

Chapter One

On the October morning that the semi-nude corpse of eight-year-old Josie Stephens was discovered floating in a north London canal, Detective Inspector Michael 'Mick' Chandra had no idea that the next several weeks of his life would be dedicated to tracking down her murderer.

As far as Mick was concerned, he was on his way from his Stoke Newington home to spend the morning putting the final touches on a sting operation with his team at New Scotland Yard. A call from the Yard's Commissioner changed all of that. Sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic on Albion Road, Mick was informed over his cell phone that he had just been seconded to the Yard's Pedophile Unit. Given only the sketchiest of details, he was instructed to make his way to the Grand Union Canal in Islington to meet with Detective Chief Inspector Kip Brodie, head of the Unit.

After another maddening thirty-five minutes of snailing through the rush hour traffic on upper Essex Road, Mick was standing next to Brodie, watching divers retrieve the child's body from the murky, trash-infested waters of the canal.

Fifty-five-year-old Kip Brodie was a twenty-three year veteran of the Criminal Investigation Department, better known as the CID. Revered by his staff, he had a reputation as a dogged investigator into crimes of child abuse and pedophilia. Of middling height, stocky build, with piercing pale blue eyes and a full head of light brown hair just beginning to turn grey at the temples, Brodie's high-flushed coloring betrayed his Scottish heritage.

He stood in conspicuous contrast to the thirty-five-year-old Chandra, himself a fourteen-year veteran, seven of them with the Metropolitan Police, and another seven and counting specifically with the CID. Mick's Anglo-Indian heritage was obvious from his dusky good looks, onyx-black eyes, straight patrician nose, and black-brown short cropped hair, gifts from his Kerala Indian father. His 6'1"

height and muscular build were attributes from his Welsh mother's side of the family. What both men did share in common were stellar reputations within the CID.

"How many scenes like this have you witnessed, Kip?"

Brodie grimly shook his head. "In my nine years with the Unit, more than I care to remember." He trained his intense blue eyes on Mick. "'Hope you don't mind that I pulled rank to have you seconded to the Pedophile Unit, Mick. I'm desperate for additional help, especially the kind you can offer. You have the best record of anyone in the CID for breaking the cases that have gone cold. Just when we're up against a vicious pedophile ring, the Home Office cut my budget to ribbons."

"Happy to be of service," Mick assured the Chief. "However, I would like to have Detective Sergeant Chang seconded to the Unit as well," he added, referring to his partner, Elizabeth Chang.

Brodie smiled, causing the lines around his eyes to deepen into crevasses. "I've already requested her. The Commissioner agreed, after Elizabeth conducts this morning's orientation for the sting you've been planning."

"Brilliant. What can you tell me about this pedophile ring?"

"Not much. What we do know is that it probably operates somewhere out of north London, because all of the children who have gone missing are from the Hackney Borough."

"How many children are missing so far?"

"Before this morning, four." Kip nodded toward Josie's corpse. "Now three."

"Sweet Jesus," Mick muttered. "Anything else?"

“One thing. From persistent rumors we’re getting on the street, one of the participants in this ring — perhaps even its leader — may be a member of Parliament. According to the little information we’ve been able to gather, the head of the group refers to himself as ‘The Erlking.’”

“That’s curious. I vaguely recall a poem entitled The Erlking about a troll who snatches children.”

“Well, I don’t know much about poetry,” Brodie said, “but I do know we’ve got a serious problem on our hands, and no child in north London will be safe until we can break up this group.”

The two men lapsed into silence as they watched the police forensics team comb the area around the canal while the divers, protected from the cold in heavy-rubber wet suits, struggled through the numbing water to bring Josie’s corpse to shore, depositing it on the bank near them.

“She’s wearing nothing but a pair of knickers,” Kip noted. “The bastards obviously disposed of Josie like a piece of rubbish once they finished with her. God, look how pretty she is. What a bloody waste!”

It pained Mick to see the nearly-nude child lying on the wet grassy bank exposed to the early morning cold. He resisted the impulse to take off his storm coat and drape it over the child’s pitiful blue corpse.

“What’s her full name?”

“Jocelyn Ann Stephens,” Kip answered, still looking at her.

“Are her parents here?”

“Parent.”

“Single mother?”

“Isn’t that usually the case?”

“Where’s the father?”

Brodie shrugged. “Who knows?”

“So another deadbeat dad goes missing. Mind if I speak with the mother?”

“Go ahead. She’s sitting in my car,” Kip said, jerking his head in the direction of the Yard car parked on the grass near the lip of the canal.

As Mick approached the vehicle, he could see Josie’s distraught mother sitting in the back seat with her head between her knees. He rapped gently on the window.

“Mrs. Stephens, Inspector Michael Chandra,” he announced through the glass, displaying his badge and ID. “May I have a few words with you?”

Slowly lifting her head, the woman nodded, wearing the expression of a somnambulist. Mick opened the door, sliding in next to her.

“I realize this is a terrible time for you, Mrs. Stephens, but the more information we can get now, the sooner we’ll be able to apprehend whoever did this to your daughter.”

“Josie was only eight,” the woman muttered to no one in particular.

“I know,” Mick responded gently. “When did you last see her?”

She blinked back her tears, trying to remember. “A week ago this past

Tuesday — in the morning, when she left for school. I couldn't walk with her that day."

"Why?"

"I...couldn't because...." The words stuck in her throat like a bone. "I work as a server in a cafe at one of the Marks and Spencers. That morning — the morning Josie went missing — I was on breakfast duty... you know, for the commuters. So I had to leave home earlier than usual."

"Josie was home alone?"

