

Chapter One

The most puzzling aspect of Rosalinda Evelyn's suicide was that she had shot herself in the head with a Magnum 8mm automatic just five hours after having won the Critics' Choice award for best actress.

Her Hedda Gabler, which played for three consecutive seasons at the Drury Lane, was praised by critics as "a pure embodiment of Ibsen's character — coltish, sexy, and dangerous." At age 46, Evelyn still had what it took to bring the occupants of the cheap seats to their feet and the groundlings to their knees.

At 3:32 that Friday morning, Detective Inspector Michael "Mick" Chandra's cell phone shrilled, prompting him to paw the night stand next to his bed.

"Sweet Jesus," he moaned. "What now?"

"Mick, meet me at the Millennium Bridge. There's been an apparent suicide."

"Anyone we know, Elizabeth?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. At least, we know her from considerable press coverage: Rosalinda Evelyn."

The voice at the other end of the phone belonged to Detective Sergeant Elizabeth Chang of New Scotland Yard, Mick's partner.

"The actress? Didn't she just win some sort of coveted award?"

"Spot on."

Mick puzzled for a moment.

"Why would a celebrated actress at the pinnacle of her career kill herself?" he

asked, trying to keep his voice down lest he awaken his wife, Jess.

“Makes you wonder, doesn’t it?”

Jess stirred, causing Mick to look over at her. With her abundant honey blond hair fanned over the pillow, she appeared to be sleeping like a stone. Gazing upon Jess always made Mick weak in the knees. The last thing he wanted to do was abandon his marriage bed, but duty called.

“Okay, sergeant. I’m on my way.”

Thanks to the light traffic of the early morning hour, Mick made good time from his Stoke Newington home in north London to the City. Within thirty minutes he was standing with Sergeant Chang on the Millennium Bridge watching the forensic pathologist making notes as he knelt next to the corpse of Rosalinda Evelyn.

Chandra and Chang had been colleagues on the Metropolitan Police Force for fourteen years, starting off together as Bobbies on the Beat. Elizabeth Chang was one of the Met’s first WPC’s, or Women Police Constables. When Mick was promoted to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) as inspector, he insisted that Elizabeth, who by then had achieved the rank of sergeant, be assigned as his partner.

The Hong-Kong born Chang and Anglo-Indian Chandra were rare commodities on the Met, which claimed a mere ten percent minority make-up on the entire force, including the CID. Although they shared the common bond of their minority status and were both in their 30s, their relationship had always remained strictly professional, despite the fact that Elizabeth Chang, by anyone’s estimation, would be considered attractive.

When it came to good looks, Mick wasn’t exactly a slouch either. From his Kerala Indian father he had inherited his straight nose, inquisitive onxy-black

eyes, dark hair, which he wore cropped short, and dusky complexion. His 6'1" height and muscular build were assets from his Welsh mother's side of the family.

As always, Mick's gold St. Francis of Assisi medallion was concealed under his shirt, a testament to his Kerala Catholic faith. Elizabeth, a Buddhist, was considered a curious oxymoron at the Yard but, then, as she explained, "Life is full of contradictions." Despite their considerable differences, the two police officers functioned together in precise counterpoint.

"The upper left portion of her skull is blown away," Mick observed glumly.

"Anyone who uses a Magnum 8mm automatic to blow her brains out is serious about killing herself," Elizabeth said.

"This is definitely not a case of the proverbial 'cry for help,' that's for damn sure."

From the narrow, modernistic footbridge, Mick gazed across the Thames to South Bank, where the Tate Modern gallery stood dimly illuminated by a smattering of anemic security lights hardly sufficient to deter any determined art thief. On the north bank, the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral was softly lit — a talisman against the foreboding darkness of the pre-dawn morning in the financial district. From both banks flashed the blue lights of police cars, refracting off the dark waters of the Thames like jittery heat lightning.

Against the backdrop of the cathedral, Mick noticed a lone woman standing several yards away from them, grasping the bridge's railing for support. Though she appeared to be gazing out at the river, it was apparent her shoulders were quaking with sobs.

