# **Chapter 12: The Montenegro Express**

The Orient Express pulled away from Belgrade station with the mechanical precision of a Swiss chronometer, its wheels finding their rhythm on the rails as the last of the Balkan twilight faded into memory. James Bond settled into his compartment and lit his third cigarette of the evening—a Turkish blend he'd acquired in Istanbul, harsh enough to cut through the railway carriage's stale air.

The bourbon in his glass caught the amber light from the reading lamp as the train swayed gently through the Serbian countryside. Outside, scattered farmhouse windows flickered like dying stars against the black canvas of night. Bond studied his reflection in the window: the lean face, the hard mouth, the eyes that had seen too much in too few years. At thirty-eight, he looked older. The business in Prague had aged him.

A soft knock interrupted his brooding. Bond's hand moved instinctively toward the Walther P99 beneath his dinner jacket before relaxing as he recognized the steward's practiced cadence.

"Your dinner reservation, sir. The maître d' requests your presence in the dining car at nine-thirty."

Bond checked his Omega Seamaster. Nine-fifteen. Time enough to finish his drink and consider the curious telegram that had reached him at the embassy that morning. Three words in cipher: "Nightingale sings twice." It could mean nothing. In his experience, it usually meant everything.

The dining car hummed with subdued conversation in half a dozen languages. Bond was shown to a table for two, though he'd made no such request. The maître d', a cadaverous man with intelligent eyes, placed a leather-bound wine list beside Bond's plate with theatrical precision.

"The lady will join you presently," he murmured in accented English.

Bond hadn't ordered wine, hadn't mentioned a lady. His appetite sharpened—not for food, but for answers. He ordered the beef stroganoff and a bottle of the '47 Burgundy, then waited with the patience of a professional predator.

She entered at precisely nine-thirty-five, and Bond felt his pulse quicken despite himself. Tall, raven-haired, moving with the controlled grace of a dancer or a killer. Her evening dress was midnight blue silk that suggested rather than revealed, and her smile was the dangerous kind that promised everything while delivering nothing.

"Mr. Bond." She extended a gloved hand. "I am Katarina Volkov. I believe you've been expecting me."

Bond rose, noting the slight callus on her trigger finger, the way her eyes catalogued every exit, the almost imperceptible bulge beneath her left shoulder blade. Professional habits died hard.

"Have I?" He held her chair, catching a whisper of her perfume—something expensive and French with undertones of cordite. "You have me at a disadvantage."

"That," she said, settling into her seat with fluid elegance, "would be a first."

The train rounded a curve, and the lights of a distant village swept across her face like searchlights. In that brief illumination, Bond saw something flicker behind her green eyes—fear, perhaps, or calculation. Possibly both.

"The nightingale," she said quietly, lifting her wine glass, "sometimes sings of death."

Bond's hand stilled halfway to his cigarette case. The second half of the cipher phrase. Whatever game was beginning, the stakes had just doubled.

Outside, the Montenegro Express rushed headlong into the Balkan darkness, carrying its cargo of secrets toward whatever dawn awaited them in the mountains ahead.