

Chapter One

Celebrated as one of England's most exquisite treasures, the village of Gap lay due west of London, nestled in the Thames Valley in a heavenly pocket rimmed by the Chiltern Hills. Having been honored not once, but twice, with the National Heritage Most Beautiful Village award, Gap is home to dogged London commuters and well-to-do retirees. Its beauty is the stuff of Wordsworthian poetry, replete with fragrant, fertile fields that slope down to the River Thames. On the bridges traversing the river, one can stand *ad infinitum* to observe the locks rising and falling, allowing the boats through to make their way on to Reading and, eventually, the environs of London.

Little wonder that once the ancient Romans arrived here they refused to leave, instead intermarrying with the local women who were beautiful, blond, and busty. Trading a soldier's life for that of a contented farmer posed no dilemmas for these retired, rehabilitated conquerors.

Many who visit Gap never leave. It is not unusual for the local estate office to be inundated on weekends with visitors who decide on the spot to move to the village. Gap has that effect on people.

It certainly had captured the heart of Chief Constable Brad Moody, head of the Thames Valley police force. He adored Gap with a passion other people reserved for a lover or a pet. Having purchased a restored 17th century cottage some years earlier, he worked and lived within his own jurisdiction. For a divorced, middle-aged, borderline-overweight man with two estranged adult children, living in this magical place was pure nirvana. Despite the odds, Chief Constable Moody was a happy man.

Not only was he a much-respected law enforcement official, Moody was also chairman of the local council, a member in good standing of St. Margaret's church vestry, and volunteer drug counselor to troubled local youths. In temperate weather, he could be found mowing between the headstones of St. Margaret's cemetery -- not

that anyone had asked him to. Out of respect for the dead, he simply thought it the right thing to do.

Moody's territory entailed the county of Oxfordshire, a largely rural outpost dotted with a series of villages laid out like dominos beginning west of London, and ending north-west with the town of Oxford itself, home to the historic university.

But because the village possessed the bucolic quiescence of a Constable painting did not mean it was immune to trouble. In fact, Chief Constable Moody was about to find out just how vulnerable Gap was.

On a sunny, brisk early September morning, Moody was enjoying a full English breakfast in a small cafe on the village High Street when a TV lodged above the espresso machine announced a name from his past.

"Jo Eccleston," the news reader announced, "was found dead on the doorstep of her London terrace. It appears that the award-winning BBC news correspondent was killed with one bullet to the head, possibly in broad daylight. No witnesses have come forward. As yet, police have neither suspect nor motive. More later on this shocking development."

Moody nearly dropped his coffee cup. *Jo Eccleston*. A ghost from his past. A woman with whom he was much in love years earlier, when he was slimmer and relatively handsome. The woman who broke up his marriage, not that the union had ever been a particularly happy one. Still, Jo was the reason Moody never remarried. If he couldn't have her, no other woman would have sufficed. Jo was the reason his son and daughter no longer spoke to him, because Moody had shifted his affections from their mother to the plucky news correspondent. Although their alienation from him hurt deeply, he could not pretend that his passion for Jo was a thing of the past. Realistically, she was simply not the sort of woman men got over easily.

In short, Jo Eccleston had been the great love of Chief Constable Brad Moody's

life. He cherished the memory of their past love affair the way some regard heirloom lace -- fraught with meaning, if threadbare with time.

"More coffee, chief?" a pretty young server asked him.

He didn't respond.

"Chief Moody?"

"Oh...no, thanks. I'll just take the check."

"Did you hear that about Ms. Eccleston?" the server asked. "Can you imagine how our quiet little village will soon be invaded by the press, taking photos of her home here along the river? Her poor, poor elderly mother. I shudder to think how this will affect her."

His hands shoved into the pockets of his uniform's trousers, Moody strode up the street to his vehicle, reflecting on the server's sage words. Yes, the press will be crawling all over Gap. And, yes, Jo's palatial family home just off the Thames Walk will be swarming with paparazzi, reporters, and the curious. The situation would soon become untenable.

