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Opening Extract from...

Welcome to Meantime

Written by Murray Davies

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Welcome to Meantime

Murray Davies



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Welcome to Meantime

DAY ONE

Wednesday

'YOU TRIED TO kill Terry Rich. You tried to drown him.'

'No, sir.'

'No? You held Mr Rich's head under the water until he confessed to a crime he did not commit.' Defence counsel paused for effect. 'A confession that you tortured out of him.'

'That's not true, sir.'

I'd been trying to kill the bastard.

Something that Detective Chief Inspector Patsy Chalke could not admit. Especially as she had just denied it on oath.

The jurors were looking at her with a mixture of admiration and disbelief.

If only they knew.

Coppers seldom won foot chases. While the villain was fuelled by fear and adrenalin, the police officer was propelled only by a sense of duty, and at the same time handicapped by the weight of his equipment. Poor old plod didn't stand a chance.

Even though Chalke had been in civvies, Terry Rich had been getting away from her when he'd spotted the uniforms coming down the towpath towards him. Rich had doubled back towards Chalke, taking what he'd thought was the soft option.

Except that Patsy Chalke was not a soft option – especially if you were a shit of an evil child molester like Terry Rich.

Chalke had waited until Rich was alongside then hurled herself at him, sending them both into the Grand Union Canal.

What had happened next was now the subject of cross-examination in Court 12 of the Central Criminal Court.

Patsy Chalke glanced at Rich. He leered back.

'In fact, Detective Chief Inspector,' continued the rich tones of Mansel Daley QC. 'You have a record of taking the law into your own hands.'

'Objection.'

'Sustained.'

But the damage had been done. The seed had been planted in the jury's mind.

'Why did the defendant run back towards you?'

'I assume because he'd seen that uniformed officers had cut off his escape.'

'Why would the defendant fear a police officer?'

'Why was he running away from a woman?'

Gotcha, you bastard. That'll teach you to ask a question without thinking through the answer.

'You were angry with the defendant, DCI Chalke,' said Mansel Daley. 'You wanted to do him damage.'

Chalke turned to face the jury. 'Any decent person who had seen what Terry Rich had done to that little girl would be angry.'

'But Mr Rich had done nothing to that unfortunate little girl, had he?' Mansel Daley was at his most silky – and his most dangerous. Chalke braced herself. 'Apart from the confession you tortured out of him, the police have no substantive case against the defendant.'

That was more or less true. No DNA, no forensics, nothing to tie Rich to the attack on eleven-year-old Vicky Gresham apart from one unreliable witness – and the knowledge that Rich had done exactly the same thing before.

A fact that the jury was not allowed to know.

'I did not torture Terry Rich.'

Chalke caught sight of her boss, Commander Alison Begley,

at the back of the court. Begley refused to make eye contact. Patsy would have appreciated a quiet thumbs-up, rather than being blanked.

Mansel Daley continued, 'You claim that the defendant said, "Okay, I did it. I couldn't help myself. Don't let me drown."'

'Yes, sir.'

'In fact, you told the defendant that you were going to hold him under water until he confessed.'

'No, sir.'

'And what the defendant said was, "Please, I'll say whatever you want but don't let me drown."'

Chalke glared at Rich.

The lying toerag!

What she'd actually said to Rich was, 'I'm going to kill you, you fucker, and save the courts the trouble.'

He spluttered, 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do it. Let me go.'

She said, 'Not until you're fucking dead.'

And then the bloody uniforms had arrived.

Mansel Daley paused to consult his notes. Chalke tried to seize the initiative.

'I'd chased the accused for a quarter of a mile. I was too tired to try to drown anyone – certainly not someone twice my size.'

'How deep is the water in the canal?'

'About five foot where we fell in.'

'The defendant cannot swim. You pulled his jacket back off his shoulders so that he could not move his arms. You had him by the hair and kept forcing his head under the water. Each time he tried to regain his balance, you kicked his legs away.'

Had she really done all that? God, she was good.

'Oh, come on, Mr Mansel Daley. I'm five feet seven and weigh nine stone. The defendant's six foot and fourteen stone. You really think that I could drown him? It was all I could do to hang onto him until my colleagues arrived.'

Sodding uniforms – dragging her off Rich.

Rich was staring at her again, his piggy little eyes blazing in hatred. Chalke felt the hairs rise on the back of her neck.

Bring it on, pond life. This time I'll really do you damage.

'Members of the jury, you can see that the defendant wears his hair long – with good reason,' intoned Mansel Daley. 'Mr Rich, please lift the hair over your left ear. Thank you. You can see that a portion of Mr Rich's ear is missing. It was bitten off by Detective Chief Inspector Chalke.'

This was the part Patsy had been fearing. She wasn't going to be able to talk her way out of this easily.

Mansel Daley pressed his advantage. 'You don't deny that you bit off Mr Rich's ear.'

'Apparently, I bit his ear.'

'Apparently!'

'These things happen quickly. It's nothing like the choreographed fights you see on TV. We fell in water. I went under. I was fighting to survive.'

'You bit off half the ear. Hardly using necessary minimum force, were you?'

It was worse for me. I could have been poisoned.

