The Hidden Assassins

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Extract

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The West End, London – Thursday, 9th March 2006

'So, how's your new job going?' asked Najib.

'I work for this woman,' said Mouna. 'She's called Amanda Turner. She's not even thirty and she's already an account director. You know what I do for her? I book her holidays. That's what I've been doing all week.'

'Is she going somewhere nice?'

Mouna laughed. She loved Najib. He was so quiet and not of this world. Meeting him was like coming across a *palmerie* in the desert.

'Can you believe this?' she said. 'She's going on a pilgrimage.'

'I didn't know English people went on pilgrimages.'

Mouna was, in fact, very impressed by Amanda Turner, but she was much keener to receive Najib's approbation.

'Well, it's not exactly religious. I mean, the reason she's going isn't.'

'Where is this pilgrimage?'

'It's in Spain near Seville. It's called La Romería del Rocío,' said Mouna. 'Every year people from all over

Andalucía gather together in this little village called El Rocío. On something called the Pentecost Monday, they bring out the Virgin from the church and everybody goes wild, dancing and feasting, as far as I can tell.'

'I don't get it,' said Najib.

'Nor do I. But I can tell you the reason Amanda's going is not for the parading of the Virgin,' said Mouna. 'She's going because it's one big party for four days – drinking, dancing, singing – you know what English people are like.'

Najib nodded. He knew what they were like.

'So why has it taken you all week?' he asked.

'Because the whole of Seville is completely booked up and Amanda has loads, I mean loads, of requirements. The four rooms have all got to be together . . .'

'Four rooms?'

'She's going with her boyfriend, Jim "Fat Cat" Maitland,' said Mouna. 'Then there's her sister and *her* boyfriend and two other couples. The guys all work in the same company as Jim – Kraus, Maitland, Powers.'

'What does Jim do in his company?'

'It's a hedge fund. Don't ask me what that means,' said Mouna. 'All I know is that it's in the building they call the Gherkin and . . . guess how much money he made last year?'

Najib shook his head. He made very little money. So little it wasn't important to him.

'Eight million pounds?' said Mouna, dangling it as a question.

'How much did you say?'

'I know. You can't believe it, can you? The lowest paid guy in Jim's company made five million last year.'

'I can see why they would have a lot of requirements,' said Najib, sipping his black tea.

'The rooms have all got to be together. They want to stay a night before the pilgrimage, and then three nights after, and then a night in Granada, and then come back to Seville for another two nights. And there's got to be a garage, because Jim won't park his Porsche Cayenne in the street,' said Mouna. 'Do you know what a Porsche Cayenne is, Najib?'

'A car?' said Najib, scratching himself through his beard.

'I'll tell you what Amanda calls it: Jim's Big Fuck Off to Global Warming.'

Najib winced at her language and she wished she hadn't been so eager to impress.

'It's a four-wheel drive,' said Mouna, quickly, 'which goes a hundred and fifty-*six* miles an hour. Amanda says you can watch the fuel gauge going down when Jim hits a hundred. And you know, they're taking four cars. They could easily fit in two, but they have to take four. I mean, these people, Najib, you cannot believe it.'

'Oh, I think I can, Mouna,' said Najib. 'I think I can.'

The City of London – Thursday, 23rd March 2006

He stood across the street from the entrance to the underground car park. His face was indiscernible beyond the greasy, fake fur-lined rim of the green parka's hood. He walked backwards and forwards, hands shoved deep down into his pockets. One of his trainers was coming apart and the lace of the other dragged and flapped about the sodden frayed bottom of his faded jeans, which seemed to suck on the wet pavement. He was muttering.

He could have been any one of the hundreds of unseen people drawn to the city to live at ankle height in underground passages, to scuff around on cardboard sheets in shop doorways, to drift like lost souls in the limbo of purgatory amongst the living and the visible, with their real lives and jobs and credit on their cards and futures in every conceivable commodity, including time.

Except that he *was* being seen, as we are all being seen, as we have all become walkers-on with bit parts in the endlessly tedious movie of everyday life. Often in the early mornings he was the star of this grainy

black-and-white documentary, with barely an extra in sight and only the sporty traffic of the early traders and Far East fund managers providing any action. Later, as the sandwich shops opened and the streets filled with bankers, brokers and analysts, his role reverted to 'local colour' and he would often be lost in the date or the flickering numbers of time running past.

