

Chapter One

Mick Chandra's cell phone went off at 8:23, shattering the morning's comfortable routine. Grasping a diaper in one hand and his four-month-old daughter's feet in the other, he tried to ignore the interruption.

"This is not good, Sarabeth," he groaned to the infant who waited with exemplary patience on the kitchen's butcher block table. A disturbing primordial instinct told Mick that the call was from New Scotland Yard. Having inherited some of his Kerala Indian grandmother's psychic abilities, he could usually tell if a yet-to-be answered call was from a friend, a bill collector, a local political candidate soliciting a contribution, or from the office.

"Go away," Mick muttered to the persistent ring as he lifted Sarabeth's bottom.

Butt raised and feet up in the air, Sarabeth responded by discovering her toes. He continued to delay answering the call, savoring his role as Mick Chandra, father, before relinquishing it to Detective Inspector Michael "Mick" Chandra, one of the brightest stars in Scotland Yard's firmament.

"What the hell took you so long to pick up, Chandra?" a voice barked at the other end.

"And good morning to you, too, Superintendent," Mick replied.

"Don't get shirty with me, Inspector. You don't have to keep proving that you're the male diva of the CID," the Super growled, referring to the Yard's Criminal Investigation Department. "Have you seen the front page of this morning's Times?"

Mick glanced over to the far corner of the kitchen where the paper lay neatly spread out on the floor underneath his Scottish terrier's dog dish.

“Can’t say that I have.”

“Well, read it, dammit — page one, column one. A homicide has been discovered at an archeological site outside Colchester. The Commissioner wants you to get up there immediately.”

“Hold on a second. I’m on family leave, or have you forgotten.”

“Not anymore, Chandra. Read the story, then haul your arse up to Colchester.”

“Bollocks,” Mick spit, slamming the cell phone down on the table next to Sarabeth, who immediately made a grab for it.

“No ma’am,” he said, moving it away from her. “We need to cover your bare bottom. Have you no modesty, lady?”

Deftly adjusting Sarabeth’s diaper, Mick reflected on how little he had missed the inter-agency politics of Scotland Yard during the past month. Nothing so exemplified this than the Superintendent’s transparent envy, and resentment, of Mick’s mutually respectful relationship with the Yard’s Commissioner. As for his Chief and Commander, the two men had long since resigned themselves to Mick being a department unto himself.

The fact that Mick, an Anglo Indian, had climbed up the Yard’s ladder to become one of its most sought-after and respected detective inspectors exacerbated feelings of prejudice and resentment among some of his white colleagues as well as much of the Yard’s hierarchy. Mick was a rarity on a police force that could claim scarcely ten percent minority representation.

That the Superintendent had beaten the Commissioner to the punch and called Mick first was par for the course, a not-too-subtle reminder that Detective

Inspector Chandra was expected to answer first to the Super, and only second to the Commissioner, an expectation he often bypassed. After years of experience, Mick had learned to blow off his detractors.

With Sarabeth securely ensconced in her Infanseat perched on the butcher block table, Mick went over to the corner and pulled the late edition of the morning Times out from under the dog's dish. This prompted the Scottie to shift into terrier mode, seizing the paper in her mouth and attempting to jerk it back into place.

"Stop it, Nessie," Mick commanded, pulling it away but not before leaving a portion of page one in the dog's unrelenting jaws.

"Damn! Now look what you made me do. Give it up, Nessie. I need that part."

Ears back and tail down, the dog relented.

"That's my good girl," he soothed her, taking the paper and torn piece back over the table.

While absently rocking Sarabeth in her Infanseat, Mick restored the torn piece to its proper place and perused the front page story:

ART FORGER FOUND DEAD IN PIT

Apparent Murder May Be Tied to Missing Artifact

The nude body of Stanislaw Janus, internationally known art forger, was discovered yesterday morning at an archeological site in the village of Ravenhoe, outside of Colchester. The victim's hands were tied behind his back, and he appeared to have been garroted. His corpse had been dumped into an excavated pit at the site.

