

PROLOGUE

England, March 12th, 6.45pm

For a moment, all he could see was her breast. The pink nipple was taut with lust, the soft, creamy skin around it smooth and translucent. She cupped it in her hand, teasing the nipple with gentle, erotic strokes. His eye travelled with her hand as she moved it lower, his breathing accelerating. Languidly her legs opened to him, inviting him towards her.

As police officer on duty, he almost failed to hear the telephone ring.

Grunting with annoyance, he muted the television and reached for the receiver, his eyes remaining on the screen.

His arousal faded as he listened to the words, scrabbling for a pen to write them down.

The moment they had finished he slammed his fist down on the cradle of the telephone to sever the connection, and began re-dialling the emergency number. The woman was forgotten. He glanced at his watch, sweat beading his brow.

‘Chief? We’ve had a warning. Code words verified.’ He stared at the paper in front of him. ‘We’ve got fifteen minutes.’

CHAPTER ONE

London, England

March 12th, 6.50 p.m.

Ollie Hardman was not having a good day.

He'd guessed it was going to be a bad one when he'd woken half an hour late that morning, his hangover beating a military tattoo inside his head. It had been confirmed when he reached inside his wallet and found the five hundred pounds he had withdrawn the previous day gone. Even now Ladbrokes was half a grand richer.

His rising had been slow, despite the lateness of the hour. He'd spent five minutes face down on the bed contemplating the grimy floor of his bedroom hoping the world would stop spinning. It hadn't. Bright, wintry sunshine streamed through the uncurtained window. An acrimonious divorce had put paid to such luxuries as curtains - not to mention the sofa, wardrobe, dining table and chairs, and as many fixtures and fittings as his ex-wife had been able to remove from their home when he was away at a News Editor's Conference.

Ollie had not been too distressed by the loss of his wife, although he missed the curtains. He didn't blame her for leaving; like most journalists, he was married to his job. In his case, his relationship with INN was more like a passionate love affair: filled with sleepless nights, thankless tasks and the occasional stab in the back.

He glanced now at his watch. He'd been on shift since eight that morning and still had more than another five

hours to go. Midnight beckoned him like a beacon of hope and respite.

He kicked back his chair away from the Home News Desk. For once the telephones had stopped ringing. If the world fell apart, someone else would have to pick up the pieces for the next five minutes.

He moved through the atrium, glancing sourly up at the immense glass and chrome structure that was INN's headquarters. Sodding monstrosity. Twelve stories high in the heart of London, the building towered above its neighbours, just a short walk from Paddington Station. The vast atrium bit out the heart of the building, making it resemble nothing so much as a giant square polo. Into the basement two floors below street level a pond had been built, surmounted by a rockery from which flowed a gentle waterfall. The News Mall around it contained half-a-dozen souvenir shops, selling mugs, tee-shirts, pens and stationery imprinted with the green and silver INN logo, or the face of its illustrious editor, Ben Wordsworth. A small theatre played a half hour documentary describing the founding of INN on a repeating loop to an eager audience, who then hurried to join the tour of the building which optimistically promised to show them real correspondents at work, assuming such a species existed. Ollie had yet to meet one.

He mooched back to his Newsdesk with a cup of foul machine coffee, nodding at Sam Hargrave, the Foreign Editor, as he sat down. Sam's 'U'- shaped desk was a mirror image of his own, positioned so that the two together formed an 'H'. Thousands of pounds and God alone knew how many time and motion studies had gone into proving that this was more efficient than any other combination. Ollie's personal opinion was that it put him far too near his boss, Brian Reynolds, whose task it was to oversee both Home and Foreign Desks and make sure that no decisions were ever made.

Ollie looked up as Janey, his Newsdesk assistant, returned from her gossip by the printer bearing a large cup

of real coffee and a Danish pastry.

'Sorry I was so long, Ollie,' she panted, throwing her plump figure into the chair on his left. 'I nipped out to the Sandwich Bar. Thought you'd prefer it to that dishwasher from the machine-'

'Forget the soft soap. What's the problem?'

Janey didn't bother to contradict him. 'We've only got two crews tomorrow to cover the whole day - and that includes the early crew. Our glorious leader has assigned two crews to shoot round the building so that he can present a documentary on INN to HRH when she opens it next week.'

'How the hell am I supposed to cover the entire day's breaking stories with two bloody crews?' Ollie yelled. 'It's bad enough today with three. Christie's got Andy for her undercover special on the teenage drug ring, and the early crew knocked off at four. That only leaves us one, and they're down at Westminster.'

