

Inside Job

"The Leaning Tower of London," announced the tabloid on Andrew's desk. He glanced casually at the report as he sat down to his first coffee of the day. It seemed that a fault had opened up beneath the foundations of the famous Tower causing a dangerous subsidence. The venerable structure would have to be closed for at least a year while repairs were attempted.

The cup of coffee stopped halfway to his mouth as a sentence near the bottom of the page caught his eye.

"While the bulk of the Crown Jewels have been moved to the safety of a bank vault, a selection of the more famous items will soon be displayed in Windsor Castle."

Andrew knew that the crown jewels were insured by the august and ancient Royal City and Shipping Company — known throughout the financial world as "The Ship". As well he should. He had been on their staff for eighteen years rising to be their star fraud investigator.

At the helm of "The Ship" stood Sir Frederick Hardcastle — an ex rugby league forward who had shouldered his way to the top of the corporate ladder and a knighthood. He was known throughout the firm as "The Guv". Even the tea ladies called him "Guv". He liked that. It bolstered the shoulder-hugging, one-of-the-boys chumminess that masked the ruthless, vengeful tyrant revealed to anyone who got in his way. As Andrew had discovered when he had been fired for contradicting The Guv at a management meeting.

That was a year ago. Before his abrupt departure from "The Ship" Andrew had fixed up a job in his department for an old school friend and ex police detective, James Bolton. He was to meet Jimmy later in the day for a pub lunch — ostensibly for a friendly reunion. What he was really after was a return favour.

At 12.20pm Andrew closed his office door behind him. Over his shoulder the sign read:

Andrew Lovemore

Corporate Remedial Action

The confidential nature of the business Andrew had started after his dismissal from "The Ship" demanded a non-specific, low-profile title. He was in fact embroiled in industrial espionage. His latest client was a shipper who had faked the piracy of his own cargo of electronic equipment. He was insured with "The Ship" and was nervous about the way one of their investigators — coincidentally Jimmy Bolton — had been sniffing around. "Can you sort this out for me, Mr Lovemore?" he had said. "Money is no problem."

Two pints of beer into the lunch and halfway through the steak and kidney pie, Jimmy Bolton furtively slipped a fat envelope into his pocket. "Leave it to me, Andy," he said. "I'll get it sorted."

At 3.30 they were still in the pub.

"So how do you get on with the 'Guv'?" asked Andrew.

Lovely guy; one of the boys," said Jimmy in a slurred voice. "He must like me because he has roped me in on a big secret project."

Andrew knew that Jimmy Bolt could not hold his liquor — nor his tongue either when he'd had a few. But he was unprepared for the monumental indiscretion that then came from Jimmy's lips.

"For God's sake keep this to yourself," said Jimmy. It's the Guv's pet project. He'll skin me alive if he finds out I've told you. It's the crown jewels move to Windsor Castle. He's going to send an armoured van with half a dozen motorcycle outriders on a high-profile trip through

the city. But he's leaked it to the press. It's a decoy to get publicity. The stuff will be already have been transferred the day before in an unmarked bullet-proof Mercedes.

"I suppose they'll be going out along the Embankment," prompted Andrew who then listened in astonishment as the drunken Jimmy gave him full details of the route. "But what about the traffic?" he probed.

"No problem we're leaving at 5 am.

"We?"

"Yes, we. And guess who's driving? Yup, little old me — with three armed heavies for company."

"Jimmy, you've impressed me," flattered Andrew. "And the Guv too by the sound of it. Let's have one for the road."

On his way back to his office, Andrew bought a bunch of red roses and a large box of chocolates. It was the birthday of the current woman in his life. He got off at the floor below his and walked along the corridor to a door marked: *MADAM ROSA — Clairvoyant*. Rosie Bingham was an attractive, ambitious 35-year-old blonde, married to an older man she did not love. But there were compensations — like the glossy new Aston Martin coupe parked in the basement, her husband's idea of a birthday gift. He had also funded her little hobby as a clairvoyant.

In the six months since he had met her in the lift Andrew had become obsessed with Rosie. He visited her several times a week for a "reading" — which usually took place in the horizontal position on a couch in a softly-lit back room. But, to Andrew, a forty-something divorcee, these clandestine trysts were becoming increasingly tawdry.

He spoke to her of his love, and pleaded with her to leave her husband. But all she said was: "Andrew, you are a sweetie, but I am afraid you could never keep this lady in the manner to which she has become accustomed".

When she answered the door Andrew's pulse quickened at the swelling bosom revealed by Rosie's blue, full-length figure-hugging dress. She took the flowers with a smile, started to kiss him, then drew back, her smile darkening into a frown.

"Andrew, you've been drinking," she snapped. "You know I can't stand the smell."

"Just a quickie perhaps?" said Andrew hopefully.

"In your dreams," said Rosie, almost pushing him out of the door.

