

## Chapter One

A buzz of excited, anticipatory conversation spread beyond the area immediately in front of the theatre. The huge crowd milled and flowed, joked and laughed and ordinary passers-by found themselves weaving and bobbing just to get wherever they wanted to go. The October evening's unseasonal warmth helped the conviviality along and every time the traffic lights caused a lull in the constant stream of vehicles another batch of concert-goers poured across the road to join the party. Several yards away, the Hammersmith flyover's huge underbelly partially blocked the view of a very pleasant evening sky.

Detective Constable Gary Houseman, in his polo shirt, cords and casual jacket had found a relatively clear space just inside one of the glass-paned front doors. He scanned the street outside, waiting to see a familiar head of chestnut hair bouncing through the crowds. Madeleine hadn't been sure exactly what time she would arrive. Still on probation in her new job, she didn't want to try for time off until she'd become a bit more used to the office protocol. A warm glow spread through Gary as he thought of her, imagined her crossing the road underneath the flyover looking out for him in the place where they'd agreed he would wait. Relief mingled with his anticipation of Maddie's arrival. A new boy himself, still at everyone's beck and call, at one point his hopes of making this date had looked doubtful. He had booked the tickets months ago; but as the concert drew close, the new roster for the Homicide Assessment Team assigned him to duty. It turned out all right, though. Detective Inspector Angela Costello, his line manager and Maddie's stepmother, told him she'd could get cover if necessary.

"Enjoy yourself; that's an order," she'd said.

He grinned as he remembered this and cast a look down at the programme in his hand. Tonight's show, the closing night of seven at this theatre, made the culmination of a national tour by pop sensation, Brendan Phelan. He'd heard of him, of course; who hadn't? That charismatic personality, fine tenor voice and proven musical abilities had ensured a steady ascent in every music lover's consciousness to prestige as a huge star. Though Gary knew this, he still couldn't name a single one of his tracks. The tickets were meant as a special night out for Maddie.

"You'll like him, I promise," she'd assured him when they were originally deciding where they would go. "His music's amazing. He does this fantastic blend of pop-rock and classical and he uses gunshots and whip cracks on stage!"

Gary had tried unsuccessfully to imagine this bizarre blend of theatrical effects and music, but it sounded exciting. He felt open to giving the man a chance.

"What, *real* guns and whips?" he'd wanted to know.

"Oh yeah, not just sound effects." Then she'd qualified it. "Well, I suppose the guns are stage guns, but they make a heck of a noise, and the whips are real. I've seen it a couple of times and it works with the music really well."

*This I must see*, Gary had thought, unconvinced but definitely intrigued. The photos on the programme gave the impression of a spectacular show, anyway. He looked out into the crowd again; any time now she'd be here. A raised voice diverted his attention suddenly away from the street in front of him to the area near the box office behind.

A well-dressed man in his forties with four girls of about sixteen in tow stood, rather red in the face, having some sort of altercation with one of the theatre staff. "What do you mean?" he was saying. Gary could hear the stress in his tone.

“I’m very sorry, sir,” the staff member replied softly, clearly hoping to avoid an embarrassing scene, “but these are not authenticated tickets.”

“Not authenticated?” His voice became closer to a shout now as anger took over. “I paid an absolute bundle for these! This is a birthday treat for my daughter and her friends.” The girls with him looked at one another apprehensively as they could see the longed-for treat disappearing before their eyes.

As Gary watched, another man, dressed in an evening suit and an air of authority, moved close to the noise. Calm control oozed from every pore of his skin. Gary judged him to be from higher up the theatre management chain. “May I help you, sir?” he asked the father of the birthday girl.

“Yes, your assistant here says there’s something wrong with my tickets and he’s refusing to let us in.”

The manager took the tickets and looked at them. He looked up at the theatre-goer, his face full of regret. “I’m very sorry, sir. My assistant here is perfectly correct. You’ll need to contact the agency where you bought them. I’m afraid I’m not able to help.”

“But I paid for them with my credit card. There’s a record, surely.”

The mouth of the birthday girl began to wobble and tears sprang into her eyes. “Dad,” she croaked. “Dad, let’s just go. We can talk about it outside.”

“Babes, there must be some mistake. I got them online from a reputable site.” He turned back to the attendant and for a moment it looked as though he might square up to him, but his daughter’s obvious distress stopped him and he started to move the party towards the street. “Scoundrels ought to be locked up,” Gary could hear him muttering as he shepherded his young charges through the doors.

