

An Excerpt from Chapter 5

A torrent of rainwater surged across the Kenwick Road, forcing Mick Chandra to abruptly apply the brakes of his BMW 1100 Sport. The heavy bike spun 180 degrees, sending sheets of water jetting in every direction. Rivulets streamed down the visor of his helmet. Already soaked from the spray of the lorries darting around him on the M25 and M11, Mick needed another bath of road water like a proverbial hole in the head.

“The sun will come out tomorrow, my arse,” he grumbled.

Turning his black and chrome motorcycle around, he gingerly guided it through the fast-moving stream.

Come on, baby. You can do it. Just get me to the Stanhopes' house. That's all I ask.

When Mick was in Kenwick during the initial investigation of the Chandler murder, the Stanhopes and Thompsons often put him up for the night. Were it not for their hospitality, he would have had to take his chances finding lodging in Walden Marsh.

Most of the villagers had taken a shine to him. Mick quickly became one of the lads, even though he had made it patently clear they were all suspects in Peter Chandler's murder until the case was solved. At the Rose and Crown pub, he had shot darts with the best of them and drank the farm hands under the table. Yet, while he was socializing with the natives, pub crawling and ogling girls, he was always on the job. Even while partying, Mick was investigating, taking in every nuance of what a person said or did, entering their words and actions on a mental matrix that he would call up later like a computer program. With his one-of-the-lads personality, Mick had an uncanny ability to tease information out of people, then process it.

On this late Saturday afternoon, the September light was fast fading. Relieved as he turned onto Monk's End, Mick began to fantasize about a nice shot of Irish whiskey, a hot meal, and a warm duvet on a soft bed in one of the Stanhopes' bedrooms. When he spied the sign for The Briars as he rounded a corner, Mick knew he was home free. He turned into the Stanhopes' gravel drive and parked his bike under the garage's portico to protect it from the rain.

Stiffly, he dismounted, wincing in pain from a .38 caliber slug he had taken in his upper thigh years ago when he was a young probationer on the force. Long hours of hard riding on the Sport invariably inflamed the old wound. Limping slightly, he descended the short stairwell at the front of the house, and knocked on the door. There was no answer.

Well, damn! I can't stand here in the rain like an idiot. Maybe someone's in the greenhouse out back.

He took the path that curved through the rose garden. Approaching the greenhouse, he saw that, indeed, someone was inside, but through the heavy rain couldn't make out whether it was Clif or Penny. What he could see was Molly, the Thompson's crippled dog, standing inside, pressing her nose against the greenhouse door. Without warning, the door flew open.

"Get him, Molly!" he heard a woman command.

"Hey, girl," he said, squatting down. "It's just your old mate Mick."

A three-legged golden retriever mongrel mix, Molly rolled over on her back, assuming a submissive position.

"Who the hell are you?"

Mick looked up to see a woman swimming in a mackintosh much too big for her. Although her face was partially concealed by the slicker's hood, he knew by

the sound of her voice that she wasn't Penny.

"Who the hell are you?" he shot back at her.

"Who's asking?"

Taking off his helmet, Mick stood and dug into an inside pocket of his leather biker jacket. Removing his badge and ID, he shoved them toward her.

"Inspector Michael Chandra, Scotland Yard."

"Oh, Jesus," she groaned, pushing the hood back, revealing her face. Mick didn't recognize her.

"Sorry, Inspector. You see, I'm here by myself, and when I saw you coming up the garden, well...you looked like Darth Vader."

"Oh, yeah. It's the black leather and the helmet."

"Jessica Beaumont. I'm renting the Stanhopes' house while Penny and Clif are in America." Jess extended her hand, which Mick accepted.

"Oh? I had no idea they were away. Are you renting the Thompsons' dog as well?"

"No...no. Troy and Gwen are in Edinburgh for a few days. I'm just Molly's babysitter."

"Say, Miss Beaumont, do you..."