Back at his desk, Andrew sat staring at the ceiling.

Andrew had been a disappointment to his father — a successful hotelier.

'Think big, my boy,' had been his repeated advice to his only son. But in his heart he could not see the mild-mannered, bespectacled Andrew causing much of a stir in the business world.

"See you tomorrow," said Andrew's secretary as she left for the day. But Andrew did not hear. He remained shrouded in thought. He shifted his gaze to the blank wall opposite as the rumble of homebound traffic slowly quietened. Suddenly he saw it was getting dark. He rose stiffly to his feet. The jewel transfer was due in just eight days. What was it his father had said? "Think big, my boy."

Fine. But how the hell did you get into a bullet-proof car containing three trigger happy thugs?

During his years with The Ship Andrew had encountered a number of shady characters. Over the next three days he enlisted the services of two of them: a car thief and a forger of driving documents. He paid them well — safe in the knowledge that they would keep their

mouths shut. He then contacted a small engineering shop, a prop maker and a location scout in the film industry and a lawyer.

Another clandestine lunch with Jimmy Bolton followed on day four — at which he issued his now-willing recruit with certain driving instructions. “And, this time Jimmy,” he promised, “you’ll need more than an envelope to hold the loot.”

That evening he lured Rosie out on their first public outing. Dinner at the Dorchester. Her husband was away on business in Japan. To start the meal, he ordered Beluga caviar accompanied by a bottle of vintage Veuve Cliquot. Rosie was impressed.

“What are you up to Mr Lovemore?” she asked. “What are we celebrating?”

“Your next birthday present.”

“And what might that be?”

“How about your own executive jet?”

They were interrupted by the waiter bearing Omelettes au Truffles accompanied by a superb twenty-year-old claret.

“You crazy man,” said Rosie leaning across the table and kissing the tip of his nose. “Have you suddenly found a rich uncle?”

“No,” said Andrew, “we’re going to steal the crown jewels.”

“Oh sure,” she said tucking into the truffles.

He waited until the coffee and Cognac before revealing his plan.

“My God, you’re serious,” said Rosy. “I have to admit it is ingenious. But there’s one little snag. How would you dispose of them? Surely they would be almost impossible to fence.”

Andrew looked at her over the rim of his brandy glass. “That, my dear, is where Madam Rosa comes in.”

Day eight dawned over the Tower with a sullen glow as Jimmy Bolton eased the long black Mercedes, headlights dipped, out under the portcullis. Two burly men sat behind him and a third in the front passenger seat. Each man had a loaded Uzi on his lap. Jimmy gripped the wheel with white knuckles as he steered the Merc, splashing, along the rain-drenched Embankment. Twelve minutes later they were speeding through Chelsea. They took a sharp bend to the left. The wet road stretched ahead empty — the neon street lamps still aglow against the brightening sky. Suddenly a light flatbed truck shot out from a side turning on the right some thirty yards ahead, blocking their path. A man in blue overalls and a black ski mask jumped from the truck’s passenger door and sprinted towards them. He was carrying something in his hand. Jimmy stood on the brakes. He heard three click-clacks as the men cocked their weapons. He slammed the gears into reverse and stalled the engine.

The man in the mask reached the car. He placed the object on the bonnet just behind the Mercedes insignia. From the metallic clang it made, it was obviously attached to a magnet. There was no mistaking its purpose. Two cherry pink sticks of dynamite were wired to a small black metal box. On its face was a small red light that was winking at them evilly. The man was halfway back to the shelter of the truck before anybody moved.

“It’s a bomb. Run for it,” yelled Jimmy as he flung himself out of the driver’s door — leaving the key in the lock. In a second all four horrified occupants were rushing back down the King’s Road on fear-winged legs. It was a good thirty seconds before, gasping for breath, they dared to stop and look back.

The truck was still there. The Merc had gone.

A kilometer from the scene the Merc turned into a quiet side street and stopped beside a gate in the high wall of a derelict factory. Rosie, now wearing dark glasses in place of the tell-tale ski mask, ran to open the gate. Andrew drove through. In the factory yard facing

outwards stood a large pantehnicon. While Rosie closed the gate, Andrew swung the Merc round to face the rear of the big vehicle. He opened the doors, and with Rosie's help, lowered a pair of hinged wheel ramps.

"That engineer did a good job," said Andrew as he drove the heavy car up the ramps into the pantehnicon. They stuffed the blue overalls behind a pile of scrap iron standing against the factory wall. Within two minutes of entering the gate the big truck was threading its way across West London through a maze of minor roads to the sound of fading police sirens.

"You should have seen their faces," said Andrew. "That film guy made a superb job of that fake bomb. Now for phase two."

At Scotland Yard all hell had broken loose. The chief duty officer was on the phone to Sir Frederick Hardcastle. The rudely awakened, red-faced Guv was shouting into the phone. "Just stop all black Mercs. No, you fool, they could not switch cars. That boot is made of 2 cm tungsten steel. It's like a built-in safe. It would take all day to open it."