Janey looked sympathetic but said nothing. Ollie scrunched his polystyrene cup and tossed it into the bin. He knew it was pointless to even debate the Editor's decisions. Once Ben Wordsworth had made up his mind, the decision was final and no correspondence would be entered into. One of these days, a late breaking story would make a nonsense of their pared-down rosters, and they would be creamed by the opposition. 'When's Christie due back?'

'She'll be at that party filming until midnight at least,' Janey said. 'She'll edit the piece tomorrow in time for the Early Evening News.'

Ollie nodded as one of the many telephones on his desk began to ring. Thank God it was a quiet night. He couldn't wait to get home.

Sussex, England

March 12th, 6.55pm

The driver of the 18.45 express train from Gatwick Airport to Victoria Station had no idea he had only five minutes left to live.

There was no indication that this journey was different from any other. The computer proclaimed that everything in order as the train hurtled along the track. There were no malfunctions. The weather was clear.

Judy Coleridge entered the driver's cab and smiled.

'Last run for you tonight, Tobe?'

The driver glanced at his watch and grinned back. 'Always takes the longest, doesn't it? Never mind, should be back in time for *The Bill*.' He yawned. 'Busy tonight?'

'You're not kidding. It's like the bloody rush hour out there. To be honest, I'd better get back. Just thought I'd say hi.'

Toby acknowledged her with a wave over his shoulder as she left the driver's cab. She passed along the swaying train, steadying herself as she paused between carriages. The automatic doors hissed open as a lurch of the train put her in range of its sensors, and she adjusted the ticket machine against her stomach, pulling the straining tunic around her ample frame. She knew she could do with losing a few pounds, but she was too happy at the moment to think about that.

She smiled softly as she contemplated the tiny diamond solitaire on her left hand. It had only been there for three weeks, and still felt new and a little alien. She kept stealing glances at it as she punched the tickets of the passengers in the crowded carriages.

A group of pensioners waved at her as she moved towards them, and Judy wagged her fingers back in greeting. Probably going on to see a show in London. She caught the misty look an old couple exchanged as they handed her their tickets. If she and Geoff were still that mushy about each other when they were that age, she'd be more than happy.

Judy tapped the legs of a young girl who was resting her crepe-soled shoes on the seat opposite her, and the girl whipped her feet down with a guilty start. Her boyfriend nuzzled her ear, and the girl blushed. God, they make me feel old, she thought wryly.

She glanced at her watch as she edged around battered suitcases, trying not to disturb two sleeping children cradled in their parents' arms. A charter flight must have just landed at Gatwick. A bag of Duty Free rolled along the shelf overhead. Judy opened her mouth to warn them as it bumped against the sill.

The cry never came.

The one hundred and eighty seven passengers on the train felt the crash before they heard it. The carriages swung crazily from the rails and lurched to the right. The lights inside them flickered and died. In the darkness, the carriages hung skewed at a forty-five degree angle, and seemed to hover, as if deciding which way to fall. A child plunged screaming through the window, breaking glass slashing his body as he fell. Screams echoed up and down the corridor, and the piercing wails of terrified children filled the air.

Then the frozen tableau came to life and the train teetered and plunged down the embankment. The eight carriages twisted away from each other, their couplings snapping apart like cotton. People spilled from the train and were crushed beneath its weight as it fell. As if in slow motion the carriages tumbled down the steep slope, rolling over and over, the metal of their sides bending and ripping like tissue paper. Trees skewered them through the windows, impaling passengers thrown against the glass. With a thunderous roar, three carriages slammed into a row of small houses hugging the bottom of the slope. The walls collapsed and disintegrated under the impact, the carriages embedded in what were once bedrooms, living rooms, homes. Dust flew upwards, and the sound of breaking glass and tearing metal filled the night.

As abruptly as it had started, the noise stopped. The debris of train and houses finally came to rest. For a moment, it was quiet.

And then the screaming began.

Notting Hill Gate, London, England

March 12th, 7.45pm

Christie Bradley surreptitiously glanced at her watch as she made a show of smoothing back her bright-gold hair, wondering how to execute a strategic withdrawal from the earnest young man talking to her without seeming unforgivably rude. She decided she didn't care if she did seem unforgivably rude.

Slowly she reached down to the message master clipped to the waist of her black silk dress, and switched the delayed action button. Ten seconds later the shrill bleep pierced the pounding thud of the music, and Christie unhooked it thankfully, reading the blank LCD screen with an expression of profound concern.

