and we believe her. Tuttle doesn't yet know she has been arrested."

M leaned forward in her chair. "We think Martin Tuttle is selling the material to the Russian Mafia," she said. "Our Afghanistan station intercepted coded messages from a syndicate in Moscow indicating they would soon have smart FPAs for sale."

"Where do I come in, ma'am?" Bond asked.

"SIS have arranged for you to be invited to a party, 007. You're to observe Mr. Tuttle and retrieve the microfilm, if possible. But we're more interested in finding out who his contact is, so try to catch him in the act."



Chapter 2

Leaving the office, Bond found Miss Money Penny with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes as she prepared the envelope containing his paperwork.

"I know that look, Penny, and it means you'd like to say something naughty but won't," he said.

"If they're turning you loose at the Playboy Mansion, I think you had better have a chaperone," she said, looking at her calendar. "Oh dear, I'm not doing anything that night."

Bond smiled. "Penny, I'd love to take you, but it will probably be a bore. I expect it's nothing like what one imagines a *PLAYBOY* party to be."

"The invitation says it's a place where fantasy becomes reality."

"I have no fantasies. Is it black tie?"

"You have to wear pajamas."

"You must be joking."

"It's true. It's the annual Midsummer Night's Dream party, and everyone is required to wear nightshirts, pajamas or lingerie."

Bond groaned. "It all sounds terribly decadent and hedonistic."

"It sounds just your cup of tea," she giped.

Bond snatched the envelope from her hand, leaned over and kissed her on the forehead.

Chapter 3

Playboy Mansion West is situated in the exclusive Holmby Hills area of Los Angeles, adjacent to Bel Air, Beverly Hills, UCLA and the Los Angeles Country Club. Bond drove his jaguar XK8 coupe to the imposing wrought iron gate at the bottom of a tree-lined drive off Sunset Boulevard and was greeted by a voice in a large rock on the driver's side. He provided his credentials, and the gate opened slowly. He drove through and was treated to a spectacular view of a marble frieze, a replica of a painting by Guido Reni displayed in the Rospigiosi Palace in Rome. The car made its way up the steep, curving drive that was lined with redwood trees and juniper hedges, ending at a circular drive with an ornate, flower-ringed marble fountain in the center. Busy valets signaled for Bond to stop. Even though he had arrived unfashionably early, there was already a queue of cars waiting to be parked.

Bond entrusted the jaguar to a valet and took a moment to gaze at the Mansion, a marvelous stone edifice in a 16th century perpendicular Tudor style. Bond thought he detected a Scottish influence as well.

"Mr. Bond?" A radiant blonde in her late 20s appeared through the open massive oak door. She was dressed in a white baby-doll slip dress, high heels and a smile. Bond thought she looked like an angel from heaven.

"I'm Lisa Dergan. Miss July 1998. I've been asked to greet you, give you a brief tour and take you to Hef."

"I'm delighted," Bond said, taking her hand. Her bright-green eyes displayed an air of self-confidence and intelligence. He could easily get lost in them, he thought.

She led him into the Great Hall, a splendid foyer with a Botticini marble floor and hand-carved oak paneling. A beautiful antique chandelier hung over the room, and two sets of curved stairs guarded by 18th century greeting monkeys led to the second floor and balcony overlooking the hall. Bond noticed Dali and Matisse originals and asked, "How old is the Mansion?"

"It was completed in 1927. Hef is the third owner, not counting a brief period when it was a place where heads of state came to stay -- people like the king and queen of Siam, the king of Sweden and loads of others. I've been a visitor here several times, and I've learned all kinds of stuff about it."

Miss July 1998 took him into a living room, where clusters of people stood with hors d'oeuvres and drinks. The men were dressed in silk pajamas and robes, and the women were draped in lacy lingerie and other forms of transparent sleeping attire. The room was furnished with 17th century antiques, a Steinway grand piano and more hand-carved oak paneling.

"What did Mr. Hefner add to the existing property?" Bond asked.

"It was redesigned to his specifications. The tennis courts and pool were put in then, as well as the sauna, bathhouse and the one-of-a-kind Grotto and jacuzzi. You have to see it to believe it."