And Rich had bled like a stuck pig, a swirl of claret in the chocolate water.

'No further questions, m'lud.'

Patsy Chalke stood outside court feeling the adrenalin drain away. Her blouse was sticking to her back with cooling sweat. She shivered.

One of her new team, Detective Sergeant Bobby Leyden, was weaving his way through the Old Bailey's crowded foyer towards her. Or rather – a battered and bruised version of Bobby Leyden.

His face was a mess. His left eye was almost closed. A livid purple bruise covered his left cheek.

Chalke was about to ask what had happened when Alison Begley, her boss as head of the Homicide and Serious Crime Command, appeared looking as if she sucked lemons for a hobby. Begley didn't beat about the bush.

'That was a less than convincing performance,' she told Chalke. 'If Rich walks, we'll know who to blame.'

Thanks a bunch. You should be here rallying your troops, not slagging them off.

Begley, battleship-grey hair lacquered to within an inch of its life, recognised Leyden. Her eyebrows rose. 'What happened to you?'

'Fighting, ma'am.'

'Fighting?!'

'I was boxing last night for the Met against the RAF.'

'Should you have been boxing when you knew you were due to give evidence the next day?'

'Assistant Commissioner Branson insisted, ma'am.'

Begley opened her mouth, decided that it would not be politic to criticise a senior officer, turned on her heel, and stalked off back to her desk at Scotland Yard.

'I hope you won,' said Chalke.

'Banjaxed him in the last round. Just as well. The cack-handed bastard had me on points. Bloody southpaws. I couldn't get my left hook working. You should come and see a fight some time, guv. We've even got women boxing now.'

Chalke shuddered. 'Not my thing, sergeant, but the commander's right. You're not in a fit state to give evidence.'

'That's okay – I'm not being called. My bloke copped a plea. And me in my best whistle, too.'

'Sorry?'

'Suit. My best suit.'

If that was Leyden's best suit, God help the others, thought Chalke.

'Are you going back to Greenwich?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'I'll give you a lift but first I need a drink and a cigarette – not necessarily in that order.' Patsy checked her mobile phone. One missed call. She hit the return call button. 'DCI Chalke. I've been in court… Say that again… Where's the body? On my way.'

Barely one week into her new job, still trying to get to grips with a new team, a new set-up and a new part of London – and now this.

She closed her phone. 'After a drink and that fag.'

Muriel Figgens plucked at her coat, an angry, black-clad sparrow of a woman, sitting to attention in the back of the funeral car. 'I still can't believe your father could go like that.'

'Leave it, Mum. Dad's dead. Move on.'

Muriel's daughters sat either side; her three granddaughters in the row in front. There was room for the sons-in-law in the big Ford Dorchester but Muriel had made them drive themselves – and warned them to stay sober to take the women home after the wake.

'Just think of the insurance money, Mum.'

'Puh.' All the money in the world couldn't assuage her resentment. To be married for fifty-two years – and then for him to die like that!

They were approaching Hither Green cemetery. Stan had always said he wanted to be buried here.

Payback time.

The hearse in front slowed. Panic engulfed Muriel.

'This isn't it,' she shouted. 'We're not stopping here. We're going to Falconwood Crem.'

The funeral car came to a halt behind the hearse.

'I told you, it's the wrong place,' repeated Muriel.

'It's all right, Mrs Figgens,' called the driver. 'We've just stopped to let a cortège pull in.'

Muriel sighed in relief then she flung open the car door and ran up to the hearse.

'Look, you bad bastard,' she shouted at her husband's coffin. '*This* is where you'd've been buried if you'd kept it in your trousers. Look. Look.'

She pointed at the cemetery, rapping on the glass side of the hearse as if to gain her dead husband's attention. Her daughters hurried up to try to calm her.

'What was that about?' asked the driver as Muriel was led back to the car.

'You never knew Stan Figgens?' asked the funeral director Herbie Bell. 'Owned the fishmonger's in Eltham. Great one for the horses and the women.'

'He must have blown it all, judging by this shitty little send off.'

'That's where you're wrong, my son.' Bell brushed dandruff off the shoulders of his black overcoat. 'Couple of weeks ago, Stan got a Yankee up at Ascot and went off celebrating with some dolly bird. Trouble was, Stan was seventy-three and needed a bit of help. He took one Viagra too many. Instead of coming, he went, so to speak.'

'At least he died with a smile on his face.'

'Yeah, but the widow's pissed off because everyone's laughing at her. She's getting her revenge by burning him on the cheap.'

The basic £1,355 funeral plus hire of one limo at £170. Any cheaper and they would have had to put Stan on a handcart and wheel him to the crematorium.

The hearse pulled in through the gates of Falconwood cemetery. The chapel was full. Stan had been popular with everyone – except Muriel. The coffin was borne to the catafalque. Bell escorted Stan's widow and his daughters to their place in the front row, bowed solemnly – and left for a cigarette.

He was on his second roll-up when he heard the opening bars of 'Mairzy Doates' – Stan's choice of recessional music. It was Bell's cue to accompany Muriel to view the floral tributes.