'Terribly sorry, must dash,' she said, easing her way around the startled young man. He stared blankly after her.

Christie forced her way through the throng of sweaty bodies crowding the underground cellar. Jungle music reverberated off the grey concrete walls, a heavy, pulsing rhythm that lacked either tune or lyrics. She pulled up the thigh-high black suede boots she was wearing and smoothed her silk dress down. The things she did for a story.

A tall, unappealing youth dressed in a hooded sweatshirt and wide jeans blocked the doorway as Christie reached the kitchen. His unnaturally bright eyes raked her body, his interest obvious.

'Can I help you, gorgeous?'

Christie took in the greasy hair and glazed expression. This boy might not be selling the drugs she was chasing, but he clearly knew a man who did. Christie smiled, arching one eyebrow with exactly the right amount

of mingled anticipation and disdain.

'I'm open to suggestions,' she said, smoothing her dress with a gesture that invited his eye to follow her hand.

'Anything to offer?'

The youth leered. 'Don't go away.'

Christie nodded. The microphone she had just activated should be able to pick up his every word when he returned.

She reached for a half-empty wine bottle on the sticky table in front of her, pouring a generous slug into a plastic cup, then replaced the bottle amongst its dozen empty fellows as she scanned the room for her cameraman. Knowing Andy, he was probably already upstairs with the juvenile sex siren he had started chatting up the moment he walked through the door.

'How's it going?'

Christie smiled as her producer, Dom Ryan, appeared at her elbow. 'At last, a friendly face. I'm beginning to remember why I tried to forget my student days.'

'Don't worry, another few years and you won't remember anything.'

Christie laughed. Dom was only twenty-one, and had been assigned to the production team at INN for less than four months, but she was impressed by both his talent and his enthusiasm. He had been shadowing her

reporting for the last three weeks, and had already proved himself intelligent and persistent.

She nudged Dom as she noticed an attractive man moving through the crush of people, the long-haired teenager at his elbow. 'Find Andy, quickly. I need some pictures if I'm going to get enough to stand this story up.'

Dom's eyes glittered. Christie Bradley was one of International News Network's top correspondents, and not without good reason. In the three years she had been with INN, she had tasted war in the most dangerous corners of the world, covering famine, corruption and human tragedy, and had risked her life more than once to get a story. She could wield a rifle with expertise, function for days without sleep or food, gain the trust of terrorists and government officials alike. This was Dom's first time on an undercover story, and he knew he was watching a master at work. He watched her shake back her thick hair and wistfully amended that to mistress.

It was hardly surprising his interest was more than professional. The reporter was one of the most arresting women he had ever met. Her green eyes gleamed from beneath dark lashes, changing from near-grey to deepest malachite depending on her mood. Her lips were a little too full, her cheekbones a touch too high, for her to be considered classically beautiful, but she had *it*: that indefinable something that was impossible to buy or emulate.

Dom forced his attention back to the story as the dealer reached Christie.

'Looking for a little fun?'

'Depends what's on offer,' Christie said smoothly.

'What did you have in mind?'

Suddenly the shrill tone of Christie's bleep cut through the conversation. The young man backed off in panic as she reached for it.

She sighed. Great. Goodbye to forty-eight hours hard work.

She spun the display towards her. It had to be important for the Desk to be bleeping her and risking the whole story. She turned towards the staircase, heading for somewhere quiet enough to use her mobile. Dom was right behind her as they struggled past people up to the landing, and shut the door to the pulsating cellar down below with relief.

'Hi, Ollie, Christie here.'

She said nothing more as she scribbled in her notebook, then shut the phone and ended the call as her cameraman finally appeared at the top of the basement stairs. 'Andy, get the crew car and follow me. I'll take my own; we may need the extra wheels when we get there.'

'What's the story?' Andy asked, falling in beside her as she ran down the steps towards her car.

'Train crash near a village called Heathley, halfway between London and Gatwick Airport. No idea what caused it. Ollie wants a piece together for the Late News show at ten.' She turned to Dom. 'Want to come? I could use a hand; we won't have anyone else there for quite a while.'

Dom nodded as Christie tugged off her suede boots and reached into the back of her MG, pulling out a pair of black jeans. He glanced in the side-mirror as she slid them on beneath her dress, which she pulled over her head without ceremony. He prayed his excitement did not show as she revealed a breathtaking glimpse of creamy white breasts and hard, pink tipped nipples, before tugging on an outsize sloppy joe jumper over her jeans.

