

Ian Fleming's James Bond in

The Brindisi Smugglers

by Kronsteen

The sea urchin lay maliciously still. It was lying there quietly on the sea bed waiting to strike in ambush. It was actually harmless unless you touched it, but still it had a derisively evil presence which always made the swim anxious and worried.

Its massive defence system, with black poisonous spines spread all over a round, calcareous shell, was reliable and vital. Thousands of tourists stamped on the creatures every year and destroyed their own vacation. The poisonous spines had a strong paralyzing and swelling affect and the part of the body affected would be big, red and unusable for a long time.

James Bond watched the dark spots through the water surface as he relaxingly swam in the crystal clear water. The last assignment in Albania hadn't been particularly tiresome, but he had nonetheless decided to take a couple of days off in the Mediterranean idyll of Dubrovnik.

Though heavily destroyed in civil war in the early 90's it was now again one of the Adriatic Sea's most genuine Mediterranean cities. The culture, the architecture, the tourism, the food, the location, the beaches and the broiling sun; it was a fabulous place for a relaxing vacation of sun, swims, cheap but excellent food, and some cultural experiences.

Bond was situated in the heart of Dubrovnik's tourism exploitation, namely Lapad, the area surrounding the Sumratin bay and its beautiful beaches. He had now swift to back position and floated about in the warm, calming waters, beating off all his thoughts of any kind. His mind was totally empty and it felt refreshing; the time in Albania had occupied his mind for almost a week without rest.

He laid empty for the better part of fifteen minutes before he turned over again and quietly breast-stroked towards the beach. Where he could reach the bottom he carefully inspected the area for sea urchins and then gently put a foot down.

The beach stretched widely along the bay coast and was sealed off from the built part of Lapad, mostly occupied by hotels and restaurants, by a stone wall. A beach café was situated at the centre and at night there was a night club and bar at the far end. Now, during the day, hundreds of people lay on towels or reclining chairs along the beach, either enjoying the broiling sun or hiding under parasols. There were occupations of every kind; from chess and card games to book reads and ball play. The atmosphere was arousing.

Bond walked steadily up from the water and revealed his red bathing-trunks. He halted in the warm, soft sand, closed his eyes shortly and let some salt water drip off his body.

He opened his eyes and continued the sluggish walk through the sand, and enjoyed his sight of a group of stunningly women in different coloured bikinis walking past him.

"Beautiful ocean views," Bond commented to the women's giggling delight. His beautiful thoughts were unpleasantly disturbed by plump, bald pensioner in small Speedos. Bond sighed unsympathetically and promised never to become like that.

Two children squabbling over a toy run past him as he reached the place where he had put his belongings. He laid the towel like a roll over his shoulders, the dark blue bag in his hand and walked up to the beach café. He sat down by the wall, elegantly put together by reed, and ordered a plain coffee without sugar or milk.

Some tables further away, in the farther corner of the café, Bond overheard three men in a serious discussion.

"I can get them sold for a better price! I've come across a new purchaser," the most elegant man said in an accent which sounded Italian. He appeared rather old, perhaps in his mid-sixties, and was dressed in a white striped marine blue suit over a white shirt. His face was weather-beaten, which seemed odd as he otherwise looked healthy and fresh, and the grey, lank hair was carefully combed backwards, and curled slightly in the neck. His thick fingers were adorned with several gold rings.

One of the other men answered him peevishly: "No risks! We continue like usual. Our regular purchaser has worked flawlessly for a long time. There's no reason the change." The man was clearly upset by the Italians decision. He sat tensely with the elbows on the table and looked generally shabby. His blue jeans were worn and the red t-shirt was a size too big. The short, black hair was tousled and he had a short, uneven beard. He looked Croatian and had a dark sun-tan.

"More money," the Italian snapped. "That's the reason to change, more money."

"But it's not worth the risk," the shabby Croatian continued the discussion. "Our current connection is safe, fool-proof. Do you even know anything for sure about this new purchaser?"

"I've heard of him. Reliable mafia member, lots of money. Located in Barletta."

"Barletta? We have to change our destination?"

The battle raged on between the two men:

"There is a question of a few kilometres."

"No, that is risky, changing destination is too risky. We must undergo new preparations. No," the shabby Croatian stated incoherent.

"Listen here, Niko. I am the boss. I have the connections. I am the one who kindly give you some money for the job. I can get rid of you two with a snap of my fingers!"

The man addressed as Niko stared evil-eyes at his supposed boss.

The second man, who had sat quiet during the discussion, talked: "Please, quiet down. Let's take this matter after tonight's work. We must leave now if we want to make Brindisi in time." Like Niko, he looked Croatian too, but appeared shorter and thinner. He also wore proper clothes; a pair of beige khaki shorts and a sky blue shirt with its sleeves rolled up. His black hair hung to his small ears, but he was clean shaven and looked good. A shining scar broke the fine sun-tan in his forehead.

Niko pulled out a crooked cigarette out of his jeans' pocket, broke off the filter and put the damaged piece of tobacco between his lips. He lighted it with a match and started off with some furious drags. "Yeah, Rapa is right. Let's go."