Muriel barely glanced at them. The only card she bothered to read was attached to a fish formed from blue irises and yellow chrysanthemums. Her eyes hardened.

'Let's get on with it,' she said.

'Would your daughters like to accompany you?' asked Bell.

'Wouldn't have thought so.'

'Right.' Bell went to take the widow's arm then thought better of it. He led the way past the carefully tended flower borders around to the back of the chapel and into the committal room.

'If you look through these glass panels, Mrs Figgens, you'll see your husband's coffin being charged into the cremator.'

'That oven-like thing?'

'Yes.'

On cue, an attendant appeared manoeuvring a metal bier carrying the coffin. A second attendant slid up the metal door of the cremator. A red glow pulsed out. Once the bier was aligned, the men slid the coffin into the cremator and closed the door.

Muriel continued to stare, her arms folded, until she demanded, 'Is that it? That's all there is?'

'That's it.' Bell nodded solemnly. 'Have you given any thought to what you're going to do with the ashes?'

'I'm putting them into an hourglass so I can turn the sod over whenever I feel like it.'

Bell didn't think Muriel was joking.

On the way back to the car, Muriel asked, 'Why didn't the Dim Reaper do the funeral himself? He's known Stan for years.'

The Dim Reaper was the nickname for Dave Shine, who owned the funeral parlour, and seven others across south-east London.

'Mr Shine spends most of his time in Spain nowadays.'

'That may be so, but one of my daughters saw him in Eltham a few days ago.'

'Mr Shine doesn't have much to do with the day-to-day running,' said Bell, who himself had been wondering why the Dim

Reaper hadn't been in touch for a while. Not that Bell minded. Things ticked along very nicely without him.

'He used to be a right villain,' continued Muriel, dripping with bile. 'He could be as nice as pie to your face but you never knew what was going on in his head. I remember when he was starting out and he thought Charlie Pearce in Charlton had deliberately undercut him.'

'What happened?'

'He only forced Charlie's hearse off the road, didn't he?' Muriel clutched her handbag tightly to her body. 'And there was a coffin in there. Didn't do to cross Dave Shine.'

Bell was relieved not to be invited into the Downham Tavern where the wake was being held. Word was that Stan had left £1,000 to each to his girlfriends. There were going to be fireworks – especially when Muriel discovered that her closest friend was one of the recipients.

Bell and the driver were the first to arrive back at the funeral parlour in Lee Green, the hearse having gone to the Sydenham branch for a funeral next morning. They parked in the yard at the rear. Bell unlocked the back door. Their receptionist had the morning off to go to hospital so the offices were empty. Phone calls were being automatically patched through to another branch. Bell walked through to the front door to collect the post, thinking of Stan Figgens – a small wiry man in a straw boater and blue-striped apron, a twinkle in his eye – always with a line of chat for the ladies.

Muriel was going to go mental when she heard about the bequests. Stan was taking the piss from beyond the grave – or, in his case, the flames.

Bell pushed open the door to his office.

A silver-haired man in a dark suit was sitting behind the ancient wooden desk. He appeared to be asleep, his head resting on his chest.

It took Bell a few seconds to realise he was staring at the body of Stan Figgens.

And a few more seconds to think that if Stan was here – who was in the oven?

Herbie Bell reached for his whisky flask.

DC Carl Cochrane glanced at his notes. 'Stanley Arthur Figgens. Died a week last Saturday and was due to be cremated at Falconwood at 10.30 this morning.'

'Has anyone moved the body?' asked Chalke.

'No, ma'am. The undertaker took one look and did a runner,' replied Cochrane, a sandy-haired Scot with a permanent scowl.

Not surprising, thought Chalke, as she looked at Figgens.

Bell's office was crowded with photographers, fingerprint specialists and scenes of crime officers in their white hooded overalls and lilac gloves. Chalke felt at home.

'And someone's been cremated in Figgens's place?'

'Looks like it. The crem people say they can see bones in the ash but the oven needs to cool down before we can get at them. Uniforms are securing the site.'

The funeral parlour was larger than it appeared from the outside. The public areas consisted of a reception area, coffin showroom and chapel of rest, while behind the scenes there was a wash and dress room, the embalming room and the workshop where various coffins stood against the wall. Chalke ended her tour in the cold room where a large cabinet with metal doors held three bodies awaiting funerals.

'Let's talk to the funeral director,' Chalke said to Leyden.

Leyden was surprised to be included. He'd first met his new boss when she'd arrived in Greenwich a week last Monday, but since then he'd been pounding the pavements on a pub stabbing that was going nowhere.

Chalke had been friendly enough in the wine bar near the Old Bailey but that was because she'd wanted to talk about the Greenwich squad. Leyden wasn't prepared to discuss his mates with the

new guv'nor, and had been politely uninformative. Good to know she hadn't held it against him.

They found Herbie Bell in the yard, still in his frock coat, high wing collar and grey-striped dress trousers, screwing shut a hip flask.

'DCI Chalke, Homicide and Serious Crime Command,' said Patsy. 'And this is DS Leyden.'

Bell found he was looking at a beautiful woman in her thirties; expensive business suit, good legs, high cheek bones, chestnut hair well cut. A woman who stood out in a crowd; perhaps a high-flying business executive or TV news reader.