"Who's she?" Mick asked, jerking his head in the woman's direction.

“Evelyn’s daughter.”

“Have you questioned her yet?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, she’s too upset. I thought it best to give her a little time.”

The pathologist rose from his kneeling position.

“A clear case of suicide, I’d say, inspector. I’ll know for certain once I get her to the lab and more accurately assess the trajectory of the bullet.”

Mick glanced down at the corpse again, mystified as to what possible reason the revered actress could have to kill herself. He could only shake his head in wonder.

There had been a time when Rosalinda Evelyn was regarded as one of the most beautiful women in Great Britain. Society photographers jostled for the opportunity to take her portrait — Armstrong-Jones, Testino, Parkman, Lichfield, Beaton. With her glossy red hair, alabaster complexion, full carnal lips, and eyes the color of Caribbean waters, she was the modern image of a late 19th-century pre-Raphaelite beauty. Now the fiery hair was matted with her own blood and the Caribbean waters had been stilled forever.

“Was the victim left-handed?” Mick asked.

“That’s my guess. Her daughter could confirm it,” the pathologist answered.

“Where’s the weapon?”

Elizabeth held up a plastic bag containing the gun.

“It’s a Magnum all right,” Mick said. “Jesus, why would she do it? She had

everything to live for.”

His query was met with silence.

Efficiently, the pathologist covered the victim with a white sheet, causing blood from the head wound to ooze onto the fabric, creating a bizarre dark-red Rorschach pattern. A team of paramedics that had been vigilantly waiting nearby rolled a gurney next to the corpse. After zipping Rosalinda Evelyn into a body bag, they grunted and hoisted her onto the gurney, then began the long journey up the bridge to an awaiting ambulance on the City bank.

The two police officers observed the scene in silence, waiting until the ambulance bearing the actress’ remains wailed off into the dark.

“Elizabeth, you go home and get some sleep.”

“Gladly. What are you going to do, Mick?”

“See if I can get anything useful out of the daughter.”

“Good luck,” she said, launching off toward the City side of the river where her police car was parked. “You’ve just made Nate a very happy man,” she added, looking at her boss over her shoulder. The Nate she referred to was Nate Wyatt, Elizabeth’s fiancée who also happened to be a good friend of Mick’s.

Seeing Mick approach her, the young woman hastily dabbed her eyes, then smoothed back a unruly lock of hair from her forehead.

“Ms. Evelyn, I’m Detective Inspector Michael Chandra and...”

“I know who you are, inspector,” she interrupted him. “I’ve seen you on the telly. You’re quite the celebrity sleuth.”

“Not by my own choosing, I can assure you.”

“I’m Susan Evelyn,” she introduced herself without offering her hand to Mick. “The victim’s daughter.”

If Mick had not been informed that the young woman standing before him was the daughter of the late actress, he would have never guessed they were related. Whereas Rosalinda Evelyn was considered one of the great beauties of the British theater, her daughter was aggressively plain in appearance — gangly-tall, neurasthenically thin, with mousey, curly brown hair, small piggish eyes, and pinched, thin lips — all of which combined to make her appear older than she probably was. Even in the dark, it was evident that she didn’t even attempt to enhance her appearance with makeup — not so much as a spot of lip gloss. Susan Evelyn gave Mick the impression of being a woman who had remained perpetually suspended in the purgatory of awkward age.

“I’m terribly sorry about your mother,” Mick said.

Susan sucked back a sob. “Me too. We had just become friends again after a period of alienation. Now...now all I can think about is the time we lost.”

“What prompted the alienation?”

“My own stupidity,” she answered, dabbing her eyes with a pretty sheer hankie with embroidery on the border. “I rebelled against my mother, but not in constructive ways. It took some time for me to accept the fact that I’d never be as beautiful or gifted as she was.”

“When did you reconcile?”

“About five months ago. I’ve been living with her...” Susan pointed over to South Bank, “...in her flat just a couple of blocks from the Tate Modern.”

“Isn’t your father the playwright Robert Evelyn?”

