

## THE CHINAMAN

THEY MADE AN ODD COUPLE as they walked together through the store, the girl and the old woman. The girl was beautiful, quite, quite beautiful. Her sleek black hair hung dead straight down to the middle of her back and it rippled like an oily tide as she wandered through the racks of dresses and blouses. She was tall and slim and wore tight green cord trousers and cowboy boots and a brown leather bomber jacket with the collar turned up. She moved like a model, smoothly and controlled, as if used to being watched. The men that followed her with their eyes had no way of knowing where she came from other than that she was Oriental. She could have been Thai or Chinese or Korean but whatever she was, she was beautiful and that was all they cared about. Her cheekbones were high and well defined and her skin was the colour of milky tea and her eyes were wide and oval and she had a mouth that seemed to be in a perpetual pout. Every now and then something would catch her eye and she would take a dress or a blouse off its rack and hold it up and then shrug, not satisfied, before replacing it. Her hands were long and elegant and the nails were carefully painted with deep red varnish.

By the girl's side walked a gnarled old woman, a head shorter and an age older. Her face was wrinkled and pock-marked like chamois leather that had been left for too long in the sun. Her hair was grey and dull and cropped close to her head and her eyes were blank and uninterested in what was going on around her. When the girl asked her opinion on an item of clothing she would barely look at it before shaking her head and then she'd drop her gaze and concentrate on the floor. She wore a thick cloth coat and a faded scarf and she kept her hands thrust into her pockets despite the warmth of the store.

It was a Saturday in January and the weather outside was bitterly cold, piles of dirty slush squashed up against the kerb and wisps of white vapour feathering from the mouths of passers-by. The girl looked over the top of a rack of imitation fur coats topped with a sign that promised thirty per cent off, and through the streaked window. She shivered and didn't know why. She'd lived in London for as long as she could remember, and unlike her mother, she was well used to the British climate. It was as if someone had walked over her grave, or the grave of her ancestors.

She took one of the coats and held it against herself. A middle-aged man in a fawn trench coat waiting outside the changing rooms with a carrier bag full of packages looked at her and smiled and nodded his approval. She ignored him and studied the coat. The old woman snorted and walked off. The girl looked at the price tag but even with the sale discount she realised she couldn't afford it.

She looked through the large glass window again at the bustling crowds fighting to get into the department store across the road. She wanted to join them and go hunting for bargains but she could see that the old woman was tired and impatient to go home and they had an hour's travelling ahead of them. She put the coat back on the rack.

A large black and red motorcycle threaded its way through the traffic and parked on the double yellow lines in front of the main entrance to the store. It was brand new and gleaming apart from the tyres which were crusted with ice. On the back carrier box was the name of a courier firm. She watched the rider dismount like a cowboy getting off a horse. He was dressed in black leather with a white wrap-around helmet and a tinted visor. There was a walkie-talkie in a leather case hanging from a belt around his waist and a black receiver clipped to his left shoulder. The rider switched on his hazard warning lights and the amber flashing was reflected on the wet road. He looked up and down the pavement as if checking for traffic wardens and then turned his back on the bike and crossed the road towards the boutique. He stepped to one side to let a trio of giggling schoolgirls leave the shop and then came in. As he passed the girl he looked at her, up and down, and she turned to watch him go, his leathers squeaking with every step. The rider was empty handed so the girl assumed he was there to collect something, but he continued to move through the shoppers, passed the pay counter and then he pushed open the doors at the other side of the shop and went out into the street. The girl frowned and turned back to the window. The bike's lights were still flashing. Her frown deepened and at that moment the twenty-five pounds of Semtex

explosive in the back carrier box exploded in a flash of blinding white light, blowing in the window and striking her with thousands of glass daggers. At the last moment she tried to turn towards her mother, to shield her, but they died together in the hail of glass.