In contrast, with Leyden what you saw was what you got – a burly street fighter with a battered face and a number-one haircut, bristling with attitude.

'Is it possible you could have put the wrong body in the coffin?' asked Chalke.

'No way,' replied Bell.

'Why not?'

'When someone dies, a doctor has to certify death before the body can be released to a funeral director. A second doctor re-examines the body at the funeral parlour. Every corpse is logged and an identification tag attached to the ankle. The ID travels with the body at all times. It's impossible to cremate the wrong body.'

'Impossible?'

'There's always the exception to prove the rule, but –'

'What happens to the body when it's here?'

'It's kept at a constant temperature of five degrees centigrade. The body will be embalmed a couple of days before the funeral.'

'Are all corpses embalmed?' asked Leyden.

'They'd whiff if they weren't,' said Bell. 'Anyway, they need to be embalmed if the family wants to view the corpse.'

'Did Stan Figgens's family view his body?'

'The widow didn't. It was the daughters who brought his

clothes. The coffin was sealed last thing yesterday afternoon.'

'How do you dress a corpse with rigor mortis?' asked Leyden.

'Rigor mortis wears off after two or three days.'

'I didn't know that,' said Leyden. Nor did Chalke – though she didn't admit it.

'How was the coffin sealed?' she asked.

'I'll show you.' Bell walked back into the workshop. 'This is the sort of coffin Stan had. Chipboard with a maple veneer, taffeta lining and three plastic handles either side. The lid's secured by four screws.' Bell held up a 2-inch screw. 'Known as a plume screw. Looks metal but it's plastic.'

'Where was the coffin last night?'

'On a bier in the cool room.'

'Who has keys to this place?'

'I do. The receptionist. One of the FSOs might take the spare key if they've an early start.'

'FSOs?'

'Funeral service operatives.'

'Who runs the business?' asked Chalke, wondering why the world was so full of acronyms.

'Bloke called Dave Shine. I'm the senior FD.'

'Where's Mr Shine now?'

'He came back to Britain about ten days ago but I've not seen him since lunchtime Monday. He called in for half an hour. Nothing special.'

'What time did you arrive this morning?' asked Chalke.

'About eight. The drivers and bearers got here just after.'

'And the coffin was exactly as you left it?'

'I think so. I didn't look closely. It had Stan's nameplate on it.'

'Did the coffin feel different when you put it in the hearse? Was it lighter or heavier than yesterday?'

Bell shook his head, releasing a shower of dandruff. 'The bearers didn't notice anything.'

'Where's the widow?'

'At the wake in the Downham Tavern.'

'Go and talk to her, sergeant,' Chalke ordered Leyden.

'Did you know the Downham Tavern used to have the longest bar of any pub in England?' asked Leyden.

'Fancy that.'

'It's shorter now.'

'Then you won't have any trouble finding Muriel Figgens, will you?'

Bobby Leyden looked around the crowded back room of the pub until his eye settled on a black-clad, angry woman holding court.

'Mrs Figgens. I'm DS Leyden. May I have a word in private?'

'Why?' She was instantly alert, spoiling for a fight.

'It's regarding your husband.'

'What's that bleeder done now? Sold my own house behind me back?' Her lips contracted into a bloodless line. 'Leaving money to those trollops. I'll fight it, that's what I'll do. I'll fight it.'

Leyden didn't have a clue what she was talking about.

'May we talk in private?'

'Whatever you have to say, say it here,' said the widow.

'I'm afraid I have some bad news.'

Muriel gave a mocking laugh. 'That'll be a change, won't it? Bad news, dearie? I've had nothing but bad news since I married that worthless bastard. What is it?'

The room had fallen silent; the mourners straining to hear what was happening. 'It's your husband Stanley Arthur Figgens –'

'I know his bleeding name.' Muriel took a gulp from her gin and tonic. 'We're seeing him off, ain't we? And not a moment too soon.'

'That's just it, Mrs Figgens. He's not gone, exactly.'

'What do you mean, not gone? You're having a laugh, ain't you, son? I saw the coffin go into that oven with my own eyes.'

'Your husband wasn't in it.'

'Jesus Christ!' Muriel Figgens slammed down her glass to stare at Leyden. 'But he is dead? Tell me he's dead.'

'He's dead all right but he wasn't in the coffin. We believe there may have been another body in there.'

'So where's Stan now?'

'Back at the undertaker's.'

Muriel Figgens emptied her gin and tonic in one. 'I'll tell you something now – I'm not going through that again.'

'Mrs Figgens –'

'And I can tell you something else – if that wasn't Stan, I want my sodding money back.'

Patsy Chalke was not in good humour. Having missed the turn-off to Falconwood Crematorium, she'd got stuck on Rochester Way until the Danson Interchange and then been forced to crawl back through heavy traffic on busy suburban roads. She hated wasting time.

She hoped the crematorium manager would turn out to be a shitty little jobsworth so she could work out her frustrations but Deirdre Stone was large and jolly – like so many who spent their time dealing with the dead. Coroners' officers were the best joke tellers in the Job. Perhaps laughter was their way of coping.