“He was my father. Papa died two years ago from bone marrow cancer. Mummy...well, she didn’t handle his death at all well. She just...I don’t know...went a bit barmy. That’s one of things that came between us.”

“In what way?”

“Oh...she said she was angry at papa for leaving us...that she was going to quit the theater and go to Africa or the Sudan to help people. And then...” She paused to blow her nose.

“...And then she began talking twaddle.”

“How so?”

“A lot about death.”

“Specifically?”

“Well, she’d say things like, ‘You know, Susan, death is really the final stage of growth. Your father is not only in a better place, but he has become more highly evolved than either of us. Death transforms us into higher beings.’”

“Where did she get that language?”

“I believe...well, I suspect from a New Age self-help group she joined about a year after my father died. She seemed happier, more together after she joined the group, but her incessant references to death were...well, frankly driving me to distraction,” Susan admitted. “So I left London and went to Los Angeles to stay with some friends of mine who are in the movie business. Unfortunately, I really got into the LA scene big time — drugs, sex, booze — everything but a flourishing acting career.” She smiled ruefully. “You see, I never inherited my

mother's beauty genes. I take after my father."

"You said your mother was threatening to quit the stage," Mick remarked, ignoring her self-deprecating comment. "What prompted her not to?"

Susan dabbed her eyes again. "Daniel Charles, the prominent theater producer/director, talked her into doing Hedda Gabler at the Drury Lane. Then...she won the Critics Choice Award...my God, just hours ago...and now, this." She broke down sobbing. "I don't understand it."

Mick laid a comforting hand on Susan's shoulder. "Ms. Evelyn, I'm very sorry. I agree. Your mother's suicide doesn't make any sense. But please try to stick with me just a little longer. You're helping a great deal."

Susan raised her head, setting her jaw determinedly.

"Did she seem depressed recently?" Mick asked. "Did she ever talk of suicide?"

"No. She seemed quite chipper, I'd say. But she had recently begun to make apocalyptic and Old Testament references like...you know...plagues, floods, locusts — that sort of drivel. She had become so...so different."

"Did she speak of Nostradamus?"

She thought for a moment. "No, not that I recall."

"When did these references begin creeping into your mother's vocabulary?"

"Soon after she joined the Oracle of Baal."

"Pardon?"

“The Oracle of Baal. That’s the name of the self-help group.”

“The Oracle of Baal,” Mick repeated. “What can you tell me about this group?”

Susan shrugged. “Very little. Mummy never would share much about it with me. That was another thing that drove a wedge between us.”

“Where does it operate?”

“I don’t even know that. Mummy only said that, after she joined the Oracle, it had done wonders in helping her cope with papa’s death.”

Tugging his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger, Mick pondered his next line of questioning.

“Ms. Evelyn, would...”

“Please call me Susan.”

“Of course. Susan, would you say your parents’ marriage was a happy one?”

“Yes...yes, they were very happy together. Their’s was not the typical theater marriage riddled with sturm und drang, competition, and petty jealousies.”

“All the more reason, then, why your mother would take your father’s death very hard,” he concluded.

“Yes. She was utterly devastated.”

A nippy breeze ruffled the surface of the Thames, forcing Susan to shiver. Although it was early April, the nights and early mornings were still chilly, while the days, although frequently rainy, were warm enough to allow

Londoners to dispense with their heavy winter storm coats and switch to lighter rain gear.

“Just a few more questions, Susan, then I’ll let you go,” Mick assured her.

Ramming her hands deeper into the pockets of her thin rain jacket, she nodded.

“Did your mother own the Magnum — the gun she shot herself with?”

“Not to my knowledge,” she said. “I have no idea where the gun came from.”

“You’d never seen it before?”

“Never,” she answered firmly.

Mick believed her.

“Was your mother left-handed?”

“Yes.”

“Not ambidextrous?”

“No. She was completely left-handed.”

The breeze off the river began picking up, becoming a bone-numbing wind. Hunching against the increasing cold, Susan turned up the collar of her inadequate jacket.

“Inspector, if you don’t mind, I’m very tired and stressed. I’d be happy to speak with you again later, like over a steaming hot pot of tea.”