The Press Association news desk received the call as the first ambulance arrived at the department store, blue light flashing and siren whining. The reporter who took the call later told the police that the voice was Irish and had given a codeword that the police identified as genuine; the tip-off was not a hoax. The voice was that of a man, he couldn't tell if he was young or old, and the caller said that a bomb had just gone off in Knightsbridge and that the Provisional Irish Republican Army claimed responsibility for it. The reporter hadn't recorded the call, he was new on the job and no one had told him that he was supposed to. The line went dead and he took his notebook over to the news editor who told him to check with the police that there had indeed been an explosion and three minutes later the story went out over the wires as a flash – IRA BOMB EXPLODES OUTSIDE LONDON STORE – AT LEAST FIVE DEAD.

By the time it appeared on the screen of the news editor of the *Sunday World* he'd already had a phone call from a member of the public keen to earn a tip-off fee. He'd assigned two reporters to start phoning the police and their Sinn Fein contacts and was trying to track down their Belfast stringers.

It was 5.30pm., the crossing over point when the day shift began to drift off to the pub and the night reporters were arriving. The picture desk had sent two freelances and a staffer to the scene, but Knightsbridge was at least half an hour's drive away from the paper's Docklands offices.

More information was trickling over the wires on PA and Reuters and the death toll kept climbing with each snatch of copy.

"Jesus, now they're saying twelve dead," said Jon Simpson, the news editor. Behind him stood the chief sub and the editor, reading over his shoulder.

"Splash?" said the chief sub, knowing the answer would be yes. The front page lead at the afternoon conference had been a sixties pop star's drug problem.

"We'll have to pull our fingers out if we're going to make the first edition," said the editor. "We'll take the whole of page one, two and three, let me see the pics first. Hold the MP story until next week and hack back the food safety feature. Hang on, no, drop it altogether. And we'll save the splash until next week as well, it's exclusive." The chief sub scurried back to his terminal to redraw his page plans, shouting to the picture editor to send over everything he had.

"You've got two hours until the first edition, Jon. Get everybody on it." The editor wandered over to the picture desk while Simpson picked up the phone.

"Where's Woody?" Simpson yelled at his deputy who was busy scrolling through the PA wire.

"Where do you think?" he shouted back, raising his eyebrows.

"Drunken pig," said Simpson and rang the King's Head, a short stagger away from the office.

As the phone trilled behind the bar, Ian Wood was downing his second double Bells and trying to look down the front of the barmaid's blouse. She saw what he was up to and flicked her towel at him and laughed. "Don't let Sandy catch you doing that," she scolded and he grinned.

"Your husband's too good a guv'nor to go slapping the customers around," he said, finishing his whisky.

"Another?" she said as she picked up the phone. She listened and then mouthed silently "Are you in?"

"Who's asking?" he mouthed back.

"The office," she replied, and he realised they looked like a couple of goldfish gasping for breath. He nodded and took the phone off her. She picked his glass up and refilled it.

“Woody, are you on for a double shift?” asked Simpson.

Woody looked at the double measure of whisky in his glass and licked his lips but hesitated for only a second before he told Simpson he’d do it. Woody was a freelance and he needed money. If he’d been staff he’d have told the news editor where to get off, but it had been a long time since anyone had given Ian Wood a staff job.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“IRA bomb. A big one. Knightsbridge.”

“Christ. How many dead?”

“They’re saying twelve now, no make that thirteen, but they’re still counting. Get out there and get the colour. Link up with the monkeys while you’re there, they’ll need their captions written.” Woody heard Simpson call out for the names of photographers. “Dave Wilkins is the staffer, find him,” he said.

“I’m on my way,” said Woody and hung up.

He took the glass off the bar and swallowed it down in one.

“You off, Woody?” said the barmaid, surprised.

“Duty calls, darling,” he said. “Can you cash me a cheque?”

“Fifty?” she asked.

“Fifty is magic. You’re a life-saver. If ever that husband of yours...”

She waved him away and counted out the notes as Woody handed over the cheque.

“See you later,” he said, and walked down the dimly lit corridor and out of the pub door into the street. He turned right and walked the short distance to The Highway and hailed a cab heading towards the City.