Mick's question prompted an avalanche of convulsive sobs.

"Yes...yes. God, I hate myself!"

Considering the circumstances, Mick wasn't about to lecture a grieving mother on the illegalities of leaving a child of eight at home without proper supervision. Since many working single mothers could not afford child care, Mick knew it was common practice for them to risk leaving an underage child alone.

"Did Josie walk to school by herself that day?"

Wiping her eyes with a much-used tissue, the woman nodded. "Usually she went with a friend from the neighborhood, but she was sick that morning, so Josie had to walk to school by herself." Giving in to despair, Mrs. Stephens covered her face with her hands. "I know what you're thinking, Inspector. I'm a bad mother."

Mick peeled the despondent woman's fingers from her face. "No. You're a good mother who was trying to earn a paycheck so you could clothe and feed your daughter."

Observing Mrs. Stephens more closely, he saw a woman who embodied hardship and disappointment. She may have been pretty at one time, but life had turned Josie's mother into an overweight plain entity who lacked the time, money, and will to invest in her appearance. Everything about this woman resonated her sense of futility in life.

"Can you think of anybody — a stranger — who may have approached Josie on the street while she was playing, or tried to engage her in conversation before she went missing, Mrs. Stephens?"

"Well, there was that social worker," she answered, blowing into the shredded tissue, prompting Mick to give over his handkerchief to her.

"What social worker?"

"The one I reported to Social Services."

"Fill me in, please."

"A woman who claimed to be a social worker came to my door about...oh...three weeks or so ago. She told me the agency had received a complaint from a neighbor about my occasionally leaving Josie alone in the morning. She threatened to take my daughter away from me."

"Did she show you an ID?"

"I demanded one, but she refused. She also refused to show me the agency's paperwork on Josie's case, saying it was none of my concern."

"What did you do?"

"I grabbed something that was on the table next to the front door — I can't

remember what — and told the bitch that I was going to bash her face in if she didn't leave immediately."

"And did she?"

"Yes. But she was very shirty about it. She said, 'If that's the way you want it, fine,' or words to that effect."

"Did you see her car?"

"Umm...yes, but I don't remember much about it. It was white, is all I know."

"Sedan? Hatchback?"

"Sedan, I think."

"Two doors? Four?"

"I...I can't remember, Inspector."

"Did you get the license plate number?"

Mrs. Stephens lower lip began to quiver again. "Sorry, no."

"Don't be sorry. You're giving me a lot of helpful information."

"I did report the incident to Social Services, though," she added, brightening a little.

"Excellent. What did they tell you?"

"That they would look into it."

“Right, but not before hell freezes over,” Mick offered cynically. “Can you describe this woman?”

Wearily closing her eyes, Mrs. Stephens leaned her head back. “Middle aged, heavy set.”

“Hair color?”

“Dark brown. But it looked phony.”

“A wig?”

“No, dyed.”

“Long hair? Short?”

“Jaw length.”

“How was she dressed?”

“Mm...professionally.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Blazer, skirt, blouse, sensible pumps — that sort of thing.”

“Did she carry a briefcase?”

She thought for a moment before answering. “Yes, she did. And a matching purse.”

“What color?”

“Black, I think. Maybe dark brown.”

“Had you ever seen this woman before in your neighborhood?”

With her eyes still closed, Mrs. Stephens shook her head slowly. “No...no. I’m certain I hadn’t. I would have remembered her.” Opening her eyes, she looked directly at Mick.

“Did she take my baby, Inspector?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“Why?”

Still a novice on child abuse, Mick decided to leave the responsibility of explaining the details of the Erlking’s ring to Kip.

“I’m not entirely certain, Mrs. Stephens. We’re looking into possible motives,” he hedged.

“But why? If she was a woman who wanted a child, why would she kill Josie?”

“We don’t know yet if she’s the one who killed your daughter. If you like, I can...”

Mick was rescued by Kip, who opened the door and stuck his head in.

“Mrs. Stephens, do you want to accompany your daughter to the pathology lab?” he asked as solicitously as one could under the circumstances.

“Yes,” she answered firmly. “I’ll be along in a moment. I just need to ask the Inspector one more question.”

“Take your time,” Kip said, leaving the two of them alone, much to Mick’s considerable discomfort.

Struggling to compose herself, the woman twisted around in the seat, facing Mick head on.

“Inspector Chandler...”

“Chandra,” Mick corrected her.

“Very well. Inspector Chandra, I know you’re not telling me everything. It’s a mother’s instinct. Whatever it is, I’ll find out sooner or later, so you might as well tell me now. Why was my daughter kidnapped, then murdered?”

“Please, Mrs. Stephens. Chief Inspector Brodie will tell you everything you need to know.”

“No, I want to hear it from you! What did they do to my baby?”

Sighing heavily, Mick gave in to his inquisitor. “They — whoever they are — may have kidnapped your daughter in order to...to sexually abuse her. We won’t know for certain until the forensic pathologist examines her body. Josie may have been a victim of a pedophile ring that’s operating somewhere out of north London.”

The mother’s hand involuntarily jerked to her mouth. “They used my baby girl for sex? For sex? My God, she was only eight years old! What kind of monsters would do such a thing?”

“Very sick monsters.”

Under the weight of truth, Mrs. Stephens again dropped her face into her

hands and sobbed inconsolably. Mick could do nothing but leave her to the dignity of her grief. Then, abruptly, she stopped and plaintively turned her tear-stained face to him.

“Are you going to catch them, Inspector?”

“Yes.”

“For sure?”

“Yes.”

“For Josie’s sake,” she pleaded, taking his hand.

Mick nodded. “For Josie’s sake.”