The three of them stood up, left some creased notes at the counter and vanished. Bond was intrigued what they might be up to. He didn't bother about the coffee, grabbed his bag and hurriedly left the outdoor café. He followed the three men at a safe distance, but the men's conversation was still manageable to hear:

"And for the thousand time, the name's Dario," the man named Rapa cursed evilly at Niko.

Dario Rapa, Niko and the boss? Who were these fellows? Some small-time smugglers or an organized gang?

They walked casually through a footpath avenue, which lead up to a main road where plenty of hotels were situated, and then turned left. Bond paid no attention to his hotel, the three-star Komodor, which stood elegantly in its limestone façade.

The three smugglers seated themselves in a white Van parked along the road and Bond realized he had to get to his car quick if he'd be able to continue the follow. He hurried over the road and jogged over to the hotel's private car park. The slender silver body of his rental Alfa Romeo stood there silent, but aggressive, and waited to go for a ride. Bond entered and quickly turned the car key. The motor spun with its beautiful snarling sound.

Bond had rented a modern, but standard type of car for his week in Dubrovnik if anything would happen. It wasn't his typical sports car, but he wouldn't have any problem keeping up with a Van.

He slowly accelerated and exited the car park, then begun the pursuit for the white Van. It drove further up the sloping road and turned left at the next crossing. As it followed the main road out of the city, Bond leaned back in the comfortable seat and increased the speed so that he'd catch up with them. The risk of losing them wasn't so big; there weren't a great lot of cars on the road. On the other hand it made him easier to spot, but that wasn't as important. He would confront them anyway.

He rummaged in his bag and managed to get hold of a light blue short-sleeved shirt. He slipped it on and buttoned it. He didn't feel the cigarette package in the chest pocket. The gun was placed on the next seat.

The protracted chase proceeded for thirty minutes, mainly on large main roads, but after a while the white Van turned off and onto a small, gravel road. They travelled bumpily on it for five minutes and then the white Van stopped on a dry meadow, the three men jumped out. Bond halted the car some hundred yards away and was amazed that they hadn't discovered him yet.

Niko, the shabby Croatian, opened the double back door to access the storage space and begun unloading a wooden box. Dario, the other Croatian, had disappeared while the well-dressed boss stood by the Van and inspected the boxes a last time.

What was they doing out here? Would they use a helicopter or an aeroplane?

Suddenly the humming of an aeroplane propeller was heard and a small, white Cessna appeared in the corner of Bond's eye. It drove up gently to the Van and the motor was shut. Dario jumped out and started to load it with two of the wooden boxes. Two more would accompany the first ones.

Bond decided to do his move. He stepped on the accelerator pedal, the rear wheels skidded in the gravel and the car speeded towards the three smugglers. They all noticed the car in frozen chock, but the boss started yelling something and the two Croatians suddenly hurried with the boxes, fumbling them about.

The Alfa Romeo glided over the meadow and as it came to a halt Bond grabbed his Walther PPK and jumped out. Dust flew around the air.

"Stop it," he commanded. The two Croatians didn't seem to hear and continued to load the Cessna. Bond fired a bullet into planes rudder. "I won't tell you again."

"What the hell!?" the boss shouted. The two Croatians froze in fear. "Drop the gun!"

Bond noticed he had been careless. The boss stood with a gun waving at him. There was no point in arguing with a man with a gun.

"What are you doing here? A modest smuggling operation?" Bond asked, and he could now see a small red hangar far away to his left.

"None of your business," the boss answered.

"I would very much like to know," Bond tried to sound calm and not upset anyone.

"Many people do..."

The boss hadn't been very careful - he hadn't made Bond throw his gun to the ground. Bond fired rapidly a bullet from the hip, straight into the planes motor. In response a bullet ricocheted of the ground an inch from his left foot.

"Drop that gun to the ground," the boss realized his mistake. "Now!"

"First, tell me what this is all about." He held the Walther between his thumb and index finger, but didn't let go.

"This is none of your business. Just turn around, walk back to your car and drive of and we'll never cross each others paths again. No harm done."

"I guess this is not exactly legal. No harm done?"

"In a way it is legal... so turn around and start walking!" the boss waved with his gun.

Bond shook his head. "If this is legal, then you wouldn't mind showing me your cargo."

None of the three men seemed to react.

"If you think I feel any pity for some shabby smugglers, you're wrong. Who are you working for?"

The boss sighed. "You're some kind of detective?" He chuckled shortly.

"You could say that, yes. Intelligence."

They all looked like they didn't understand.

"From Britain," Bond added. It was still warm, but the sun slowly started to set and a slight breeze past.

The three men's hair was tousled in the wind, but that wasn't the reason why they dropped their jaws. They looked speechless. Bond felt unsure for a second, but grabbed his gun again and continued.

"The cargo please."

The men looked at each other like question marks; the boss spoke.

"Okay, I'll tell you. It isn't going to be fun, but perhaps you'll leave us alone then." He cleared his throat.

"Is it going to be a long story or what?"

"I'm afraid so..."