Like all CCTV actors, his talent was completely missable, his Reality TV potential would remain undiscovered unless, for some reason, it was perceived that his part was crucial, and the editor of everyday life suddenly realized that he had occupied the moment when the little girl was last seen, or the young lad was led away or, as so often happens in the movies, briefcases were exchanged.

There was none of that excitement here.

The solitary male or female (under the hood not even that was clear) moved in the tide of extras, sometimes with them, sometimes against. He was extra to the extras and, worse than superfluous, he was getting in the way. He did this for hour after hour, week after week, month after . . . He was only there for a month. For four weeks he muttered and shuffled across the cracks in the pavement opposite the underground car park and then he was gone. Reality TV rolled on without him, without ever realizing that a star of the silent screen had been in its eye for just over 360 hours.

Had there been a soundtrack it would not have helped. Even if a mike had been placed within the horrible greasy hood of the parka it would have clarified nothing. All that would have registered was the mutterings of a marginalized moron, telling himself the colour, model and registration number of apparently

random cars and the time they passed his patch of pavement. It was surely the obsessive work of a lunatic.

What sort of sophisticated surveillance equipment would have been able to pick up that the eyes deep inside the darkness of the hood were only choosing cars that went into the underground car park of the building across the street? And even if there was equipment that could have made that connection, would it also have been able to discover that the stream of uninteresting data was being recorded on to the hard disk of a palm-sized dictaphone in the inside pocket of the parka?

Only then would the significance of this superfluous human being have been realized and the editor of everyday life, if he was being attentive that morning, might have sat up in his chair and thought: Here we have a star in the making.

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Seville – Monday, 5th June 2006, 16.00 hrs

Dead bodies are never pretty. Even the most talented undertaker with a genius for *maquillage* cannot bring the animation of life back to a corpse. But some dead bodies are uglier than others. They have been taken over by another life form. Bacteria have turned their juices and excretions into noxious gas, which slithers along the body's cavities and under the skin, until it's drum tight over the corruption within. The stench is so powerful it enters the central nervous system of the living and their revulsion reaches beyond the perimeter of their being. They become edgy. It's best not to stand too close to people around a 'bloater'.

Normally Inspector Jefe Javier Falcón had a mantra, which he played in the back of his mind when confronted by this sort of corpse. He could stomach all manner of violence done to bodies – gunshot craters, knife gashes, bludgeon dents, strangulation bruises, poisoned pallor – but this transformation by corruption, the bloat and stink, had recently begun to disturb him. He thought it might just be the psychology of decadence, the mind troubled by the slide to the only

possible end of age; except that this wasn't the ordinary decay of death. It was to do with the corruption of the body – the heat's rapid transformation of a slim girl into a stout middle-aged matron or, as in the case of this body that they were excavating from the rubbish of the landfill site beyond the outskirts of the city, the metamorphosis of an ordinary man to the taut girth of a sumo wrestler.

The body had stiffened with rigor mortis and had come to rest in the most degrading position. Worse than a defeated sumo wrestler tipped from the ring to land head first in the front row of the baying crowd, his modesty protected by the thick strap of his *mawashi*, this man was naked. Had he been clothed he might have been kneeling as a Muslim supplicant (his head even pointed east), but he wasn't. And so he looked like someone preparing himself for bestial violation, his face pressed into the bed of decay underneath him, as if unable to bear the shame of this ultimate defilement.

As he took in the scene Falcón realized that he wasn't playing his usual mantra and that his mind was occupied by what had happened to him as he'd taken the call alerting him to the discovery of the body. To escape the noise in the café where he'd been drinking his café solo, he'd backed out through the door and collided with a woman. They'd said '*Perdón*', exchanged a startled look and then been transfixed. The woman was Consuelo Jiménez. In the four years since their affair Falcón had only had a glimpse of her four or five times in crowded streets or shops and now he'd bumped into her. They said nothing. She didn't go into the café after all, but disappeared quickly back into the stream of shoppers. She had, however, left her imprint on him

and the closed shrine in his mind devoted to her had been reopened.