'You wouldn't believe the paperwork I'll have now,' said Deirdre Stone cheerfully. 'And we're already the busiest crematorium in the country.'

'In that case, why isn't there a better road link?' demanded Chalke, determined not to succumb to Deirdre's motherly charms without a struggle.

'There are clear directions on our website.'

'I didn't have time to look at your website.'

Chalke didn't mention that she had failed to program her satnav – again. According to that gadget, she was currently

somewhere west of Fishguard. She'd have to get round to reading the instructions – some day.

'Take me through what happened at the funeral,' she said brusquely.

'I'll show you.'

Chalke followed Deirdre into a light, airy chapel. Two of the four walls were made of glass. The catafalque was surrounded by lovat-green curtains.

'You must understand that every coffin arriving here is sealed and accompanied by an authority card which stays with the body every step of the way,' began Deirdre.

'Okay.'

'This is the smaller of our two chapels. This morning was a little unusual because the widow asked to see the coffin being charged into the cremator.'

'I didn't know you could do that.'

'Members of some religions – Hindus for example – need to witness the moment.'

Deirdre escorted Chalke to the committal room sandwiched between the two chapels.

'The catafalques are just the other side of those soundproof doors,' explained Deirdre. 'Our attendants monitor the service on CCTV, then once the congregation's left, they go in, place the coffin on a bier and wheel it in here. If a cremator's free, the coffin's disposed of immediately. If not, by law it has to be cremated within twenty-four hours.'

She led Chalke into a side room containing a bank of five blue cremators with stainless steel doors.

'Which one should Stan have been in?' asked Chalke.

'Bottom right.'

Chalke peered through the small window at the intense red glow.

'Once the ashes have cooled, they're raked out and put in a

cremulator where the larger bones like the tibia and fibula are ground into a fine ash,' continued Deirdre.

'Do the jaw and teeth survive?' asked Chalke.

'Not a chance. It gets up to 850 degrees centigrade in there. At that temperature all the DNA's destroyed as well.

'Any chance of fillings or anything like that being left?' Chalke was thinking of a bullet.

'Metal melts. We run a magnet through the ash to find things like false hips.' Deirdre pointed to a collection of dull metal objects in a bucket. 'We recycle as much as possible.'

Chalke's mobile phone rang. 'Yes, Sergeant.'

'I'm back at the undertaker's, ma'am,' said Leyden. 'Two things. The SOCOs have found fibres in the cool room cabinet that could have come from Stan's suit.'

'Right.'

'And Bell's just coughed that Dave Shine keeps a bird on the side. He comes back to London to get his leg over.'

'The Dim Reaper's doing well for himself,' observed Leyden gazing up at the sand-coloured block of modern flats overlooking the river Thames. 'Not a bad drum.'

'Drum?'

'Drum and bass. Place.'

'Why don't you speak English?'

'It is English where I grew up.' Leyden bit into the battered sausage he'd bought at the local chippie.

'Where was that?' Chalke knew that she needed to learn more about her squad but her own secretive nature made it difficult. She hoped that if she wasn't curious about others, then they wouldn't be curious about her.

It never worked.

'Ferrier estate in Kidbrooke,' said Leyden, his mouth full.

'I've heard of the Ferrier.'

'Everyone's heard of the Ferrier,' said Leyden.

The Ferrier was an infamous sink estate a few miles away which was shortly to be knocked down by Greenwich Council. Not before time, said those who lived there.

The early cloud had cleared, leaving a glorious late summer afternoon, the sun turning the Thames blue. In the distance the skyscrapers of Canary Wharf rose from the Isle of Dogs. To their right, an aircraft climbed out of City airport.

Chalke flicked the butt of her lunch into the Thames. 'How did Mrs Figgens take the news about her husband?'

'She got the petrol that he wasn't toast,' replied Leyden, brushing crumbs off his lapels.

'I haven't a clue what you're on about.'

'Mrs Muriel Figgens found the idea that her husband hadn't been cremated distressing.'

Chalke grinned. 'Let's go and talk to the girlfriend. Just hope she speaks English – unlike some around here.'

Leyden refused to rise to the bait. As they walked towards the block of flats he observed, 'There must be money in the death business. I wouldn't mind living here.'

Chalke made a doubtful noise. 'Wouldn't kill for it.'

'It's better than my shoe box.'

When would she learn to keep her mouth shut? Just because she lived in a penthouse.

Lucymar Varenos was a 23-year-old Venezuelan with sallow skin and the sort of pinched face that went with a drug problem. She wore shorts and a T-shirt, a get-up which accentuated her bony frame.

There was starved chic and there was malnourished, thought Chalke. This girl belonged on an Oxfam poster.

Definitely more atrophy than trophy.

The third-floor apartment was filled with cheap contemporary

furniture. A flat-screen TV filled most of one wall.

Chalke perched on the mock leather sofa under posters of Caribbean beaches while Leyden prowled next to the picture window looking downriver towards the old Royal Naval College – now Greenwich University.

'You speak English?'

'Some.'

'Is this your apartment?'

'*Si*. I live here.' The girl's dark eyes stayed fixed on the floor.