“Mr. Janus appears to have been ritualistically executed in a style practiced by the local ancient Celtic tribe, known as the Trinovantes,” said Dr. Gill Metcalf, director of the excavation, who discovered the body. Dr. Metcalf, a professor of archeology at University College London, went on to explain that the ancient Celts practiced human sacrifice. Typical modes of killing their victims were either by cutting their throats or by garroting — strangulation with a rope or iron collar. Also, they often beheaded their victims.

“Whoever murdered Stanislaw Janus knew something about ancient Celtic culture and practice,” Metcalf went on to say.

“This appears to be an act of blatant revenge,” stated Marcus Elwood, Colchester’s Chief Constable. “Whoever wanted Janus dead also wanted to make a point. Exactly what that point is, we won’t know until a complete investigation of this homicide is carried out.” Elwood added that he has requested help from Scotland Yard in investigating Janus’ apparent murder.

The Polish-born Janus, 53, was known as one of the world’s most notorious art thieves and forgers, specializing in ancient Celtic artifacts. He had been suspected in a rash of thefts and forgeries, including a forgery of the famous Battersea Shield, the original of which is now in London’s British Museum. He is believed to have eluded Interpol authorities by assuming a variety of identities.

Janus was most recently linked to the theft of the priceless Ravenhoe Cauldron, a nearly 2,000-year-old gold artifact discovered at the Ravenhoe site. The cauldron was recently discovered missing from the Colchester Museum’s collection and has yet to be found. Cauldrons served many purposes in Celtic culture, one being to catch the blood of sacrificed victims whose throats had been cut. Chief Constable Elwood believes that Janus’ murder could be linked in some way to the missing Ravenhoe Cauldron.

“To some, Stanislaw Janus was a romantic figure — the stuff of legend,” added Dr. Gill Metcalf. “But to me, he was just a common thief who

compromised, even endangered, England's cultural heritage."

"Hmm, the stuff of legend, eh?" Mick mused. He could feel the old itch coming back — that compulsion to leap back into the fray of homicide investigation. Mick Chandra was second to none in the CID for solving the "unsolvable" murders. Cases that had gone cold typically landed on his desk, and he took on every challenge with relish. It gave him the kind of rush that cocaine gives an addict. Perversely, Mick already hoped the Janus case would be one of the tough ones.

While Sarabeth dozed in her Infanseat and Nessie polished off the remaining kibbles in her dog dish, Mick picked up the cellphone and dialed the number of the elderly Greek widow who lived at the end of the block. Known affectionately in the neighborhood as Ya Ya, she served as Sarabeth's surrogate grandmother and Nessie's favorite dog sitter.

"Allo?" came a woman's voice from the other end.

"Ya Ya, it's Mister Mick. I know this is last minute, but could you possibly babysit the angel and the monster until their mummy returns home later this afternoon?"

"Mummy" was Mick's wife, Jessica Beaumont-Chandra, an American expatriate who was a celebrated concert pianist and a adjunct professor at London's Royal Academy of Music. Today she was in Liverpool at the music school established by former Beatle Paul McCartney, presenting a master class on Beethoven's late sonatas.

"Meester Meek, sure, I be der immejutly," Ya Ya chirped.

After thanking her profusely, Mick left a note for Jess telling her he had been called to Colchester and that he had to take her Volkswagen Golf. While on family leave, he had lost the use of an official Yard car. Fortunately, Jess had

taken a commuter flight to Liverpool and would be taking a taxi home from the airport, so her Golf wouldn't be missed. He left the note for Jess and Ya Ya's payment in plain sight on the kitchen butcher block table where Sarabeth still slept, unaware that her papa had been called back into action.

"I'll miss you very much, Little Precious," he whispered, bending down to leave a soft kiss on Sarabeth's forehead. Nessie came over and sat at his feet, thumping her tail.

"You, too, Loch Ness Monster," he said, petting her.

After Ya Ya had settled in with the babies, Mick bolted from his century-old Stoke Newington terrace into the cold November air and jumped into Jess' Golf to begin the two-hour drive to Colchester.

"Damn, I hate to leave," he admitted aloud as he negotiated the congested north London traffic, making his way to the M25 that would put him on the A12 to Colchester.

Still, Mick couldn't deny the quickening of his pulse.