Earlier the Médico Forense had stepped carefully through the rubbish to confirm that the man was dead. Now the forensics were concluding their work, bagging anything of interest and removing it from the scene. The Médico Forense, still masked up and dressed in a white boiler suit, paid his second visit to the victim. His eyes searched and narrowed at what they found. He made notes and walked over to where Falcón was standing with the duty judge, Juez Juan Romero.

'I can't see any obvious cause of death,' he said. 'He didn't die from having his hands cut off. That was done afterwards. His wrists have been very tightly tourniqueted. There are no contusions around the neck and no bullet holes or knife wounds. He's been scalped and I can't see any catastrophic damage to the skull. He might have been poisoned, but I can't tell from his face, which has been burnt off with acid. Time of death looks to be around forty-eight hours ago.'

Juez Romero's dark brown eyes blinked over his face mask at each devastating revelation. He hadn't handled a murder investigation for more than two years and he wasn't used to this level of brutality in the few murders that had come his way.

'They didn't want him recognized, did they?' said Falcón. 'Any distinguishing marks on the rest of the body?'

'Let me get him back to the lab and cleaned up. He's covered in filth.'

'What about other body damage?' asked Falcón. 'He must have arrived in the back of a refuse truck to end up here. There should be some marks.'

'Not that I can see. There might be abrasions under the filth and I'll pick up any fractures and ruptured organs back at the Forensic Institute once I've opened him up.'

Falcón nodded. Juez Romero signed off the *levantamiento del cadáver* and the paramedics moved in and thought about how they were going to manipulate a stiffened corpse in this position into a body bag and on to the stretcher. Farce crept into the tragedy of the scene. They wanted to cause as little disturbance as possible to the body's noxious gases. In the end they opened up the body bag on the stretcher and lifted him, still prostrate, and placed him on top. They tucked his wrist stumps and feet into the bag and zipped it up over his raised buttocks. They carried the tented structure to the ambulance, watched by a gang of municipal workers, who'd gathered to see the last moments of the drama. They all laughed and turned away as one of their number said something about 'taking it up the arse for eternity'.

Tragedy, farce and now vulgarity, thought Falcón.

The forensics completed their search of the area immediately around the body and brought their bagged exhibits over to Falcón.

'We've got some addresses on envelopes found close to the body,' said Felipe. 'Three have got the same street names. It should help you to find where he was dumped. We reckon that's how he ended up in that body position, from lying foetally in the bottom of a bin.'

'We're also pretty sure he was wrapped in this –' said Jorge, holding up a large plastic bag stuffed with a grimy white sheet. 'There's traces of blood from his severed hands. We'll match it up later . . .'

'He was naked when I first saw him,' said Falcón.

'There was some loose stitching which we assume got ripped open in the refuse truck,' said Jorge. 'The sheet was snagged on one of the stumps of his wrists.'

'The Médico Forense said the wrists were well tourniqueted and the hands removed after death.'

'They were neatly severed, too,' said Jorge. 'No hack job – surgical precision.'

'Any decent butcher could have done it,' said Felipe. 'But the face burnt off with acid *and* scalped . . . What do you make of that, Inspector Jefe?'

'There must have been something special about him, to go to that trouble,' said Falcón. 'What's in the bin liner?'

'Some gardening detritus,' said Jorge. 'We think it had been dumped in the bin to cover the body.'

'We're going to do a wider search of the area now,' said Felipe. 'Pérez spoke to the guy operating the digger, who found the body, and there was some talk of a black plastic sheet. They might have done their post-mortem surgery on it, sewed him up in the shroud, wrapped him in the plastic and then dumped him.'

'And you know how much we love black plastic for prints,' said Jorge.

Falcón noted the addresses on the envelopes and they split up. He went back to his car, stripping off his face mask. His olfactory organ hadn't tired sufficiently for the stink of urban waste not to lodge itself in his throat. The insistent grinding of the diggers drowned out the cawing of the scavenging birds, wheeling darkly against the white sky. This was a sad place even for an insentient corpse to end up.

Sub-Inspector Emilio Pérez was sitting on the back

of a patrol car chatting to another member of the homicide squad, the ex-nun Cristina Ferrera. Pérez, who was well built with the dark good looks of a 1930s matinée idol, seemed to be of a different species to the small, blonde and rather plain young woman who'd joined the homicide squad from Cádiz four years ago. But, whereas Pérez had a tendency to be bovine in both demeanour and mentality, Ferrera was quick, intuitive and unrelenting. Falcón gave them the addresses from the envelopes, listing the questions he wanted asked, and Ferrera repeated them back before he could finish.