"Please, call me Jess."

"And call me Mick. Do you think we could go inside, Jess? I'm soaked to the

bone.”

“Of course. Where are my manners?”

Mick followed her into the house with a very wet Molly gamely hopping on all fours behind him.”

“Ah, this is what I remember — the heat from the Aga,” he said as they entered the house through the mud room. Molly furiously shook the water from her fur, getting Mick even wetter.

“Sorry about that,” Jess said.

With his hand, Mick wiped the dog’s shakings from his face. “How did Gwen and Troy acquire a three-legged dog?”

“They found her badly injured and abandoned on Monk’s End. Her leg had to be amputated, and they simply didn’t have the heart to put her up for adoption.”

“Because no one would have wanted a crippled dog, right?”

Nodding, Jess bent down and gave Molly a hug.

“Well, thank God for the warmth of the hearth. I sure was getting weary of that bone-numbing rain and wind,” Mick said.

“The Aga is a blessing in this weather,” Jess agreed, straightening up. “You’d better get out of those wet things before you come down with pneumonia.”

She took off the oversized mackintosh, hanging it next to the mud room door, then removed some ripe greenhouse tomatoes from its pockets. Fully revealing herself, Mick stared at her the way a man stares at an unexpected treasure he has just stumbled upon, not believing his good fortune.

Did I luck out. She's a babe!

"If you need some dry clothes, I'm sure we could find some things of Clif's upstairs."

"I'll be all right," he said, sitting on the floor and pulling off his leather pants.

"Perhaps I should leave while..."

"It's okay. I have trousers on underneath these," he reassured her, revealing a pair of black jeans. "I may need to borrow a pair of Clif's mules while my boots are drying, though."

"Fine. I'll go up and fetch them."

"Not necessary. I know where they are. I'll get them later."

"You've been here before?"

"On several occasions. I used to stay with the Stanhopes or Thompsons during the original investigation of the Chandler murder."

"Yes, Troy mentioned your name to me. Is the case being reopened?"

Mick stood and removed his leather biker jacket, revealing a black turtleneck that showed his muscular upper body to best advantage.

"Yep. And I'm in charge of it now."

Jess didn't comment.

"Uh... do you think there might be a shot of Bushmills lying around the

house?" he asked sheepishly.

She smiled at the suggestion. "I think Clif may have some in the liquor cabinet. I'll check."

Turning to leave, she stopped, looking back at him. "By the way, hang your leather jacket and pants here in the mud room. If you put them near the Aga in the kitchen, they'll shrink to squirrel-size. But you can go ahead and put your boots in the kitchen."

Mick strolled into the kitchen, glad to feel the radiant heat of the behemoth cast-iron stove. He placed his boots directly in front of the Aga, then walked over to the table, where Boodles was sleeping on a chair.

"We're in luck," Jess announced as she came into the kitchen, carrying two bottles along with two crystal rocks glasses. "An unopened bottle of Bushmills and an almost full bottle of Beefeaters gin."

"Brilliant. I see that old Boodles is still with us," he observed, stroking the cat.

"Oh, yes. Neat, or on the rocks?" she asked, popping the top of the Bushmills bottle.

"Neat."

"One finger, or two?"

"Two."

Jess poured the equivalent of two American shots of Irish whiskey in his glass and handed to him. Then she went to the freezer compartment of the Stanhopes' Americansized refrigerator and filled her glass with ice, brought it back to the table and poured herself a generous gin on the rocks.

"Here's mud in your eye," she toasted him.

"Bottoms up."

Sipping the whiskey, Mick emitted a long, satisfied sigh. "You have no idea how good this tastes after being chased down by lorries in the rain on the M roads."

"Oh, God, I hate those lorries," she said, motioning him to sit at the table while she sat opposite him.

"So what brought you to Kenwick, Jess?"

Hesitating, she took a long pull on her drink. "If I told you the weather, would you believe me?"