At 07.00 hours, deep in the countryside, and seen only by a trio of cows, Andrew drove the pantehnicon into a hanger on a disused airstrip which, like the derelict factory, had been found by the film location scout. With Rosie's help he removed the seats from the back of the car and wasted no time in getting to work on the armoured steel with a thermal lance supplied by his engineer contact.

Day twelve. The PA entered The Guv's office bearing a piece of paper. The old man was in a bad mood. He was not relishing the prospect of paying out the 15 million pounds for which the jewels had been insured.

"Sorry to disturb you, Guv," said the PA. "There's a woman downstairs who claims to know where the jewels are. She is a **clairvoyant**."

"For God's sake, George, don't waste my time with that sort of bollocks," "My sentiments exactly," said George, handing him the paper. "But I think you should see this."

"But this is just a crude drawing of some of the crown jewels. Look there's the **Koh-i-noor** and that big pear-shaped one is the Star of Africa She could have copied these from a book."

"Indeed," said George. "But how did she know which ones to copy? These are the very pieces that are missing. And look at the numbers she's written across the bottom. These are the numbers on the strong boxes."

There was a silence, then: "Bloody hell," said the Guv. "Better send her up."

"One other thing, Guv," added George. "She's got a lawyer with her."

"You want how much!" roared The Guv" five minutes later.

"Five million," repeated the lawyer in even tones.

"We'll go to fifty thou, no more." said The Guv.

The lawyer raised an enquiring eyebrow at Rosie. She shook her head.

"You're in no position to bargain, Sir" said the lawyer. "We know the arithmetic. I've drawn up a contract in which the Royal City and Shipping Company agrees to pay my client five million pounds on receipt of information leading to the recovery of the missing jewels. I'll leave you to study it."

"You're aiding and abetting a crime," shouted The Guv as they left.

The lawyer smiled thinly. "Madame Rosa, enjoys a wide reputation as a clairvoyant. She assures me that a spirit guided her hand.

The Guv knew a shakedown when he saw it. But the document was watertight. The Ship was required to deposit the money in a trust account before Madam Rosa handed over the information. He turned to his PA. "Call an urgent board meeting for this evening."

The meeting was short. At the end of it the Financial Director said: "Sorry Guv. But she's got us by the short and curlies."

"All right, pay the bitch," growled the Guv. "But keep it out of the press."

After the meeting, The Guv took his PA aside. "Get hold of Max," he murmured. "Set up a meeting at my club tomorrow afternoon".

Max Skorinski was The Guv's secret weapon. He worked for the Ship on contract as a fraud investigator on certain specialised cases. It was rumoured that he had been a Mafia hit man — a rumour supported by his broad New York accent. He sat facing the Guv in a secluded corner of the club drawing thoughtfully on one of the old man's expensive Havanas.

"We're looking at an inside job," said the Guv, leaning close. "Get on to it Max. Start with the driver of the Merc."

A week later, Max got back to The Guv. It was a comprehensive verbal report.

"Well, done Maxie boy," said The Gov. "I knew Bolton was the key. I haven't seen him lately by the way. Where is he?"

"In intensive care. He'll be out in about six weeks. In a wheelchair."

"Excellent," said The Guv. "Now, Max, I don't want these bastards to get away with it. Understand?"

Andrew disentangled himself from a drowsy Rosie and strolled, naked, to the bedroom window. The view across the Indian Ocean from the five star Luxor Hotel, at Manakara on the East coast of **Madagascar** was superb. Across the palm-fringed, turquoise lagoon the rollers thundered onto the coral reef, sending up huge clouds of spray that lit up like flames in the rising sun. In the four months since the heist, a baffled Scotland Yard had run up against a stone wall. The flatbed truck turned out to be stolen and the pantechicon, hired on a six-month lease, had not even been missed, let alone found. The loot was safely stashed in a Cayman Island bank account. His connection with Rosie remained unknown to the police — who had lost interest in the case when Sir Fred Hardcastle had announced the recovery of the jewels by the Ship's security branch.

He yawned and stretched, taking a deep breath of the jasmine-scented air. Rosie, warm from the bed, joined him at the window. She smiled as she rested her head on his shoulder.

The crossed hairs of the telescopic sight lingered for eight seconds on Rosie's naked breasts — then moved to the right onto the man's chest. The gunman in the disused lighthouse 200 metres away raised his aim for a head shot. His finger tightened on the trigger. Unexpectedly the woman reached up to kiss the man — who then lifted her up and exuberantly swung her round. The blonde curls at the back of her head moved into the crossed hairs.

Max could not resist it. Two with one bullet! He squeezed the trigger. Humming happily, he deftly dismantled the weapon and fitted it back into its case.

"The Guv will love it," he murmured.

Anonymous