Brad Moody was in need of a friend -- one like Detective Chief Inspector Michael "Mick" Chandra, of New Scotland Yard.

Sitting together in the garden of the local pub, Mick and Moody caught up on old times before they tackled the mind-numbing murder of Jo Eccleston.

"I have to bring Jess here," Chandra said, referring to his wife, admired American expat concert pianist, Jessica Beaumont. "I've heard about Gap's beauty, but I had no idea just how breathtaking this place really is."

"Bring her during this wonderful early September weather, before the storms blow down from the North Sea and ruin everything," Moody advised his friend.

Mick and Brad went back to the days when they were Bobbies on the Beat on London's Metropolitan Police Force, or "the Met." Another mutual colleague was Mick's

current partner, Hong Kong- born Detective Inspector Elizabeth Chang, who had been one of the Met's first WPCs, or Women Police Constables. The two worked well together, thanks to Elizabeth's Chinese rationality and Mick's keen Anglo-Indian instincts, which he attributed to his grandmother who had been the local seer in her Kerala village.

Now with the Yard's CID, the two were rare birds within an organization noted for its institutional racism. With fewer than ten-percent minority professionals, Scotland Yard was well aware of its white-bread image. A few years earlier, the top brass had ordered a major minority recruitment effort, only to have it pretty much fall on its high-profile face.

Ever ambitious, Brad went on to become assistant chief constable, then chief constable, of the Thames Valley constabulary. Despite that, he and Mick made a point of keeping in touch, if only occasionally.

"Mick, you have no idea how relieved I am that you and Elizabeth have been assigned to Jo's murder. I was praying the two of you would be," Brad confessed.

His friend sipped some tea. "How are you holding up, mate?"

Moody shrugged. "Alright, I guess. Jo and I had not spoken for years -- six to be exact. But I never stopped loving her."

"Fool for love, Brad, fool for love," Mick tweaked his friend.

"You should bleedin' talk. You're so besotted with Jess, you can't see straight."

"*Mea culpa*," Mick agreed. "Any ideas who may have wanted Jo dead?"

"I just can't fathom it," Brad said, shaking his head.

"Her ex...what's his name...?"

"Reeve Winfield...no, *Sir* Reeve Winfield, the prominent investor. 'Doubt it. He's an arse, but that doesn't make him a murderer."

"But a very wealthy arse," Mick offered.

"Yes. Jo liked her men rich and powerful. Blokes like me didn't meet her criteria,

at least, not when it came to marriage material."

"To your knowledge, was Jo seeing anyone else?"

"I wasn't in the habit of prying into her private life, especially after we were history," the chief constable bristled. "Once we were finished, I gave Jo a very wide berth."

"But not so wide that you didn't know some details about her doings, right?"

Moody's face flushed. "Oh...very well... I did occasionally hear things from the rumor mill."

"Such as?"

"Well... she was seeing an actor for awhile -- I don't know his name, but I was told he was fairly prominent on the telly. Then there was a married Lib Dem MP who's aspiring to form a break-out party with himself as its leader."

"Busy girl," Mick said, polishing off his tea. "Names?"

"Don't remember. I'll find out, though. More tea?"

"Uh...no thanks.

"What are you thinking, Mick?"

"Just this," he said. "She was involved with, as you say, 'an actor and an aspiring political party leader.' And she may have still been seeing her ex, Reeve Winfield. Did she learn something about one of those blokes she shouldn't have? Was she blackmailing one of them? Did she have incriminating evidence that may have ended someone's career? Was Jo about to break an embarrassing story about one or more of those tossers?"

Brad shrugged. "Beats me."

"Well let's go on a fishing expedition, then," Mick announced, shoving off from the table.

"Where?"

"On the river, of course."

"*Where* on the river?"

Mick dropped some pound coins on the table for the server. "To her family home on the Thames Walk. Where else? Surely Jo's mother must know something. Mothers always do."