'They sewed him into a shroud,' he said to Cristina Ferrera as she went for the car. 'They carefully removed his hands, burnt his face off, scalped him, but sewed him into a shroud.'

'I suppose they think they've shown him some sort of respect,' said Ferrera. 'Like they do at sea, or for burial in mass graves after a disaster.'

'Respect,' said Falcón. 'Right after they've shown him the ultimate disrespect by taking his life and his identity. There's something ritualistic and ruthless about this, don't you think?'

'Perhaps they were religious,' said Ferrera, raising an ironic eyebrow. 'You know, a lot of terrible things have been done in God's name, Inspector Jefe.'

Falcón drove back into the centre of Seville in strange yellowing light as a huge storm cloud, which had been gathering over the Sierra de Aracena, began to encroach on the city from the northwest. The radio told him that there would be an evening of heavy rain. It was probably going to be the last rain before the long hot summer.

At first he thought that it might be the physical and mental jolt he'd had from colliding with Consuelo that morning which was making him feel anxious. Or was it the change in the atmospheric pressure, or some residual edginess left from seeing the bloated corpse on the dump? As he sat at the traffic lights he realized that it ran deeper than all that. His instinct was telling him that this was the end of an old order and the ominous start of something new. The unidentifiable corpse was like a neurosis; an ugly protrusion prodding the consciousness of the city from a greater horror underneath. It was the sense of that greater horror, with its potential to turn minds, move spirits and change lives that he was finding so disturbing.

By the time he arrived back at the Jefatura, after a series of meetings with judges in the Edificio de los Juzgados, it was seven o'clock and evening seemed to have come early. The smell of rain was as heavy as metal in the ionized air. The thunder still seemed to be a long way off, but the sky was darkening to a premature night and flashes of lightning startled, like death just missed.

Pérez and Ferrera were waiting for him in his office. Their eyes followed him as he went to the window and the first heavy drops of rain rapped against the glass. Contentment was a strange human state, he thought, as a light steam rose from the car park. Just at the moment life seemed boring and the desire for change emerged like a brilliant idea, along came a new, sinister vitality and the mind was suddenly scrambling back to what appeared to be prelapsarian bliss.

'What have you got?' he asked, moving along the window to his desk and collapsing in the chair.

'You didn't give us a time of death,' said Ferrera.

'Sorry. Forty-eight hours was the estimate.'

'We found the bins where the envelopes were dumped. They're in the old city centre, on the corner of a cul-de-sac and Calle Boteros, between the Plaza de la Alfalfa and the Plaza Cristo de Burgos.'

'When do they empty those bins?'

'Every night between eleven and midnight,' said Pérez.

'So if, as the Médico Forense says, he died some time in the evening of Saturday 3rd June,' said Ferrera, 'they probably wouldn't have been able to dump the body until three in the morning on Sunday.'

'Where are those bins now?'

'We've had them sent down to forensics to test for blood traces.'

'But we might be out of luck there,' said Pérez. 'Felipe and Jorge have found some black plastic sheeting, which they think was wrapped around the body.'

'Did any of the people you spoke to at the addresses on the envelopes remember seeing any black plastic sheeting in the bottom of one of the bins?'

'We didn't know about the black plastic sheeting when we interviewed them.'

'Of course you didn't,' said Falcón, his brain not concentrated on the details, still drifting about in his earlier unease. 'Why do you think the body was dumped at three in the morning?'

'Saturday night near the Alfalfa . . . you know what it's like around there . . . all the kids in the bars and out on the streets.'

'Why choose those bins, if it's so busy?'

'Maybe they know those bins,' said Pérez. 'They knew

that they could park down a dark, quiet cul-de-sac and what the collection times were. They could plan. Dumping the body would only take a few seconds.'

'Any apartments overlooking the bins?'

'We'll go around the apartments in the cul-de-sac again tomorrow,' said Pérez. 'The apartment with the best view is at the end, but there was nobody at home.'