'Do you own it?'

'It belongs to Mr Shine.'

'When did you last see him?'

Lucymar gave an elaborate shrug. Chalke fixed the girl with a hard stare. 'Think.'

Forget the *good cop, bad cop* routine. If this girl was going to be a pain, she'd get the *two pissed-off cops* routine.

'Maybe yesterday.'

Chalke held out her hand. 'Your passport.'

Lucymar's face tightened. 'I don't know where it is.'

'If you can't show me your passport, then I'll have to assume you're an illegal immigrant. You want to spend the night in a detention centre?'

Lucymar stalked off to the bedroom.

'Do Venezuelans need visas?' Chalke whispered to Leyden.

'Not if they're staying less than six months and not working or studying.'

'How do you know that?'

'Doesn't everyone?'

Lucymar returned. Inspecting her passport, Chalke saw that the girl had first entered Britain twelve months ago. Last Christmas she'd gone home to Caracas, returning in January. It was now September. She had overstayed by two months.

'You don't mind if we have a look around, do you?'

Lucymar's eyes flashed with anger but she nodded meekly.

Chalke didn't have a clue what she was looking for, but something might turn up. She was disappointed. The flat was practically sterile. There were no smells, even. No scents of polish or coffee, no stale sweat or cat's piss.

The bedroom was spotless. It put Chalke's to shame. She told herself she must tidy up when she got home. Make the bed, hang up the clothes she'd strewn everywhere, put her dirty underwear in the laundry basket. Then again… life was too short.

She checked the bedside drawers. No sign of Shine's passport or wallet. A photograph on the bedside table showed a man in a black shirt, open to reveal a gold medallion, leaning on the bonnet of a silver BMW Series 6 coupé. The man, in his early forties, had dark swept-back hair and a heavy jaw.

Chalke took the photo into the living room. 'Is this Dave Shine?'

'Yes. That's his car. He's very proud of it. He keeps it in the garage here.' Lucymar was sitting at the table, her left foot pumping up and down.

'What time did you last see him yesterday?'

'Maybe midday. He went to see someone in the West End. I don't know who.'

'How did he get up to London?' Chalke handed Leyden the photograph.

'He drove. He says public transport is for people who haven't made it.'

'What was he wearing?'

'He always wears black. Like in the photo.'

'Did you know that Mr Shine has another house in Blackheath?'

'That's for his wife. He doesn't often come to London when she's here.'

I bet he doesn't, thought Chalke. 'How did you two meet?'

In a bar on the Costa del Sol where she was working, said Lucymar. When Shine found out that she was saving to come to Britain to learn English, he suggested that she enrol at one of Greenwich's language schools. He'd buy her a flat nearby. She could live there. It suited them both.

'What happened to your studies?'

'Dave wants me here when he's in London.'

'And when he's in Spain?'

'Then it's different.' Lucymar gave a secret smile.

'As soon as you hear from Dave, ask him to phone me.' Patsy Chalke handed the girl her card. She took it unwillingly.

Back in the corridor, Leyden made a dart for the closing lift door.

'I was going to take the stairs,' said Chalke.

'Old Chinese proverb. Never run when you can walk, never walk when you can stand, never stand when you can sit, never sit when you can lie.'

'Okay, we can check that the Dim Reaper's Beamer's not in the car park,' said Chalke, as if to justify taking the lift. 'Just in case.'

They rode down to the basement. The lift opened onto a dusty concrete lobby leading to the underground car park. It was chilly, damp and badly lit. They walked along the bays, checking the cars. The last bay was occupied by Dave Shine's BMW coupé.

'He came back,' said Leyden. 'Why didn't he go up to the flat?'

'Who says he didn't?' countered Chalke. 'Lucymar never once asked why we were asking her questions.'

The car doors were locked. Leyden tried the boot. It too was locked. But now that he looked closely he saw that there was a tiny smear on the lip.

'Blood?' murmured Leyden.

'Blood,' agreed Chalke.

*

Patsy Chalke's office looked over the police station yard towards the back of Gloucester Circus. Two centuries ago, the Circus had been planned as an oval with sweeping crescents enclosing a formal garden. Then the architect Michael Searles had run out of money, leaving the last third a hotchpotch of buildings that had been flattened by a V1 rocket. After the war, first council flats and then the police station had been built on the bomb site. Now residents of Gloucester Circus either lived in the flats facing Georgian houses or in Georgian houses looking out at the flats. Neither was perfect, thought Patsy.

Her bare office depressed her more than the view. Next door, her immediate superior Detective Chief Superintendent Des Weaver had photos of his wife and daughter on his desk, commendations around the walls and cacti along the window ledge.

The only personal touches in her office were a wooden model of a man with jointed limbs and a sheep in wellington boots. On the sheep was written, *Smile. It confuses people.*

Both were presents from former lovers. The one who'd given her the model man had told her, 'Put him in whatever position reflects your mood, then I'll know where I stand.'

Patsy had arranged the wooden arms in surrender.

After the Terry Rich incident, she'd been transferred to the south-east task force of Homicide and Serious Crime Command, Specialist Crime Directorate, based in Greenwich. She hadn't been surprised. Greenwich was the traditional dumping ground for coppers who cocked up or gave trouble. Those who did not conform.