‘Never travel without this lot,’ she grinned at him, slipping on a pair of worn trainers. ‘I can hardly go on camera in a cocktail dress when I’ve got mangled bodies in the background.’

‘What happened?’ Dom asked, as Christie flung a map at him.

‘No idea. Train just came off the rails and plunged down the siding. Hit a row of houses.’

Dom shivered at the thought of the carnage that must be awaiting them. He had never even seen a dead body. Until he had joined INN, most of his time had been spent covering Arts Festivals and local celebrities. Suddenly he would be facing the kind of sight that made experienced rescue teams sick.

The police tape fluttering in the wind told them they’d found the right place. Christie leaped from the car and left Dom to park as she ran towards a policeman, waving her Press card. ‘Christie Bradley, INN. Is there someone I can talk to about the accident?’

‘If you’d like to move your car back to the end of the road, Miss Bradley, there’ll be someone along soon to take care of you,’ he said blandly. ‘Don’t cross the tape, please. We don’t want the efforts of our rescue workers

hampered.'

Christie scowled. If she waited for someone to find her, she'd end up corralled into a Press cordon and any chance of some decent pictures, let alone the real story, would be gone. But there was little she could do until Andy arrived. She walked back towards the MG and unlocked the boot, extracting a six-pack of lager that she had bought for the party and then forgotten. Handing one to Dom, she weighed up what to do. She needed to recce the scene to find a good position for the engineers to set up the links so that she could transmit a live piece back to the studio for the Late News at ten.

The rescue teams suddenly switched on their floodlights, slicing open the darkness around her. Christie was shocked at the carnage, far worse than she had expected. Three houses had been completely destroyed, several others untidily sliced in two. A bed hung suspended in mid-air, half in and half out of a bedroom. In one living room, she could see the television still playing.

Two teenage boys approached and hovered near her elbow. 'You a reporter?'

She nodded without really listening.

'Bleedin' mess, ain't it?' one of the boys said conversationally.

'Can't exactly see much from here,' Christie said crossly.

'Got a great view from my bedroom,' the boy volunteered.

Christie's pulse quickened. She had the feeling something was a little out of kilter here. There were too many police were here already, ahead of the emergency rescue services. Her reporting instincts told her that she was witnessing the result of more than a routine points failure.

She leaned into the car. 'Dom, look out for Andy,' she murmured. 'The minute they arrive, get them as close as you can for some wide-shots and general views of the area. See what else you can find out, then get back to me with the GVs.'

She straightened up and handed the boys a can of lager each. 'Christie Bradley, INN. How would you to like to become journalists for the day?'

A young policeman watched in astonishment as, moments later, a stunning blonde and two young boys marched straight towards his police tape and lifted it, then walked calmly past him. 'Hey, you can't do that!'

'How else am I supposed to reach my house?' Christie said indignantly. 'Number 32.'

'I'm sorry, miss, but I can't just let you go through there -'

'Me mum'll kill me if I don't go home,' one of the boys said. 'She said she'd ground me if I bunked off again.'

The policeman hesitated. Christie smiled brightly at him and shot through the gate of the boys' house before he could stop her. The front door opened, and a startled woman dodged out of the way as the two boys bowled past her, hauling Christie after them. The younger one stopped halfway up the stairs and leaned over the banister. 'It's all right, mum. It's the TV!'

One look from the boy's bedroom satisfied Christie that the trouble she'd undoubtedly just caused Ollie was worth it. She couldn't have a better vantage point. She pulled out her mobile and called the Newsdesk, her script already forming in her mind.

'Ollie, Christie here.'

'Where the fuck are you? Andy's going crazy.'

'I've sent Dom to find him. I'm inside the bedroom of one of the houses on the road by the crash. Don't ask why, just send me three hundred pounds. Where are links?'

Any material she shot could be beamed to the INN building from a van specifically equipped for that purpose. The only drawback was that it had to be placed on a high vantage point; if terrain was particularly hilly, it could take two or three links trucks to bounce the signal along from point to point.

'We're working on it,' Ollie said. 'They're all out at the moment, covering the by-election. They should be with you in an hour. It'll be tight, but we should just make the Late News at ten. We'll try to get the satellite dish down to you for your live two-ways later.'

'Time they get the signal established, the world and his wife are going to be here,' Christie snapped. 'If you want an exclusive, you'd better get them here in thirty, max. If you need me, you can get me on my mobile.'