Bond grabbed his gun and put it in the waist band. The boss spoke.

"You're familiar with the Camorra in Naples I hope. A notorious Italian mob. Brutal in many ways, but they're also working in legitimate business. Mostly food and textiles, both which are exported to countries all around Europe. Britain is one of those countries and certain companies in Britain are frequent buyers. These companies often sell cheaper brands, because the Camorra only sells cheap goods. Apparently they want everybody to afford what they sell; I guess that's their way of showing some morale for a change." He chuckled shortly once again.

"Some lesser fortunate parts of British society therefore need this kind of companies, but how the Camorra in Italy can compete with companies stationed in countries like Moldavia or Albania I can't understand. Somehow Camorra manages to have low prices. The problem is this: you can't trust the Camorra. Even if they deliver correctly there are rumours that they send smuggle goods with their exports and that an insider man at the customs picks them up - the Camorra has people everywhere where they can make a penny or two. The companies want nothing to do with that, they just want their goods.

The companies need what the Camorra can offer, but the Camorra doesn't always do what they claim. It has led to that a handful of companies have joined in a discussion with the British government. They need the connection with the Camorra and have persuaded the British government that British citizens need these companies, but they want to be sure that what goes on in the Camorra is straight."

Bond was impatient. "And what has that to do with you three?"

"The problem was: how could the British government help these companies? In this modern world within the European Union the use of stationary agents are almost wiped out. There's really no need for it, and if a country would find out that another country were having agents on their territory... it would be an outcry! The government asked MI6 if there were any possibility to send a man to Naples to keep an eye on Camorras business, but that was a dead end. Even MI6 can be looked into; especially their economy is easy to check up. There is no such thing as secrets within intelligence anymore; the government can control it all. So together with the MI6 the government solved it their own way. They hired a former Italian agent - unofficially of course - to keep an eye on the Camorra. If the Italian government would find that out, all diplomacy between Britain and Italian would cease overnight. So the MI6 can't keep any records of this, but still has to pay the police officer for doing what he does for them."

The boss flung his arms out and sighed. It all seemed a mess.

Bond let his arm drop and a perplexity stuck him. Did the boss tell him the truth?

"So the British government has hired you, and gang of criminals, to smuggle goods into Italy to pay for this agent?"

"We buy jewellery and gold cheap here in Dubrovnik and fly it over to Brindisi where we continue to Naples and sell it for a much higher price... yes."

"Who do you sell it to?"

The boss seemed to blush. "Who do you think?"

"The Camorra..." Bond sighed.

What a mess! If the boss told the truth M had authorized this operation. MI6 was involved in a criminal offence. All to help a few companies. As much as he hated communism - he had battled it for a long time years ago - this was truly the downside of capitalism and commercialism.

The three men looked at him, wondering what he would do. Honestly, Bond didn't know. These men were operating under orders from his own boss. But was it M's fault? He operated under the orders of the government.

The three smugglers were doing a criminal offence. MI6 and M were doing a criminal offence. The government was doing a criminal offence. The Prime Minister himself did surely know, but who was really the responsible one?

Bond sighed once again and suddenly felt a total hopelessness. What could he do? He couldn't order these men to immediately stop. The Italian agent wouldn't get his money and notify his employer - MI6. MI6 would immediately contact the smugglers, and Bond would be named. Worse, the companies could find out or the Italian government could be informed. It would lead to the worst diplomatic crisis since the Cold War.

Bond had to fear the worst. He couldn't do a single thing right now, just put the tail between his legs, turn around and drive back to his hotel. He had to fly home and have a meeting with M and possibly Bill Tanner, Chief of Staff. The smugglers would have to qualify as his staff as well. Did he know anything?

It would be a long journey home, with much to think about. He needed to think out what to do and exactly what to say.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I can't force you to stop."

They all nodded as they understood his dilemma.

"Do what you think is right. We're just working to get some money, and we're doing it under serious orders. It's not a criminal gang or the Camorra. It's a government who're just doing what they think is right for their citizens."

"My government are pressed by companies who want to make money. There are no excuses for that!"

Bond turned around and walked slowly towards his car as the sun now laid its back at the horizon. The gun dangled in his hand and his shirt was caught by a swirl of wind. The Alfa Romeo door opened silently and the gun was laid to a rest in the glove compartment. The engine roared silently and as Bond stepped on the gas pedal and turned gravel and dust flew up in the air.

The three smugglers stood as a frozen row in the rear-view mirror and would seconds later hastily rush up to the plane and inspect any damages from Bond's 7.65 mm barrel. They would notice that even if Bond was a perfect marksman the motor had survived with just a scratch and the rudder could easily be fixed. They could continue their operation as if nothing had happened.

Bond darkened under his eyes and fumbled for a cigarette in his chest pocket. He hadn't been this upset for years. He lighted the cigarette carefully as he steered the car up onto an asphalt road. The accelerator meter increased quickly, but Bond sat calmly as if it didn't affect him. The smoke wriggled to the car ceiling as he took a deep breath. A drop of water landed on the wind shield. The first rain of this summer.

Kronsteen, September 2009