Chalke had found a depleted squad and a backlog of unsolved cases, including a fatal stabbing during a brawl outside a Woolwich pub – the case Leyden had been working on. A second murder involved the mugging of a pensioner that had gone wrong. Detectives knew the killer's identity. Proving it was another matter.

In addition, a series of brutal post office raids was grabbing local headlines while police intelligence indicated that Greenwich was the terminus for a people-smuggling racket.

Chalke needed the Stan Figgens mystery like a hole in the head.

She pressed the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger and asked Des Weaver, 'Any chance of drafting in a few extra bodies?'

'No chance. The budget's all gone on the war on terror.'

'Begley could request more resources.'

Weaver, grey haired, broad-shouldered, florid and avuncular, gave Chalke a knowing look. 'You don't think Alison's going to rattle cages for us, do you?'

'But we've a DI on long-term sick leave and two sergeants on secondment.'

'More glory for the few,' said Weaver.

While others were posted here to get them out of the way, Des Weaver had spent his entire career in south-east London. Never mind how much the brass had tried to move him to other duties, other areas, Weaver had always managed to wangle his way back. As a result there was nothing he didn't know about local villains.

He could have retired twelve months ago, after his thirty years – the optimum length of service to get the maximum pension – but he'd stayed on. He claimed he didn't fancy working for a security company, he didn't play golf and his wife Brenda didn't want him under her feet at home. Chalke suspected that he was waiting until his only daughter – on whom he doted – qualified as a doctor. Young Annie Weaver didn't have a student loan around her neck. Instead she drove a newish VW Golf and spent her vacations in Thailand.

'How are you getting on with Bobby Leyden?' asked Weaver.

'Fine – when I can understand what he's saying.'

Weaver chuckled. 'Bobby's got his *sarf* London act off to a tee. He's much sharper than he lets on.'

'I'll remember that. Shall we run over today?' she asked. 'See where we're going?'

'Of course. Get Leyden in if you like. A bit of responsibility might get him thinking about his inspector's exams.'

'Okay.'

Chalke walked along the corridor into the Incident Room filled with rows of metal desks, each with a phone and a computer monitor. The monitors not being used had blue screensavers bearing the Met motto – 'Working Together for a Safer London'. The blinds were down against the late afternoon sun, making the atmosphere in the room even heavier than usual, with its smells of stale sandwiches, paper, warm dust, and deodorant. The small offices of the statement reader and action allocator lay to one side.

Chalke paused in front of the whiteboard, absorbing the ongoing lines of inquiry. She would never be Weaver's equal as a thief-taker, but she did have a photographic memory.

Leyden was putting down the phone.

'No reply from Dave Shine's number in Spain,' he told her. 'I'll try again later.'

'Come into my office. Mr Weaver and I are about to review the day's events.'

Leyden followed her, looking as if he suspected he was walking into a trap. He took the small chair against the wall. Weaver entered seconds later.

'How's it going, Bobby?'

'Fine, thank you, sir.'

'Right. It's fair to say that at the moment we're treating the case as a suspicious death.' Chalke sat behind her desk. 'Are we certain that it's a human body that's been cremated? It wasn't a dog or some other animal in the coffin?'

'The doc reckons that it was a man, from what's left of the pelvis,' said Leyden. 'We'll know more tomorrow when a

forensic anthropologist examines the remains. There's definitely amalgam from teeth fillings and something that looks like a belt buckle.'

'No bullet?'

'Not so far, ma'am.'

'Okay.' Chalke steepled her fingers. 'So, someone broke into the funeral parlour between six last night and eight this morning with the body of an unknown male. They opened Stan's coffin, took out *his* body, hid it in the cool room and put the other body in the coffin. Then, between 9.30 a.m. and midday, while Bell was at the crem, they returned to position Stan's body behind the desk. Someone went to a lot of trouble. Why?'

'Also, who's been cremated?' asked Weaver, looking at the mystery from the other end.

'We've checked mortuaries, hospitals and undertakers right across London and the south-east,' reported Leyden. 'No one's missing a body.'

'Bell said the funeral parlour was unoccupied only because the receptionist had taken the morning off. That suggests inside information,' said Chalke.

'Maybe chummie didn't leave and return this morning,' suggested Weaver. 'Maybe he was hiding in the cool room with Stan all the time.'

'Bit gruesome.'

'Not if you're used to working with dead bodies.'

'Like Dave Shine,' said Chalke, trying to manipulate her wooden man to imitate Rodin's *The Thinker*. So far she'd only succeeded in making him look as if he was on the lavatory.

Leyden asked Weaver. 'Have you had any dealings with Shine, sir?'

'And the rest. I first nicked him in the early nineties. He took it personally. The man's got the memory of an elephant – a rogue elephant. Never forgets, never forgives. Six foot of muscle on a

short fuse. Worked as an enforcer for the Jolly crime family for a while. For some reason, Shine always wanted to be an undertaker. When a funeral director in Eltham retired some time back, Dave acquired his two shops. Now he's got eight. Word has it he got the nickname the Dim Reaper when he tortured some Albanian who'd upset the Jolly family. He'd got this guy strung up with electrodes clamped to his balls. Shine couldn't understand how the Albanian could stand the pain. In the end Shine got so angry that he beat the bloke to death. Only then did someone point out that he'd forgotten to switch on the power.'