"Only if you're a masochist."

"All right, then. I came here for the waters."

"There are no waters in Kenwick," he said, proving that she wasn't the only one in the room who knew the dialogue from the film, Casablanca. "You were misinformed."

Instead of laughing, Jess solemnly stared into her rocks glass.

"I'm...sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

"It's okay," she said, gamely smiling at him. "I'm running away from some demons. But, then, you probably had guessed that, being a police inspector and all."

Tilting back in the chair, Mick thoughtfully tapped his lower lip with his index finger.

“Ah, yes. Now I have it! You are the long-lost American relative of Her Majesty the Queen who has returned to the motherland to claim your rightful inheritance.”

“That’s it!”

“And you were the secret love of your cousin, Prince Charles, who longed to marry you and couldn’t because...well...you’re cousins.”

“Alas, our poor children would be idiots.”

“That’s par for the course in the Royal family, I’m afraid. Here, show me your palm.”

She held out her hand. “What do you see, oh swami?”

“Ah! Just as I thought. I see...I see a stranger.”

He looked up at her, then back down at her palm. “Yes, a dark, mysterious stranger who’s going to spirit you away from all of this.”

“Where’s he going to take me?”

“To his gypsy camp, where he will marry you and make you deliriously happy.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. And you will bear him many children.”

Jess narrowed her eyes. "How many is many?"

"Umm...lots. But — you will have a nanny, too."

"Well, that's good to know, what with good help being so hard to get these days."

Mick studied her palm more closely. "I see that you have met the great love of your life already."

Jess pulled her hand away, feeling that Mick's 'reading' was cutting a bit too close to the bone.

"That'll be the day," she muttered.

"It's true. You just don't know it yet."

"Well, Inspector, I must say I'm impressed with your psychic abilities."

"I perform magic tricks, too."

"I bet you do," she said, getting up to freshen her drink.

Mick leaned back in the chair and stretched, hoping that this beautiful woman might notice his well-formed chest.

"So what can you tell me about the Chandler case?" she asked, sitting again, apparently oblivious to Mick's physical charms.

"What do you want to know?"

She shrugged one shoulder. "Anything. Everything. Unless, of course, you can't talk about it."

"I can reveal the obvious. Most of the details have been in the press. Why are you so interested?"

"Perhaps it's because I don't think anyone should get away with murder."

"A lot of people do, you know."

"I'm painfully aware of that, Mick."

Mick detected a tinge of anger in her answer.

"Well, I think Chandler knew his killer," he volunteered.

"Someone in the village?"

"Or nearby."

"Jack Maynard?"

"Why Maynard?"

"Well, for one thing, he was Chandler's accountant."

"How did you know that?"

"Troy told me," Jess said. "Is Maynard a suspect or isn't he?"

"Yes, but so is Adam Marr."

"Adam...Marr?"

"We know for a fact that Marr and Chandler were thick as thieves in some

land deals around here," Mick said.

"So what? A lot people do business together without killing each other."

"Marr's wife, Patricia, was sleeping with Chandler, as well as with half the male population of Kenwick."

Jess swallowed hard. "I didn't know that."

"No reason you should. Look, Jess, everyone is a suspect until I find the murderer. Hell, if you had been living in the village at the time of Chandler's murder, you'd be one as well."

"Who else was Patricia Marr sleeping with?" she persisted, ignoring his comment.

"Tony Neville."

"Neville! Good lord."

"Jack Maynard, too."

"Figures."

"And the vicar...what's his name? Grimsby."

"Get outta here! Even the vicar?"

"Without question."

"Is the vicar a murder suspect?"

"Yes, but not a prime suspect."

"But Adam Marr is?"

"What's Marr to you?"

"Nothing," she lied. "I'm just curious as to why Marr is a prime suspect and the vicar isn't."