“Oh dear, what a shame; that happens a lot, I think,” said a familiar voice in Gary’s ear. He jumped and turned to smile into the face of Madeleine Costello. He leaned forward and kissed her.

“You do hear of it quite a bit,” he agreed. “Those poor girls aren’t going to get their special birthday outing now.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Madeleine, looking out into the street. Gary followed the direction of her eyes. As the man and the girls stood irresolute on the pavement, they were being watched by a ponytailed, T-shirted man in his twenties with narrow tattoos of hawks swooping down each bare arm.

“Ah yes; do you reckon that’s a tout?” he asked.

“Wouldn’t be surprised; they can smell disappointed punters from a long way off.”

Together they watched as the tattooed man sidled towards the group and moved slowly in a semicircle to its other side where their leader stood. The man’s daughter was still dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. The tout leaned a little closer and said something to catch the man’s attention. He gave some instruction to the girls and moved with the tout a short distance away from them.

“He didn’t waste any time homing in on the situation, did he?” remarked Gary.

“They’re haggling,” said Madeleine, watching the transaction take place.

“I bet he’ll pay up. He won’t want to disappoint his daughter and her pals.”

Madeleine nodded her agreement. “It’s going to cost him a bomb; Brendan Phelan is a really hot ticket.” She slipped an arm round his waist. “Come on, let’s go and get our seats.”

The atmosphere in the auditorium was electric. They could feel the eager anticipation of a good night’s entertainment in the air. Seeing himself surrounded by ardent fans, Gary suppressed

his reservations about the evening ahead but remained sceptical as the lights dimmed. A hush fell over the packed auditorium. He sensed the audience waiting expectantly.

Silence.

Darkness.

Then everybody jumped at the resounding crack of a whip. At that exact moment a set of spotlights illuminated three backing singers dressed in black. Seconds later the same thing happened to bring the band into view. Each visible person on stage stood motionless, the darkness outside the pools of light, absolute. Gary sensed the audience holding its corporate breath. Again a loud whip cracked out across the stage, and a gunshot blasted from somewhere above as a bright single light illuminated Brendan Phelan standing stage right and solitary, his head bowed. He jerked his face up, spread his arms, smiling, and everybody in the place erupted to a thunderous applause. Brendan Phelan, mega-star, knew how to wow the crowd.

Three numbers in, Gary's applause had become spontaneous; two hours later he admitted to himself that Madeleine was right. Brendan's charisma, his lyrics – sometimes poignant, often incisive – his melodious voice and his showmanship had drawn him in.

He had been especially impressed with the sound effects. "Those gunshots worked well with that song, didn't they?" he leaned across to say in her ear after one particularly astonishing number. Even so he'd felt some concern when two figures, again in black, appeared from either side of the stage and began shooting into the air, the shots ringing out in perfect timing with the beat of an instrumental break in the middle of a song. It was very effective, but Gary still found it a bit worrying. A recent case he'd worked on had involved someone taking a pot-shot at D.I. Costello and the memory was still all too vivid. Maddie, even sitting right next to him had to listen intently to catch what he said.

"Oh yes," she nodded emphatically. "I'm amazed how he does it."

As the show drew towards its close, most of the audience rose to their feet. They calmed down from the clamour of appreciation greeting the previous number for no longer than it took to recognize the opening chords of Brendan's anthem. Then the foot stomping, clapping and cheering started all over again. In writing "Battle For Your Love", Brendan had incorporated elements from the 1812 overture. This was Maddie's all-time favourite.

"I hope he's not going to use real cannons," joked Gary. Before tonight he would have considered messing about with the 1812 not far short of sacrilege. But Maddie had turned to face the stage again and he couldn't be sure she heard him.

He shook his head to clear the image of real cannons on stage, and joined in with the clapping and the stomping, wholeheartedly this time. What a sensational night this had been.

Brendan gave them four encores, each more enthusiastically received than the previous one, but finally the show came to an end and they joined the massive crowd slowly feeding out along the aisles through the exits.

Madeleine clung to Gary's arm as she felt herself pushed and pulled in the crowd. "Don't let go of me," she said.

Gary hugged her more tightly. "I've no intention of doing that," he answered. She smiled at the deeper meaning beneath the obvious one. They hadn't been going out together for very long, but each could recognize something solid and deep forming in their relationship.

"I wonder if they'll make that announcement about Brendan having gone," said Gary after a few moments, shuffling patiently in step with the pack.