The driver looked over his shoulder when Woody told him where he wanted to go. “We’ll never get near the place, mate,” he said. “There’s a bomb gone off.”

“Yeah I know,” said Woody. “I’m a reporter.”

“OK,” said the cabbie and sped off down the road. “Which paper d’yer work for then?”

“*Sunday World*,” replied Woody.

“Yeah?” said the cabbie. “What happened? Page Three girl killed was she?” His deep-throated laughter echoed around the cab.

They hit unmoving traffic long before they reached Knightsbridge and though the cabbie tried to find a way through the side-streets they were soon helplessly locked in.

“Best I can do,” said the driver apologetically, his professional pride wounded.

“No sweat,” said Woody, getting out. He handed a ten-pound note through the window.

“I’ll walk from here. Call it a tenner and give me a receipt, please.”

“Clamping down on expenses, are they?”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

The cabbie signed a receipt and handed it to Woody. Then as an afterthought he ripped off a few blank receipts from his pad. “Here,” he said, “fill these in yourself.”

“You’re a prince,” said Woody, and put them gratefully into his raincoat pocket.

He began to jog slowly towards the sound of sirens, his feet slapping on the wet pavement and his raincoat flapping behind him. Despite the cold he soon worked up a sweat. Ian Wood was not a fit man. He was slightly overweight but that wasn’t the problem, he was out of condition because he never took any exercise, hadn’t since his schooldays.

The police had cordoned off the area around the store and a burly sergeant blocked his way when he tried to duck under the barrier. He fished out his yellow plastic Metropolitan Police Press card and after the copper had scrutinised it he was waved through.

It was a scene from hell. Wrecked cars were strewn across the road, still smoking and hissing. There was an assortment of emergency vehicles, all with their doors open, radios crackling and lights flashing. There were two fire engines though their hoses were still in place, unused. There had obviously been a number of small fires burning but the firemen had used extinguishers to put them out. There were half a dozen ambulances, and as Woody walked towards the police top brass one of them pulled away and its siren kicked into life. Something squelched under Woody’s shoe and he looked down. He was standing on a hand. It was a small girl’s hand, the skin white and unlined, the nails bitten to the quick. The hand was attached to a forearm but that was all, it ended in a ragged, bloody mess at the point

where there should have been an elbow. Woody's stomach heaved and he pulled his foot away with a jerk, a look of horror on his face.

He backed away and bumped into a policeman wearing dark-blue overalls, black Wellington boots and thick, rubber gloves that covered most of his arms. The policeman picked up the dismembered arm and dropped it into a plastic bag he was carrying. As he straightened up, Woody saw that the man's face was covered with a white surgical mask and then he saw the blonde wavy hair and realised it wasn't a man at all, but a woman in her twenties. There were tears streaming down her face. She turned away from him, walked a few steps and bent down again. This time she picked up a shoe with a shattered bone sticking out of a green sock. Woody shuddered. There were dozens of policemen dressed in the same overalls and following the girl's grisly example. Woody realised with a jolt why the body count hadn't been finalised. It was at least an hour since the bomb had gone off and they were still picking up the pieces. Ambulancemen were ferrying bodies on stretchers at the run, some of the victims moaning or screaming, others still, their faces covered with blankets. The policemen in their blood-spotted overalls worked at a slower pace, knowing that it was more important to be thorough than fast. They were not in the business of saving lives, simply collecting evidence.

Woody looked around, surveying the damage. All the windows of the store had been blown in, as had those in the shops opposite, and the stonework was pitted and blackened. Lying half on and half off the pavement was the twisted frame of a motorcycle, the back a mass of scorched and melted metal. It was being examined by two middle-aged men in white overalls.