"Because, for one thing, Marr and Chandler had a vested interest in each other. Marr Enterprises sold Chandler some valuable property in London as well as leasing his accountant the prime pastureland next door to his place. Also, Chandler purchased his manor house in Kenwick from Marr. It had previously belonged to Marr's sister, who moved to Antigua."

"None of that is illegal."

"Not that we know of. But such dealings do open up more opportunities for hostilities to fester," Mick explained. "Look, Marr's wife is sleeping with Chandler, and Chandler and the husband have some sort of business relationship. There are a lot of things that can turn sour in that scenario. You know what they say — familiarity breeds contempt."

"Business ventures make bad neighbors," Jess muttered, quoting Troy.

"What?"

"Oh...nothing. How does Maynard enter into this equation, Mick?"

"Same thing. Maynard was Chandler's accountant and must have know everything about his business dealings, some of which were probably not on the up and up."

"What makes you think that?"

“Because Maynard is known to be a wealthy man. Do the math, Jess: the bloke’s an accountant! And because he was accountant for many of the locals, and therefore knew everything about their business dealings, he may have been blackmailing Chandler and others. Although Maynard has vehemently denied that charge, I believe he doth protest too much.”

“And now you’re back here in Kenwick to resume the investigation.”

“Right. First, I want to question Marr again.”

“Well, you’re out of luck. He’s on his way to Brussels to attend an EU agricultural conference over the next few days,” she blurted out.

Mick wondered how Jess knew that. ““You keep his diary?”

“Why...no, of course not.”

She had painted herself in a corner and knew it. When Adam Marr left her bed early this morning, he had informed Jess that he would be in Brussels for the next few days. After a night of love making, the cavalier abruptness of his departure had left her feeling dismissed. And now, in light of Mick’s revelations, she hardly relished the notion that she had spent the night with a murder suspect.

“How do you know Marr is in Brussels, Jess?”

“Am I being interrogated?”

“Yes,” Mick said. “Remember, anything you say about the Chandler murder is my business.”

“I’ll remember that.”

Although he sensed there was something going on between Marr and Jess, Mick decided to drop the subject for now. Foremost in his mind at the moment was that he wanted Jess to like him.

“Got anything to eat around here?” he asked, getting up to help himself to another Bushmills.

“Sure,” she said. “I’ll make us some dinner if you like. Where do you plan to spend the night?”

“Here.”

“You can’t stay here!”

“Well, then I’ll stay with the Thompsons across the road.”

“Oh...no, that won’t do. As I told you, they’re in Edinburgh for a long weekend. That’s why I have Molly.”

“Damn, I forgot. But I have to sleep somewhere,” Mick said. “I plan to spend tomorrow going about the village, questioning the natives. In the evening, I’ll go to the Rose and Crown to see what I can ferret out. ‘Want to come along?”

Jess hesitated before answering. “I...I’ll take a raincheck, pardon the pun. Look, you’d better stay here, after all. You can sleep in one of the guest bedrooms.”

“I was hoping to have the master bedroom above the kitchen.”

“That’s where I sleep.”

Mick smiled at the thought. “Guess it’s out of the question then. Let me see,

now...it's Saturday night. So Sunday should be a good day to make my rounds, seeing as how the English don't go to church. You don't happen to know if Marr's daughter is home for the weekend, do you?"

"Why would I know that?"

"You seem to know where he is."

Refusing to be baited, Jess didn't respond, and Mick let it drop.

Stretching again, he suppressed a yawn. "Ah, the country air makes a man hungry and knackered."

"We'd better have some dinner before you slump face down into the Bushmills, Mick."

Over a dinner of roasted leg of lamb stuffed with fresh rosemary and garlic, baked garden squash, a salad of baby greens, and sponge treacle for dessert — all of which Mick helped Jess to prepare — he entertained her with Blackstone's disappearing salt shaker trick. For the remainder of the evening, neither of them brought up the subject of Peter Chandler's murder.