"What, like the old 'Elvis has left the building' line?"

“Yeah, so people don’t waste their time going round to the stage door trying to get an autograph.”

“You can’t get to the stage door at this venue,” replied Madeleine. “I’ve been to a couple of concerts here before. They’ve got it blocked off from the public.”

“Fans must still try, though, surely?”

“I expect so but there are probably heavies guarding the place.”

“Yes, I suppose – oh hello, I can feel night air on my face. I do believe we’ve nearly made it to the outside world.”

Madeleine laughed as they pushed their way across the foyer and into the street.

“There’s the flyover,” he said, pointing. “OK, the tube’s that way, then.”

“Sure, but let’s just have a quick peek at the stage door first,” said Madeleine, pulling him along to the right.

“There’s no point if it’s blocked off and guarded,” protested Gary. He stopped, surprised by the sheepish smile that suddenly appeared on Madeleine’s face.

“We might just see him from a distance, you never know,” she said.

He looked quizzically at her. “Are you a bit star-struck?” he asked

“Just a bit,” she admitted.

He grinned and accompanied by the noise of the traffic roaring round the Broadway, followed her to the corner just a short way along the street. A few other concert-goers had the same idea and they formed a small, untidy procession of people pulling away from the bulk of the crowd. A few yards brought them as far as they could go. Black iron gates to cut off access to the alley stood slightly ajar but, as predicted, a couple of tall, chunkily built men stood guarding the entrance. They moved to bar the way when Madeleine and Gary, at the front of the bunch, appeared, but relaxed a little as it became clear they had no intention of venturing further. The alley was barely visible, though Madeleine stood on tiptoe and Gary craned his neck for a better view. They could just see a white van parked some way along. A box of some sort sat on its roof with what looked like a black bin liner fluttering a little in the night air. A dark crate stood, half-hidden, behind it, ready to be loaded, but they could see no one moving around.

“Packing up already. They don’t waste any time,” said Gary.

“It seems not.”

“I don’t think you’re going to see him,” he said, looking at her regretfully. He turned towards the road, wanting to be on his way to the tube.

“No, you’re –” Suddenly a resounding shot rang out, closely followed by the sound of a door banging within the enclosure. It seemed to come from beyond the van. Both the heavies started and their heads whipped round to face the alley, though neither man budged from his post. Gary noted the questioning look that passed between them then, and his police training kicked in immediately. He checked his watch: 23:05.

“What on earth was that?” cried Madeleine, stepping a little closer to Gary.

“A gunshot,” he replied. “Wait here and have your phone ready.” He fumbled for his police ID and started forward.

One of the bouncers moved to block him. “Sorry, mate, out of bounds.”

“Police,” he said, holding up his badge. “I heard a shot.”

The other guard joined his colleague and put a hand up to prevent Gary passing. “S’all right officer,” said the second man reassuringly, humouring him. “They use shots in this performance.”

“The show’s over,” Gary retorted. He pushed past them, dashing towards the van, evading the hands reaching out to grab him, dodging the guard who cursed and ran in pursuit. He had every expectation of making a fool of himself. He’d find nothing more than backstage staff horsing around with the guns. A scene began to roll in his mind – himself backing off through the gates with a sheepish expression on his face; apologizing to the security guards, and to Madeleine; too embarrassed to reprimand the culprits for larking around with loaded weapons, fake or not.

But what met his eyes once he got past the van obliterated all thoughts of anybody playing around, or stage props filled with blanks.

Like an awful parody of the show, the bulkhead light above the stage door shone down on a man sprawled motionless on the ground where he had fallen. The light reflected on a spreading pool of blood seeping from the back of his neck. As the bouncer at his heels stopped in his tracks and let fly several expletives, Gary hurried to the fallen man and hunkered down, trying not to disturb anything. He took hold of the unresisting wrist – no discernible pulse. Ignoring the doorman now speaking urgently into his walkie-talkie (“Tango One to Foxtrot Four, Tango One to Foxtrot Four, dammit! Come in someone!”), Gary pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and punched in the emergency number.

Only one other person was present, on the far side of the alley. As he spoke into the phone Gary’s eyes travelled up from the feet. He saw the black trousers and shirt, unchanged since the performance had finished, the shiny, silvery waistcoat which had glinted and glistened under the spotlights just a short while earlier. Finally, Gary met the horrified, staring eyes of Brendan Phelan.