Shocked shoppers and staff were still filing out of the store, urged on by uniformed constables in yellow reflective jackets, as an inspector shouted through a megaphone that there could be another bomb in the vicinity and would the crowds please keep back. Woody knew that he was just saying that to keep the ghouls away. Two bombs would have meant double the risk for the bombers planting the devices, and the IRA never bothered using two devices against civilian targets, only against security forces in Northern Ireland. Besides, if there was any chance of a second device they'd keep the ambulancemen back while the Bomb Disposal Squad gave the place a thorough going over.

There were a handful of sniffer dogs and their handlers checking the street, and Woody could see more dogs inside the store, noses down and tails wagging, happy to be working. One of the dogs in the street, a long-haired Retriever, lunged forward and seized something in its jaws. Its handler yelled and kicked its flanks and the dog dropped whatever it had been holding. It was an arm. The handler yanked his dog away, cursing. The dog cowered, all the time keeping its eyes on the prize.

Woody went over to the Chief Superintendent and two inspectors who were surrounded by a pack of reporters and photographers. He recognised many of the faces and he knew that all the tabloids and heavies would be represented. If not, some news editor would be getting his backside soundly kicked. The older hacks were taking shorthand notes in small notebooks while the younger ones thrust mini tape-recorders in front of the police. Behind the pack were two television crews trying in vain to get a clear shot. He heard the click-whirr of a motor-drive and he turned to see Dave Wilkins aiming his Nikon at a torso lying in the gutter.

"They won't use it," Woody told him. "Too gory."

"So?" said the photographer.

Woody listened to the Chief Superintendent explaining what he thought had happened. A bomb in the back of a motorcycle, no warning, the streets crowded and the stores packed. No idea yet how many had been killed. Fifteen at least. Yes, almost certainly linked to the recent wave of London bombings, four so far. Correction, five including this one. Yes, the IRA had claimed responsibility.

"And that, gentlemen," he said with the wave of a gloved hand, "is all that I can tell you right now. Would you please all move back behind the barriers and let my men get on with their work. We'll be having a full press conference at the Yard later tonight." He politely pushed his way through the journalists, and they moved aside to let him go, knowing that

the officer had said all he was going to say. There was no point in antagonising him. Besides, they all had their own police contacts who would be a hell of a lot more forthcoming.

Woody went over to the shops facing the department store, noting down the names on the signs. His feet crunched on broken glass and he stepped to one side to let two ambulancemen with a stretcher out of a boutique. They were carrying a girl, her leather jacket and green cords shredded and ripped and dripping with blood. He knew she was a girl because of her long black hair. There was nothing left of her face, just strips of flesh hanging off white bone. Woody felt his stomach heave again. He'd been at accident scenes before, far too many to remember, but he'd never seen such carnage. The area reeked of death, of blood and burning and scorched meat. He fought to keep his emotions under control, knowing that he had work to do. It was harder for the reporters he thought bitterly. The monkeys had it easy. They looked at everything through the camera lens and that insulated them from the reality of it. But reporters had to be there and experience it before they could write about it, they had to open themselves to the horror, the grief and the pain. Sometimes it was almost too much to bear. Almost.

He stood by one of the ambulances and got some snatched quotes from a couple of harassed stretcher-bearers and then he followed a woman in a fur coat that he'd seen leaving the store, ducked under the barrier and caught up with her. Her eyewitness account was harrowing and she had no qualms about giving her name and address. Her eyes were glassy and Woody knew she was in a state of shock and he held her arm gently as he spoke to her and then gestured over at Wilkins, standing to one side so that he could get a head-and-shoulders shot of her.

"Got all you want?" Woody asked the photographer.

"Yeah," said Wilkins. "I'll head back and leave the freelancers to get the rest. You coming?"

"No, I'll ring the story in, it'll save time. I'll see you back there."

Woody half-heartedly looked for a call box, but knew that he stood little chance in Knightsbridge. He walked to a small Italian bistro and went inside.

"Can I use the phone?" he asked a waiter. The waiter began to protest in fractured English so Woody took out his wallet and gave him ten pounds. The protests evaporated and he was soon through to the office and dictating to a copytaker straight from his notebook. Twenty-five paragraphs, and he knew it was good stuff. When he'd finished he asked the copytaker to transfer him to the news desk and he checked that everything was OK with Simpson.