"Will you show it to me?" Bond asked.

"Later, perhaps," she said, blushing.

She took him through the rest of the ground floor, including the exquisite dining room where De Kooning's *Woman* hung over a marble fireplace and three 15th century French tapestries of lions hung above the sideboard. Bond was impressed by the manor. It was a palace fit for any king, and a warm, friendly atmosphere pervaded each of its rooms.

As they came back into the Great Hall, Bond noticed Hugh Hefner himself, talking with guests and holding a glass. Bond caught the scent of Jack Daniels. Hefner was wearing purple tailor-made silk pajamas and a smoking jacket. Two gorgeous young women, a blonde and a brunette, stood on either side of him. They were wearing next to nothing.

Bond loved pajamas, so he felt some kinship with his host in that respect. He had decided to wear a navy satin set, also tailor-made, covered by his beloved Hong Kong housecoat decorated in Chinese characters, which comfortably concealed his shoulder-holstered Walther PPK.

"Excuse me, Hef," Lisa said, stepping up to the group.

He turned to her and beamed. "Lisa!" he said, interrupting his conversation to give her a hug. "You look lovely."

"Thank you. May I introduce Mr. Bond?"

He held out his hand to Bond and said, "Hugh Hefner."

"Bond. James Bond." The handshake was firm and dry.

The founder and editor-in-chief of *PLAYBOY* looked fit and energetic and was taller than Bond had remembered. He carried himself with authority and dignity, yet also exhibited characteristics of playfulness and good humor.

"Welcome to the Mansion." He indicated the others standing near him. "This is my personal physician, Dr. Mark Saginor, and this is one of our great American singers, Mel Tormé." He introduced the two young women as Tracy and Sandy. Apparently Hefner had not one but two dates for the party.

"It's a pleasure to be here," Bond said, shaking hands with the others.

Hefner said, "Excuse me, I need to speak with Mr. Bond alone. Thank you, Lisa."

She smiled at Bond and said, "If you need anything else, just look for me. There's a lot more you haven't seen."

"Especially that Grotto," Bond said. Lisa wagged her finger at him as Hefner and Bond withdrew into the library. The library boasted a LeRoy Neiman original and a backgammon table designed especially for Hefner. An elegant bookcase built into the wall next to the fireplace held leather-bound volumes of every *PLAYBOY* magazine, dating back to 1953.

"The CIA came to see me today to tell me what you're here to do," Hefner said.

Bond nodded. He knew that Hefner would have been briefed. After all, if there were any threat of violence at a social event attended by 500 celebrities and Centerfolds, Hefner would know about it.

"If there's anything I can do, just ask," he said.

"Just try to relax and enjoy your party, sir," Bond said. "No one else knows of my real purpose here?"

"No one knows. Not even the security guards."

"Do you know if Martin Tuttle has arrived?"

"I haven't seen him. You know, there was always something I didn't like about that guy. I'm not sure why I kept letting him visit the Mansion. Some of our younger guests enjoyed having him around, I suppose. I always found him to be obnoxious."

"Do you have any idea who his contact might be?" Bond asked.

Hefner shook his head. "He knows a lot of people. Show business people."

"Such as?"

"Another musician, Chocky Day. A couple of film stars are in his circle."

"Is there anyone out of the ordinary coming tonight?"

"I would hope so, or it wouldn't be a party at the Playboy Mansion," Hefner grinned broadly.

"But I know what you mean. We have some foreigners coming tonight. I'll ask Mary O'Connor, my personal assistant, to point them out to you. They're all in the film industry. I'm sure there will be dozens of people here tonight whom I've never met before. I suppose it could be anyone. Sorry."

"That's quite all right, you've been very helpful," Bond said.

Bond was fairly sure Hefner had not recognized him. Their encounter in Jamaica had been a long time ago.

Bond turned to go, saying, "I'd like to walk around the grounds to get a feel for the place before the big crowds arrive."

"By all means," Hefner said. "Wait, I have something I want to give you. You might find it useful."