'Can you give me a phono before you go?' Ollie said quickly. 'We've newsflashed the details, but you're the first

on the scene. Sixty seconds will do fine.'

'You need pictures to tell this story, Ollie, you know that,' Christie retorted. 'If I waste time giving you a phono now, we could lose any chance of some decent shots. Anyway, it won't tell you anything you don't know already.'

'It tells us you're there, and the BBC, ITN and CNN aren't,' Ollie said crisply.

'OK, ready when you are,' Christie said, rapidly composing her thoughts. 'Three...two...one...At the crash scene tonight...'

Swiftly Christie gave a concise account of the little information she already had, drawing a lightning picture of the scene of the tragedy in a few strong, clear words. As soon as she finished, she signed off with Ollie and put down the telephone. She guessed she would have half an hour before the whole area was declared off limits to the Press, and she didn't intend to waste it.

She left the two boys waiting for Andy and went into the back garden. The wrecked carriages loomed above her, illuminated by arc lights and sparks from cutting equipment. Two firemen carried a covered stretcher down the slope of the embankment. A waiting ambulance man directed them towards the next door garden which had been commandeered by the rescue services. Three similar shrouded bodies already lay there.

She turned back to the house as Dom, Andy and another cameraman arrived. 'You got through OK?'

'The copper on the gate's given this house up as a lost cause,' Dom said.

'OK, let's get going. Dom, liaise with Ollie for me. As soon as that links truck gets here, you give me a shout. Tell him I need at least two more crews, and we're going to want a lot of back up. We'll go live as soon as we possibly can. Jimmy, cover any pressers that come up, Dom can ask questions if necessary. Andy, you and I should get some pictures before this whole thing becomes a no-go area. Then we'll have to get to the links truck and get ready to go live with what we've got.'

Without checking to see if Andy was following, Christie edged discreetly towards the embankment where the nearest carriage lay sprawled on its side at the end of the garden. She could hear the hiss of the cutting gear as the rescue workers tried to free those trapped in the wreckage, and the hum of the generators that supplied power to the floodlights.

She moved beyond the circle of the arc lights into the darkness. Low branches whipped at her hair, and she heard Andy curse as he caught his camera in some tangled bushes. Suddenly she ran up against a wire fence. Beyond it, the slope of the embankment towered, seeming far steeper now she was at the bottom of it.

'Can you manage to get up this with your gear?' she asked Andy.

Andy grunted. 'Done worse.'

The eight carriages sprawled across the embankment to their right. They approached the wreckage nearest to them, and Christie realised that it was not a carriage, but the engine of the train. She gazed at it for a moment, wondering why her senses were instantly alert.

'There's something wrong with the engine,' she whispered after a few seconds. 'It shouldn't look like that.'

'Looks OK to me,' Andy said, already lining up the twisted metal in his viewfinder. 'Apart from the fact that it's been squashed to bits, of course.'

Christie left the cameraman filming the rescue teams busy cutting survivors from the wreckage, and sidled forward, keeping to the shadows. No-one had told her specifically not to be where she was, but she was in no doubt of the authorities' reaction should she be discovered.

As she moved towards the main carriages, she felt like a spirit moving invisibly through another world. The bulk of the wrecked train loomed, dark and threatening, all around her. Groans and cries for help emanated from the tangled metal. Christie stopped, appalled by the feeling of helplessness that washed over her.

Andy finished filming a shot of a teenage couple being carried from the debris, their arms still twined around each other, their bodies mangled and still. They were clearly dead. 'Let's go,' he said in a low voice. 'I've got what we need. We don't want someone to see us and confiscate the tape.'

As they headed back to the garden of Number 32, they saw a group of rescuers already lifting the engine from its precarious position just below the tracks. Andy paused to take a shot of the hoist being fastened around the debris. Two men inspecting the front of the engine turned away, and studied the track itself.

'Follow them,' Christie whispered. 'Something's going on here, I know it.'

They edged towards the track, using the activity around the engine as cover. Andy zoomed in on the ground the two men were examining.

'It was definitely an explosion, no doubt about that,' one man said, crouching down. Christie suddenly realised he was actually at the edge of a huge crater that the engine's bulk had prevented her from seeing before.

'Bastards,' the other said bitterly. 'What's the point the buggers giving us fifteen minutes warning when they don't tell us which fucking track they've put the device on? Christ, there must have been two hundred people on this train.'

The two men moved out of earshot, but not before Andy had recorded every word.