A long, pulsating flash of lightning was accompanied by a clap of thunder so loud that it seemed to crack open the sky above their heads. They all instinctively ducked and the Jefatura was plunged into darkness. They fumbled around for a torch, while the rain thrashed against the building and drove in waves across the car park. Ferrera propped a flashlight up against some files and they sat back. More lightning left them blinking, with the window frame burnt on to their retinae. The emergency generators started up in the basement. The lights flickered back on. Falcón's mobile vibrated on the desktop: a text from the Médico Forense telling him that the autopsy had been completed and he would be free from 8.30 a.m. to discuss it. Falcón sent a text back agreeing to see him first thing. He flung the mobile back on the desk and stared into the wall.

'You seem a little uneasy, Inspector Jefe,' said Pérez, who had a habit of stating the obvious, while Falcón had a habit of ignoring him.

'We have an unidentified corpse, which could prove to be unidentifiable,' said Falcón, marshalling his thoughts, trying to give Pérez and Ferrera a focus for their investigative work. 'How many people do you think were involved in this murder?'

'A minimum of two,' said Ferrera.

'Killing, scalping, severing hands, burning off features

with acid . . . yes, why did they cut off his hands when they could have easily burnt off his prints with acid?'

'Something significant about his hands,' said Pérez.

Falcón and Ferrera exchanged a look.

'Keep thinking, Emilio,' said Falcón. 'Anyway, it was planned and premeditated and it was important that his identity was not known. Why?'

'Because the identity of the corpse will point to the killers,' said Pérez. 'Most victims are killed by people –'

'Or?' said Falcón. 'If there was no *obvious* link?'

'The identity of the victim and/or knowledge of his skills might jeopardize a future operation,' said Ferrera.

'Good. Now tell me how many people you really think it took to dispose of that body in one of those bins,' said Falcón. 'They're chest high to a normal person and the whole thing has got to be done in seconds.'

'Three to deal with the body and two for lookout,' said Pérez.

'If you tipped the bin over to the edge of the car boot it could be done with two men,' said Ferrera. 'Anybody coming down Calle Boteros at that time would be drunk and shouting. You might need a driver in the car. Three maximum.'

'Three or five, what does that tell you?'

'It's a gang,' said Pérez.

'Doing what?'

'Drugs?' he said. 'Cutting off his hands, burning off his face . . .'

'Drug runners don't normally sew people into shrouds,' said Falcón. 'They tend to shoot people and there was no bullet hole . . . not even a knife wound.'

'It didn't seem like an execution,' said Ferrera, 'more like a regrettable necessity.'

Falcón told them they were to revisit all the apartments overlooking the bins first thing in the morning before everybody went to work. They were to establish if there was black plastic sheeting in any of the bins and if a car was seen or heard at around three in the morning on Sunday.

Down in the forensic lab, Felipe and Jorge had the tables pushed back and the black plastic sheet laid out on the floor. The two large bins from Calle Boteros were already in the corner, taped shut. Jorge was at a microscope while Felipe was on all fours on the plastic sheet, wearing his custom-made magnifying spectacles.

'We've got a blood group match from the victim to the white shroud and to the black plastic sheet. We hope to have a DNA match by tomorrow morning,' said Jorge. 'It looks to me as if they put him face down on the plastic to do the surgery.' He gave Falcón the measurements between a saliva deposit and some blood deposits and two pubic hairs which all conformed to the victim's height.

'We're running DNA tests on those, too,' he said.

'What about the acid on the face?'

'That must have been done elsewhere and rinsed off. There's no sign of it.'

'Any prints?'

'No fingerprints, just a footprint in the top left quadrant,' said Felipe. 'Jorge has matched it to a Nike trainer, as worn by thousands of people.'

'Are you going to be able to look at those bins tonight?'

'We'll take a look, but if he was well wrapped up I don't hold out much hope for blood or saliva,' said Felipe.

'Have you run a check on missing persons?' asked Jorge.

'We don't even know if he was Spanish yet,' said Falcón. 'I'm seeing the Médico Forense tomorrow morning. Let's hope there are some distinguishing marks.'

'His pubic hair was dark,' said Jorge, grinning. 'And his blood group was O positive . . . if that's any help?'

'Keep up the brilliant work,' said Falcón.