He opened a cabinet next to the backgammon table and took out three objects. One was a Sheaffer Levenger exclusive Mediterranean fountain pen. It was made of beautiful blue translucent polymer with a jewel-like appearance, further enhanced by gold-plated rings and pocket clips. The other objects were a black device the size and shape of a cassette tape case and a small waxy thing that looked like an earplug.

"This is an ordinary fountain pen with a 14-karat-gold tip," Hefner said, handing it to Bond.

"What's unusual about it is that it's also a CSS 600 UHF transmitter with a range of a thousand meters. The receiver will fit neatly in the pocket of your housecoat, and you can listen discreetly with this tiny earpiece. No wires are needed. It has two channels, but you'll need only one. If you can get the pen attached to Tuttle somehow, you'll be able to listen to everything he says."

Bond was amused and impressed. "Where did you get this?" he asked, taking the pen, receiver and earplug.

"People give me thingamajigs all the time," Hefner said with a smile. "My two greatest interests are gadgets and girls."

"I can relate to that."

Chapter 4

Bond surveyed the grounds, which were decorated with an Arabian Nights theme and entirely covered by connecting tents extending to the swimming pool, the Grotto and beyond. Bright colored flowers and fairy lights covered the hillside, bushes and trees, and by nightfall the effect was magical. There were bars at the pool and in the main tent area. Staph circulated with plates of rumaki, skewered Nile River shrimps, cold mussels stuffed with pine nuts and rice, Egyptian meatballs, grape leaves stuffed with lamb and phyllo puffs with spinach and feta.

Bond had heard the place described as a "Shangri-la where time stands still," and it was true.

An endless parade of California's elite began to arrive, and within an hour; the party was in full swing. A disc jockey provided music while guests danced to everything from big band to Fifties doo-wop to disco and rap. The sight of scantily clad women of all ages gyrating on the dance floor attracted a large group of spectators. Celebrities from all fields -- entertainment, sports, politics -- were among the guests. Bond recognized Tony Curtis with two lovely girls. He was introducing them to Robert Culp as "Monday" and "Tuesday." ("The rest of the week couldn't make it," Curtis explained.) Bond noticed attorney Vincent Bugliosi in a heated discussion with writer Larry Gelbart. Jim Brown was dancing with his date. Hefner and his two girlfriends seemed to know everyone, and he was always greeted with enthusiasm and affection.

Bond noticed that the party was not without security. Several well-built men stood about, not so inconspicuously, armed with unconcealed Beretta Model 92F 9mm handguns.

He was scanning the crowd near the main buffet line when he noticed Lisa Dergan talking with another striking blonde who had just entered with a tall, handsome man in his 50s. Behind him was an even taller man, a beefed-up bodyguard. The blonde was in her mid-20s and had a wide face, clear blue eyes and a fabulous figure. She was wearing a black leather catsuit with a low neckline and open-lace sides from her arms down to her ankles. An impressive pearl necklace accented her cleavage. Her companion had short, curly hair, brown eyes and a swarthy complexion. He looked as if he had eastern-European Gypsy ancestry.

"Oh, there you are," Lisa said, beckoning to him. "Mr. Bond, this is my friend Victoria Zdrok, Miss October 1994."

Victoria beamed and shook his hand. "How do you do?" She had a distinct accent that Bond placed immediately.

"What's a nice Ukrainian girl like you doing in a place like this?" he asked.

She gave him a sexy smirk. "Maybe I'm not so nice," she purred. "How did you know where I come from?"

"Oh, let's just say that Russia and her neighbors used to be one of my hobbies."

"Victoria was one of the first students from the Soviet Union to come to America to attend high school and college," Lisa said. "She finished college before she was 18 and now has a law degree and a master's in clinical psychology, is that right?"

"That's correct," Victoria said.

"Be careful," the man warned with a much thicker Russian accent, "she will prosecute you before you can say *na zdoróvie*." Bond placed him nearer to Moscow.

Lisa continued, 'And this is Anton Redenius, the movie producer.'