"Got it here, Woody," he said. "Great read."

"OK, I'm going back to see what else I can get. I'll call you." He hung up before Simpson could order him back to base. On the way out he got a receipt from the waiter.

There was a pub down the road and Woody gratefully walked up to the bar and ordered a double Bells. It was only when the whisky slopped around the tumbler that he realised how badly his hands were shaking.

The intercom buzzed, catching them all by surprise, even though they were waiting for him. There were three of them in the flat, drinking tea and watching television. They were casually dressed – baggy pullovers, faded jeans and grubby training shoes – and looked like sociology students stuck with nothing to do between lectures. One of the men was smoking and on the floor beside his easy chair was a circular crystal ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts. He leant over and stubbed out the one in his hand, pushed himself up and walked into the hall. On the wall by the door was a telephone with a small black and white television screen; he pressed a square plastic button and it flickered into life.

"Welcome back," he said to the figure waiting down below and pressed a second button, the one that opened the entrance door four floors below. As he waited for him to come up in the lift he went back into the lounge. "It's him," he said, but they knew it would be because

no one else knew they were there and if they did they wouldn't be coming in through the front door but through the window with stun grenades and machine guns.

There was an American comedy show on the television and canned laughter filled the room. Through the floor-to-ceiling sliding windows at the end of the lounge the man saw a tug struggle along the Thames, hauling an ungainly barge behind it.

He went back into the hall and opened the door as the lift jolted to a halt. The man who stepped out of the lift was in his early twenties, wearing grey flannel trousers and a blue blazer over a white polo neck sweater. He had dark-brown curly hair and black eyes and was grinning widely. "Did you see it?" he asked eagerly, before the other man even had a chance to close the door. He punched the air with his fist. "Did you bloody well see it?"

"Calm down, O'Reilly," said the man who'd let him in.

O'Reilly turned towards him, his cheeks flaring red. "Calm down?" he said. "Christ, man, you should have been there. You should have seen me. It was fan-bloody-tastic." He turned back to look at the television set. "Has it been on yet? How many did we get?"

"Fifteen so far," said the man sitting on the leather Chesterfield directly opposite the pseudo-antique video cabinet on which the television stood. "You did well, O'Reilly." He was the oldest of the group but even he had barely turned thirty. Although he had the broadest Irish accent he had Nordic blond hair and piercing blue eyes and fair skin. His name was also far removed from his Irish origins but Denis Fisher was Belfast-born and he'd killed many times for the Cause. "What about the helmet and the leathers?" he asked O'Reilly.

"In the boot of the car. Just like you said. It was so easy."

"Not easy," said Fisher. "Well planned."

"Whatever," said O'Reilly. "I deserve a drink." He went into the white-and-blue-tiled kitchen and opened the fridge. "Anyone else want anything?" he called, but they all declined. O'Reilly took out a cold can of Carlsberg and opened it as he walked back into the lounge. He pulled one of the wooden chairs out from under the oval dining-table and sat astride it, resting his forearms on its back.

"What next?" he asked, grinning.

"Yes," said the man who'd opened the door and who was now sitting on a flowery print sofa by a tall wooden bookcase. His name was McCormick. "What do we do next?"

Fisher smiled. "You're so bloody impatient," he laughed. He turned to look at the occupant of the chair by the window, the one they called The Bombmaker. "That depends on what MacDermott here comes up with." The Bombmaker grinned.

The comedy show was interrupted for a news flash and a sombre man with movie-star looks reported that sixteen people had died in a bomb explosion and that the Provisional IRA had claimed responsibility. They then cut to a reporter in a white raincoat standing under a streetlamp in Knightsbridge, who said that police now believed that the bomb had been in the back carrier of a motorcycle and that it had been detonated by a timing device.

O'Reilly punched the air again, and The Bombmaker's grin widened.