It was still raining, but in a discouragingly sensible way after the reckless madness of the initial downpour. Falcón did some paperwork with his mind elsewhere. He turned away from his computer and stared at the reflection of his office in the dark window. The fluorescent light shivered. Pellets of rain drummed against the glass as if a lunatic wanted to attract his attention. Falcón was surprised at himself. He'd been such a scientific investigator in the past, always keen to get his hands on autopsy reports and forensic evidence. Now he spent more time tuning in to his intuition. He tried to persuade himself that it was experience but sometimes it seemed like laziness. A buzz from his mobile jolted him: a text from his current girlfriend, Laura, inviting him to dinner. He looked down at the screen and found himself unconsciously rubbing the arm which had made contact with Consuelo's body in the entrance of the café. He hesitated as he reached for the mobile to reply. Why, suddenly, was everything so much more complicated? He'd wait until he got back home.

The traffic was slow in the rain. The radio news commented on the successful parading of the Virgin of Rocío, which had taken place that day. Falcón crossed

the river and joined the metal snake heading north. He sat at the traffic lights and scribbled a note without thinking before filtering right down Calle Reyes Católicos. From there he drove into the maze of streets where he lived in the massive, rambling house he'd inherited six years ago. He parked up between the orange trees that led to the entrance of the house on Calle Bailén but didn't get out. He was wrestling with his uneasiness again and this time it was to do with Consuelo – what he'd seen in her face that morning. They'd both been startled, but it hadn't just been shock that had registered in her eyes. It was anguish.

He got out of the car, opened the smaller door within the brass-studded oak portal and went through to the patio, where the marble flags still glistened from the rain. A blinking light beyond the glass door to his study told him that he had two phone messages. He hit the button and stood in the dark looking out through the cloister at the bronze running boy in the fountain. The voice of his Moroccan friend, Yacoub Diouri, filled the room. He greeted Javier in Arabic and then slipped into perfect Spanish. He was flying to Madrid on his way to Paris next weekend and wondered if they could meet up. Was that coincidence or synchronicity? The only reason he'd met Yacoub Diouri, one of the few men he'd become close to, was because of Consuelo Jiménez. That was the thing about intuition, you began to believe that everything had significance.

The second message was from Laura, who still wanted to know if he would be coming for dinner that night; it would be just the two of them. He smiled at that. His relationship with Laura was not exclusive. She had other male companions she saw regularly and

that had suited him . . . until now when, for no apparent reason, it was different. Paella and spending the night with Laura suddenly seemed ridiculous.

He called her and said that he wouldn't be able to make dinner but that he would drop by for a drink later.

There was no food in the house. His housekeeper had assumed he would go out for dinner. He hadn't eaten all day. The body on the dump had interrupted his lunch plans and ruined his appetite. Now he was hungry. He went for a walk. The streets were fresh after the rain and full of people. He didn't really start thinking where he was going until he found himself heading round the back of the Omnium Sanctorum church. Only then did he admit that he was going to eat at Consuelo's new restaurant.

The waiter brought him a menu and he ordered immediately. The pan de casa arrived quickly; thinly sliced ham sitting on a spread of salmorejo on toast. He enjoyed it with a beer. Feeling suddenly bold he took out one of his cards and wrote on the back: *I am eating here and wondered if you would join me for a glass of wine. Javier.* When the waiter came back with the revuelto de setas, scrambled eggs and mushrooms, he poured a glass of red rioja and Javier gave him the card.

Later the waiter returned with some tiny lamb chops and topped up his glass of wine.

'She's not in,' he said. 'I've left the card on her desk so that she knows you were here.'

Falcón knew he was lying. It was one of the few advantages of being a detective. He ate the chops feeling privately foolish that he'd believed in the synchronicity of the moment. He sipped at his third glass of wine

and ordered coffee. By 10.40 p.m. he was out in the street again. He leaned against the wall opposite the entrance to the restaurant, thinking that he might catch her on the way out.

As he stood there waiting patiently he covered a lot of ground in his head. It was amazing how little thought he'd given to his inner life since he'd stopped seeing his shrink four years ago.

And when, an hour later, he gave up his vigil he knew precisely what he was going to do. He was determined to finish his superficial relationship with Laura and, if his world of work would let him, he would devote himself to bringing Consuelo back into his life.