"James Bond," 007 said, shaking the man's hand. Redenius had a viselike grip.

"What brings you here, Mr. Bond?"

"I work for Playboy Enterprises. I'm a lawyer in their UK office."

Redenius pulled away his hand as if he had burned it. "Aaiiee, a lawyer! God help us!" He laughed, and the girls laughed along with him. When the body guard, Estragon, didn't laugh, Redenius scowled at him. The thug forced a guffaw, satisfying his boss.

"You must forgive Estragon. He has no sense of humor," Redenius said to Bond.

The man was boorish, Bond thought. He was the type of person who used his power and charisma to bully people.

"Redenius ... that sounds German," Bond said.

"My father was German, my mother was Russian. I was born in what became East Germany, but I was raised in the Soviet Union," the man said. "Now I live in Hollywood, make movies and play golf!"

"I want to dance," Victoria said. "Anton, will you dance with me?"

"No, no, my dear," the man said. "I really must have something to eat. Please join me for some of this incredible food first."

"I'm not hungry. Mr. Bond, will you dance with me?" she invited.

Bond said, "Certainly," and allowed Miss October 1994 to pull him toward the dance floor.

It was a song with a heavy beat, something Bond had never heard. He normally disliked disco dancing. He preferred the more traditional ballroom and big band swing. But he had learned early on, when he was a young man in the sixth form, that being able to dance went a long way toward impressing the opposite sex.

Victoria began to bump and grind in front of him, then took his arms and pulled him to her. He followed along, -- gazing into her eyes. The sleepwear made the body contact extremely sensual. She pressed her breasts into his chest. The pearl necklace glinted in the mirror ball lights, a direct signal to her magnificent cleavage.

"That's quite a necklace," Bond said.

"Thank you," Victoria replied. "It was a birthday present from Anton."

"Really?"

"Can you believe it? He's asked me to star in his next movie! We're going to film it in Russia. We leave in two days. I'm so excited! I try to go back once a year anyway."

"I thought Miss Dergan said you have a law degree."

"I do. I'll continue that, of course, but acting might be fun. I still model, so it's really the same thing, isn't it? It's only for two months. I wouldn't want to make a career of it, because I need more intellectual stimulation. But he needed a blonde Russian girl who speaks English, so he asked me. I suppose it didn't hurt that we've been dating."

"Ah-ha," Bond said, "the old casting couch trick."

She shoved him playfully. "Stop, it's not like that. Besides, I date other men, too. I'm terribly

unfaithful." With that, she moved closer to him. "You like the pearls? Anton wants me to wear them in Russia as part of the character. I'll be nervous traveling with something worth as much as these are. But I think pearls are sexy, don't you?"

They continued to dance silently, as Victoria slowly removed the pearl necklace and used it as a prop to tantalize Bond. She pulled it up along his face, over his head and down the other side. She rolled the pearls on his skin, allowing him to feel the smooth texture. Then she placed the string against his mouth. He opened his lips and sucked three pearls into his mouth. He bit them gently, noting their smoothness.

Bond reached up, removed the necklace from Victoria's hands and placed it around her neck. The song ended as he glanced up to see Martin Tuttle entering the tent.

"Thank you," he said to the girl. "That was thoroughly enjoyable. However, you must excuse me. There's someone that I must speak to."

"That's OK," she said. "I enjoyed it, too. I hope I'll see you later!" She quickly snared bandleader Ray Anthony from the sidelines as the music picked up with a disco hit.

Martin Tuttle was dressed in a white terrycloth robe that had big pockets. It looked as though it might have been provided by a hotel. His date was a young woman with a pierced nose and crimson hair. Behind them were two more couples of the same ilk.

Lisa Dergan stepped up to Bond and hooked his arm, saying, "Who is this handsome guy standing over here by himself? You want to get something to eat -- oh look, Martin Tuttle and Chocky Day!" She squeezed his arm. "Sorry, I'm a little starstruck. This is all pretty new to me! I knew being a Playmate would put me in contact with a lot of famous people, but I had no *idea*! Come on, Mr. Bond, let's go talk to them."

