

THE ASSASSIN

"I don't like this room – it's creepy. Do you feel it?" said Jack as he and his pal Joey looked round the dilapidated room at the top of the tower block. It was scheduled for demolition, and there were strict cordons round the building to stop uninvited visitors. But then, boys will be boys and the lure of the forbidden building had encouraged them to see what all the fuss was about. It did indeed feel a bit creepy, with dust, broken bits of plaster and crumbling walls but to the boys it was a splendid place to conceal themselves while they and the gang played hide and seek.

At the side of the room was a cupboard, its door ajar, but with just enough room to fit into as long as they didn't wriggle. "Then we can jump out and say 'Boo' when they find us said Joey. "That should make them jump."

Suddenly they heard heavy footsteps on the stairway. They stopped looking round. That didn't sound like Dave – he was wearing trainers and could move like a cat. They looked at each other and with one accord they were both in the cupboard with the door slightly ajar so that they could see who was now entering their domain.

Across the town a couple was entering the foyer of the local hotel for a business meeting. Caroline looked about her. "I don't like this place – it gives me the creeps," she said and shivered as she pulled her jacket closer round her body. Michael looked round. He had to admit that death did seem to play quite a large part in the decorations. There were suits of armour, swords and rifles attached to the walls and paintings that all seemed to include some element of mortality – Bruegel's painting 'Hunters in the Snow', dogs poised proudly over hares caught during coursing and stuffed fish with gaping mouths and sightless eyes staring into eternity in the usual glass cases.

"Oh, sorry, darling," exclaimed Michael. "I didn't think of that when I booked." He paused. "Don't worry: I'll ask the Maitre d' if he can seat us somewhere else. H'm. Would you like to sit outside?"

"Oh, yes, please," replied Caroline with a smile. "It's a gorgeous day. That would be lovely."

"Right my lady," he joked. "Your wish is my command," and he approached the MD who was soon showing them to a table outside on the patio.

Michael smiled to himself in congratulation at having manipulated Caroline. “Well done, old boy,” he thought. “Just what you wanted without having to try at all. Now I’ll be able to have a ciggy.”

The couple went outside and were seated at a pleasant table for three, while they waited for their visitor to arrive.

“I told you we’d be here before Dirk”, chuckled Caroline. “He’s always late”. Michael said nothing but helped her as she sat down before sitting down himself opposite her.

“Not this time”, said a deep voice behind them and they both smiled as a blond young man caught up with them and took the third seat at the table.

The couple were preparing a clandestine meeting with a Dutchman to consider the benefits of selling their pharmaceutical Company, L’Aroma, to Dirk van Timmerman, whose greater experience would ensure their sales in the wider marketing area of Europe and beyond and give them a nice little nest egg so that they could enjoy themselves free from the constraints of business. In the UK L’Aroma was becoming well known and there had been many attempts to infiltrate it in order to access their formulae. Only recently had the employment of a new young internee been terminated when she had been discovered in the lab rifling through the files – hence the secret meeting before their plans were known and the market affected by the proposed sale.

In the abandoned tower block McBride surveyed the scene from his hide-out in the top floor where he was directly opposite the restaurant. He had made sure he had not been followed and now settled down on the dusty concrete in front of the window, adjusting his rifle and getting the little group in his sights before concentrating the cross hairs on Caroline.

The trio began to choose from the menu that the maître d’ offered them, discussing the merits of the various dishes. Caroline reached across to pick up her wine glass but knocked it over, sending wine all over the table. She leaned sideways to find a tissue in her handbag to mop up the wine on her clothes before they began to smell but suddenly there was a whoosh of air followed by a quiet ‘pop’ and as she slowly sat up, the handbag she had been reaching for clutched in her hand, she looked across the table at Michael, who lay back in his chair with a hole in the middle of his forehead and the horrified silence was shattered by her screams.

“Fff”, growled McBride and, fuming, he quickly dismantled the rifle, packing it into a sports bag, and made his way from the building to where he had parked his car for a quick getaway. Of all the damned luck! Not only

had he missed his target but he'd accidentally killed the chap who had paid him to carry out the assignment. Michael had led Caroline along, encouraging her to believe that they would be selling their venture to the Dutch company, but unknown to her he had made advances to the firm about going into partnership with them. This he considered to be far more lucrative but Caroline was to be no part of the scenario.

When McBride's footsteps had receded, the boys emerged from their hidey-hole, their eyes shining with excitement.

"Wow," breathed Jack. "Fancy that – a real life murder and we were in on it. Wait till we tell the others" and they hurried out of the building to report what they had seen to the police, who were at first dubious about their story but eventually took them seriously and wrote down as much as the boys could tell them about their experience.

A month later Michael's murderer had still not been apprehended and Caroline was staring stonily at sales figures from the new Company she had created together with Dirk now that Michael was no longer there coaxing her not to do so but to sell out. She wanted to rule the world and now the wretched Dutchman was putting obstacles to her suggestions for expansion all along the way and would not even consider an amalgamation with the mighty American conglomerate who had made overtures to them for the sale of their products in the United States. There was only one thing she could think of.

Thumbing through Michael's address book she came across the name of the odd job man he had talked about knowing from his past, who would do anything for anyone if the money was right. When she had discovered the extent of his odd jobs it had been quite a shock to her but needs must and with firm fingers she dialled and waited for the phone to be picked up.

The 'phone rang until "Yes", said a guarded voice.

She paused a while to get up courage. "McBride?" queried Caroline.

"Yes," was the gruff reply.

"Right," she said, calm now. "We need to talk. I have a job I'd like you to do for me. Someone I need to get out of my life. Not permanently, you understand, but just incapacitated enough for the next six months or so. I'm sure you've got some ideas," and dates, terms and venue were discussed.

Dave's mum was preparing supper when his father came home from the police station where he was the Chief Superintendent.

After the meal "Dad", began Dave hesitantly. They always seemed to rub each other up and he was afraid of irritating his father.

"Yes," said his father absently, being tired and occupied in trying to finish the crossword in the daily paper.

"Well," continued Dave, gaining courage, "You know the hide and seek game we play?"

"Yes," replied his father. He paused. "You haven't been getting into any trouble, have you?" he asked sharply.

"No," said Dave firmly. Dad always seemed to think the worst of him. "It's just that the last time I saw them was when we were playing and I'd just got my new 'phone and I was snapping everything in sight. I'd forgotten about it but I was just looking through to delete stuff when I found one I'd taken that afternoon. You can see Jack and Joey as they were coming out of the block, but just in front of them, right in the corner of the picture, almost out of it, it looks as though there was someone putting a bag into the boot of the car. If you could get hold of him he might be able to throw some light on what happened. Look," and he showed his father the picture.

Suddenly Dave's dad was a hive of activity, throwing the paper aside and starting to put on his going-out clothes.

"Why the hurry, Patrick - where are you off to now?" asked his wife, coming into the room. "I thought you'd finished for the day."

"To the station," he said briskly. It looks as though our son might have given us something to go on about that shooting, although it might be clutching at straws. We'll have to start street reconnaissance – asking people in the neighbourhood, looking at cctv cameras and, depending on what we see maybe car registration numbers – and the sooner the better." He looked with new pride at his son. "Well done, lad, well done."