Mick extended his hand to her. "Of course. You've been very helpful, Susan. I'll have a police constable escort you home."

Susan handed Mick a card with her phone number and address embossed on it.

"That would be nice," she said, almost smiling as she shook his hand.

It was nearly six in the morning before Mick quietly unlatched the front door of his Stoke Newington Victorian terrace.

In a little over an hour, the house would erupt into a hive of activity. Jess would be up doing her twenty-minute exercise routine while Mick took care of Sarabeth, their eleven-month-old daughter. Then Jess would take their Scottish terrier puppy, Nessie, out for her morning constitutional, while Mick fed the family cat, Pickles, and finished getting Sarabeth ready for her Greek nanny, YaYa, who would arrive momentarily to take the second watch.

After they bolted some toast and shared a quick kiss, Mick would then be on his way to New Scotland Yard in Westminster while Jess, a professional musician, crawled through rush hour traffic to the Royal Academy of Music in Marylebone.

An American expatriate, Jessica Beaumont-Chandra was a highly respected concert pianist who held an adjunct faculty position at RAM that afforded her ample time to concertize. Mick had first met her in a small village in Essex more than two years earlier while investigating a homicide. She had fled to the bucolic village from her Washington, D.C. home seeking peace and tranquility after a string of personal tragedies, including a bitter divorce, followed by the tragic death of her ten-year-old son. Following a failed suicide attempt, Jess decided to put her past behind her to become a permanent resident in England.

The lovely petite American in her early 30s instantly captivated the former

ladies man. Mick couldn't resist her dark green eyes and flawless complexion, combined with her throaty laugh and wicked sense of humor, subtle sex-appeal, and a profound self-assurance that never tipped the balance over into arrogance.

Too wired from the early morning's events to sleep, Mick quietly padded upstairs to his home office, trying not to wake the two-legged and four-legged members of the Chandra clan. Scanning the books on his shelf, he pulled out a well-thumbed thick paperback entitled *The Cult Mystique*, authored by Dr. Solomon Deal, a social anthropologist on the faculty of the University of London. Mick had read the book during an investigation of a string of teenage runaways some years ago, knowing that youngsters on the lam were often recruited by cults.

Dr. Deal's opening paragraph immediately caught his attention:

"All cults have five common factors:

- 1) The claim to be able to transform your life;
- 2) The insistence on thought-reform; that is, to change your former philosophy of life to that of the cult.
- 3) A charismatic leader or leaders.
- 4) The claim to hold the secret to life.
- 5) The insistence on distancing you from your friends and loved ones."

Plunking himself down in his desk chair, Mick turned the book face down on the desk and pulled out a note pad. On it he wrote:

Primary Factor: Still beautiful middle-aged actress at the pinnacle of her career kills herself.

- + Won Critics' Choice Award
- + Loses beloved husband to cancer
- + Joins New Age self-help group to cope with husband's death

- + Becomes obsessed with death, yet seems happy, content, or “chipper” as daughter describes her
- + Becomes obsessed with apocalyptic references
- + Possesses gun daughter didn't know about
- + Won't share any information with daughter about “The Oracle of Baal,” the self-help group
- + Despite recent reconciliation between mother and daughter, mother becomes increasingly secretive, distancing herself from daughter once again

Sum Total: Oracle of Baal = Cult?

Mick looked up from his desk. The sun has risen, bathing the street beyond the window in the buttery-yellow light of early spring. Tapping the desk with his pen as he thought, he scanned his list again then underlined The Oracle of Baal.

If Dr. Solomon Deal was still on the faculty of the University of London, Mick was determined to pay him a visit later that morning. Reaching for the phone book, he was brought up short by the sound of Sarabeth gurgling in her crib in the room next to his office, prompting Nessie, the Scottie, to bark from her crate in the kitchen downstairs. Pickles, the portly grey tabby cat, sashayed into Mick's office, seductively rubbing herself on his trouser-leg. Jess' footfall could be heard padding down the hallway to the bathroom.

Morning in the Chandra abode had commenced.