"All right. But you have to call me James."

They walked across the floor and caught Tuttle and his entourage heading for the buffet line. Bond and Lisa joined the queue behind them. Tuttle was telling Day a story about how his manager had swindled him.

"You're going to have to sue," Day said.

"Well, that's possible, but I just might not have to now," Tuttle replied.

"Oh? Got something up your sleeve?"

"Definitely."

"Excuse me, Mr. Tuttle?" Lisa interrupted. "I'm Lisa Dergan, Miss July 1998. I just wanted to meet you. I love your music."

Tuttle's eyes widened as he took in the lovely girl. "Well, hello." He held out his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"This is embarrassing, I swear, but can I have your autograph?" Lisa gushed.

She picked up a napkin with MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM printed on it. "I don't usually do this, but I just had to ask." She was so charming about it that Tuttle laughed.

"Of course" he said. "Do you have a pen?"

"I do," Bond said. He handed the Sheaffer Levenger to Tuttle. The rock star took a second to admire it, then wrote his name with a flourish. He handed the napkin to Lisa and said, "Here you are."

"Thank you!"

Tuttle offered the pen back to Bond and said, "Thanks."

"Keep it."

"Huh?"

"Go ahead, you can have it," Bond said. "You might be accosted by more fans tonight."

"Why, thank you, this is a nice pen."

Tuttle stuck the pen in his robe pocket, as Bond hoped he would. "Say, you're from my side of the pond, aren't you?"

"That's right," Bond said without elaborating.

The buffet spread was the *pièce de résistance* of the party. Cubes of fruit formed a three-foot pyramid, cascading down mirrored blocks into a river of colors on the table. There were five Middle Eastern salads. Dinner consisted of roasted crown of lamb; grilled skewered swordfish marinated in lemon juice, olive oil and bay leaves; grilled kebabs of tomato and colorful bell peppers; moussaka made traditionally with extralean ground beef and lamb, eggplant, tomato and cheese; and a saffron-scented pilaf.

Bond and Lisa sat on cushions on the floor and ate at a low table. The place was packed now, and the scene reminded Bond of a sultan's harem. One woman in a bra and panties removed her top and began feeding grapes to a man lying on his back with his head in her lap. As the party progressed into the night, the amount of bare skin increased. The atmosphere became erotically charged as disrobed couples went swimming or disappeared into some of the more private areas such as the Grotto, the bathhouse or the more intimate rooms in the Game House. The older guests were more modest, but they seemed to be reveling in the spirit of the event as much as the younger crowd was.

"Isn't Hef a nice man?" Lisa asked. "For his birthday I baked him a chocolate chip cookie in the shape of a rabbit. It was big, too -- it filled a pizza box! Hey, do you golf?"

"A little," Bond replied with a shrug. He found Lisa delightful. Her girl-next-door wholesomeness was a contrast to Victoria's more worldly bad-girl image. When Lisa wasn't looking, though, Bond slipped the earphone into his ear and adjusted the volume on the receiver in his housecoat pocket. He immediately heard Martin Tuttle talking to his date.

"We'll go back to England as soon as I finish the job," he was saying.

"But you promised, Martin!" she said.

They continued the conversation for a few minutes, then Tuttle said to his friends, "I'll be right back. Watch my plate, will you?" He slipped through the crowd and left the main tent. Bond concentrated on listening to Tuttle, but Lisa was attempting to make conversation. He did his best to pay attention to her, but when he heard Tuttle's voice whisper, "There you are, I've been looking for you," Bond held up his hand to shut her up.

"What?" she asked, confused.

"Shhh," he said.

Another man's voice, one with a thick accent, replied, "What are you worried about? We were bound to run into each other, Martin." Bond recognized the accent as that of the Russian filmmaker, Anton Redenius.

"Look, I delivered your stuff yesterday. You promised me my money tonight. A deal is a deal," Tuttle said.

"Quite so. Haven't you made plenty of money on our little deals? Fine, we are prepared to give you your payment for this one," Redenius said. "Estragon?"

Tuttle gasped and made a choking sound. Bond jumped up from the pillows, catlike and without saying a word to his bewildered Playmate companion, and ran past the pool and out of the tent.

Outside he heard the gurgling and wheezing sounds intensify.

"I'm sorry, Martin. This is your midsummer night's doom," Redenius said. "Keep him quiet, Estragon. We don't want anyone to hear us."

Tuttle continued to choke and gag. Bond raced past one of the security guards, who was dressed in a lightweight suit.

"Sir, you need to stay within the -- hey!" he shouted as Bond jumped across a rope barrier and ran into the darkness. The guard followed, but Bond was far ahead of him.

He ran past the caged squirrel monkey, causing an outburst of chattering, and into a grove of redwood trees. Then he saw them. Anton Redenius and his henchman, Estragon, were standing over the body of Martin Tuttle. Estragon was holding a wire garrote extending from his wristwatch. He looked up and saw Bond, then released the wire, which snapped back into his watch.

Bond drew his gun and said, "Freeze!"

"No, *you* freeze!" came a voice from behind him. It was the security guard, training his Beretta on Bond.

Bond didn't move but said, "These men are criminals. The tall one just murdered the man on the ground. I work for the British government."

"Don't be a fool!" Redenius said to the guard. "We found this man here. I think it was this Brit who killed him!"

"All three of you!" the guard said. "Hands up. You, drop the gun. Now!"

Bond did as he was told. The three men raised their hands. The guard kicked the Walther away and gestured with the Beretta. "All right, walk back toward the tents, slowly."

The guard reached for a walkie-talkie with his free hand and spoke into it. "John, I've got a dead man in the woods and three suspects. We're walking toward the tents from the redwoods. Send backup immedi ———"

His words were cut short as Estragon surprised him. The brute grabbed the guard's gun arm with a well-practiced maneuver and brought it down hard on his knee, snapping it in two. The Beretta flew into the air. Estragon deftly caught it, then kicked the guard in the chest. The man went down, crying in agony. Estragon swung the gun around to Bond and prepared to fire, but 007 was a second ahead of him. He lunged for the big man's waist, tackling him. The gun went off in the air. They struggled for control of the weapon as the guard writhed helplessly. Anton Redenius, meanwhile, slipped away and disappeared into the darkness.

Estragon punched Bond several times in the face, in rapid succession. The blows stunned him, giving the bodyguard time to get to his feet and run. Dazed, Bond stood up, got his bearings and chased after the man.

Estragon was big and agile, but he wasn't fast on his feet. Bond caught up to him inside the tent at

the pool, just as other guards arrived on the scene. Bond leaped for the man and they both went into the water with a splash. Naked revelers screamed and jumped out of the way, climbing over the sides to grab their towels.

Two guards drew their guns and aimed at the men, but they were stopped by Hugh Hefner, who appeared behind them with his head of security. "Hold your fire!" he shouted.

The fight continued in the pool, where Bond was in his element. He was an expert swimmer and one of only three double-O agents who had taken a first in SIS' underwater combat course, and he quickly gained an advantage by using Estragon's weight and size against him. Bond got the man's neck in the crook of his arm and squeezed, pulling him below the surface. Able to hold his breath for an extraordinary amount of time, Bond had no problem keeping his opponent submerged until he began to panic. Bond had saved an ounce of strength for this very moment. He applied more pressure, locking Estragon's neck in a tight grip, forcing him to swallow water. The struggling continued for another minute, and then the bodyguard went limp.

Bond pulled him out of the water and rolled him onto the deck of the pool. Completely beaten, Estragon began to cough and gasp as two guards handcuffed him. Another pair of guards approached Bond with cuffs, but Hefner said, "Wait. Not him."

By now, a large, semidressed crowd had gathered next to the pool. They had heard the commotion and the gunshot. Lisa Dergan was there, as were Victoria Zdrok and her companion, Anton Redenius.

Bond pointed at Redenius. "He's the one you need to arrest," he said, fighting for breath. "He's a killer and a spy."

"How dare you!" Redenius said. "I shall sue you for slander! No one lies about me that way! "

Bond stood up and faced him. "You are involved in organized crime in Russia. Martin Tuttle stole classified strategic information from my country and gave it to you. You're planning to smuggle it into Russia when you go there to make your movie, then sell it to your Mafia friends. Martin Tuttle has been supplying you with data for sometime now, but instead of paying him off, you had him killed."

"Lies!" Redenius shouted. He turned to the shocked crowd. "He tells lies!"

Victoria was looking at him oddly. "Is this true, Anton?" she asked.

"Of course not! He can't prove anything he says!"

Bond calmly approached Victoria and said, "I can prove it. May I borrow your necklace, please?"

"What?"

"Your valuable pearl necklace. May I?" He held out his hand.

She hesitated for a second, then unclasped the necklace and gave it to him.

Bond asked one of the guards to shine his flashlight on the ground. Then, surprising everyone, Bond dropped the necklace into the pool of light. He squatted down, picked up a stone and crushed the pearls with one blow. Victoria screamed.

Bond sifted through the pearls' debris and picked up three tiny black objects.

"Miniature microfilm cartridges," Bond said, holding them in his palm.

"I'm sorry, Victoria, I couldn't tell you before, but these pearls are fake. This man was using you as an unwitting courier. If you had been caught, you could have gone to jail for the rest of your life."

"How -- how did you know?" Victoria asked.

"When you put the necklace in my mouth, I tested the pearls with my teeth. That's how you can tell if they're real or not. If they feel smooth, they're fake. Real pearls are gritty, like sandpaper. I knew immediately that they were hollow. I had to be sure that Redenius was Tuttle's man before I told you."

Victoria gasped and looked at Redenius. "You bastard," she said through her teeth, then slapped him hard on the face, almost knocking him down. Redenius was dumbfounded.

Victoria turned away, saw Dr. Saginor watching with amazement and said, "Come on, Doctor; let's dance." She took Saginor by the hand and led him out of the crowd.

"Wait, my dear!" Redenius called after Victoria, but the guards roughly descended upon him. He was cuffed and taken away as he shouted obscenities and protests.

Hefner addressed the rest of the crowd. "Please, go on with the party. I apologize for this disturbance. The party *will* go on!"

The guards helped disperse the spectators and the swimmers dropped their towels and jumped back into the pool. Lisa remained behind with Hefner and Bond. The head of security returned Bond's Walther PPK to him, saying the crime scene in the woods had been sealed off for the police.

"You got what you came for?" Hefner asked.

"Yes," Bond said, pocketing the microfilm and holstering his gun. He gave the receiver and earphone back to Hefner. "You'll find your fountain pen in the pocket of Martin Tuttle's robe."

"I don't care about that. I have three or four of them," Hefner said. "You know, that was good advice you gave me in Jamaica. We had a nice club in Ocho Rios."

Bond was amazed. "I'm surprised that you remember that day, Mr. Hefner," he said.

"We have always kept up with you, James," Hefner said with a wink. "We're a lot alike, you and I. And please, call me Hef."

Lisa said, "James, you'll probably have to make a statement to the police when they get here."

Bond nodded. "That will kill the rest of the evening. We don't have much time."

Hef cleared his throat, shook Bond's hand and politely withdrew.

"Come on, let's continue that tour," she said, taking Bond's arm and leading him toward the Grotto.

It was a dimly lit and misty facsimile of a small cavern with a warm spring running through it. There were at least two other couples snuggled in the nooks and crannies. Lisa chose a small alcove that was lined with cushions.

They got comfortable, lying together arm in arm.

"This is wonderful," he said.

She kissed him lightly on the cheek. Then she rose a bit and slipped the straps of her slip dress off her shoulders, letting it drop down to reveal her firm, round breasts. She put her arms around his neck, reclined next to him and whispered, "I don't normally do this sort of thing, you know. But they say that the Playboy Mansion is a place where fantasy becomes reality."

Bond ran a hand through her hair and said, "I've heard that before. Whoever 'they' are, they have my vote of complete confidence."

Then he brought his mouth ruthlessly down on hers.