'Charming,' said Chalke.

'His wife Crystal is a golf fanatic. About three years ago, they bought a villa near a golf course outside Alicante. No children.'

'How do you rate him, sir?' asked Leyden. 'Killer or victim?'

'Killer, every time,' replied Weaver. 'But we do need to know who he's topped.'

Chalke's phone rang. She listened. 'Thank you. Anything else let me know.' She replaced the phone. 'That was blood on Shine's Beamer,' she told Leyden. There's more in the boot. The car's on its way to the labs.'

'We need to check Shine's associates, see if they can provide a lead as to who was in the coffin,' said Weaver.

'Who normally acts as statement reader in a major inquiry here?' asked Chalke.

The statement reader searched for the lie in the paper. He sat undisturbed reading every word of every statement from every witness. Boring as hell – but that was the way murders were solved. And you didn't have to go out in the cold.

'The Eternal Flame,' said Leyden.

'He likes the shiny bum jobs,' agreed Weaver. 'And he's good.'

'Who're we talking about?' asked Chalke.

'Les Blunt. The guy who looks like Billy Bunter without the glasses,' explained Leyden. 'The Eternal Flame. Never goes out.'

Weaver glanced up at the wall clock. 'I reckon that's my lot for the day. Anyone fancy one in the Tolly Shop?'

'I'll join you, sir,' said Leyden. 'I'll just try Crystal Shine one more time.'

This was a chance for Chalke to get to know her team better but she didn't like beer and wasn't that keen on pubs. Anyway, she'd had enough for one day.

'Coming, Patsy?' asked Weaver.

'I'm afraid I've arranged to see my sister,' she lied. 'Another night.'

Leyden tried the number in Spain. This time he was in luck. Crystal Shine had just returned from the golf course, but she couldn't talk. She needed a shower and then she had to dress to go out. She wasn't particularly concerned that her husband hadn't been seen for a few days. Dave was like a bad penny. He'd turn up. She didn't know of any enemies nor had she any idea what he did when he was in London. Dave had no money worries, as far as she knew. She couldn't think where he could be. She had to go. She wasn't going to miss a night out for bloody Dave.

Leyden got to the pub to find Weaver in the garden with Carl Cochrane and Les Blunt.

The pub's real name was the Richard the First but old hands knew it as the Tolly Shop. According to Weaver, it had once been owned by the Tolly Cobbold brewery when the small bar had been the off-licence – hence the name Tolly Shop. Weaver liked it because it had no TV, no jukebox and no fruit machine. A good old-fashioned boozer, he called it.

But no sooner had Weaver handed Leyden a pint of lager than his phone rang. Weaver moved away to take the call. He returned looking solemn.

'Problems, sir?'

'My daughter's bringing her new bloke for supper and I'm under commander's orders to get home soon and sober.'

'One before you go?'

'Better not. I'll catch up tomorrow.' Weaver stood, drained his glass in one and slouched away.

'You don't think of the guv'nor being under the thumb,' commented Cochrane.

'He's doing it for his daughter,' explained Blunt. 'If you made more of an effort at home, you wouldn't be on wife number four.'

'Number three,' corrected Cochrane. 'It's not my fault I marry bloody-minded old battle-axes.'

'Whose fault is it, then?'

'They change, you know,' muttered Cochrane darkly.

Tell me about it, thought Leyden.

'Hey, Bobby, what does Karen think about you coming home with a face like a well-smacked arse?' asked Blunt.

'Don't think she notices,' said Leyden in a neutral voice.

'Women get like that,' said Cochrane. 'I rest my case.'

'Well, while you're resting your case, Carlo, you can shift your arse and get us a drink. It's your round.'

Leyden and Blunt stared in silence at Cochrane, still nursing the last of his lager.

'No, it's not.'

'Yes, it is,' said Blunt. 'I got one. The guv'nor got one.'

'And I bought you two pints last night when you said you'd no money on you,' remembered Leyden.

'I've not had a chance to go to a hole in the wall.'

'The pub takes plastic, Carlo,' prompted Leyden.

'Pints or halves?'

'Fuck off and make sure it's Stella and not that Foster's shit.'

Cochrane scowled and headed inside. Watching him leave, Leyden noticed how other drinkers had given their table a wide berth. Was it was that obvious they were coppers?

'Do you think he'll do a runner?' asked Blunt.

'Wouldn't dare. He knows I'd hunt him down.'

'He's getting worse. He never used to be this tight.'

'Oh, I don't know.' Leyden remembered Blunt had landed the statement reader's job. 'Who's becoming the station cat, then?'

'You don't have to walk off the shoe leather to be a decent copper.'

'Bollocks. You're just a shiny-arsed flub.'

'Just because your lips ache when you read.'

It was a well-worn argument between the two. The idea of being stuck in a small office, undisturbed, day after day, reading statement after statement, was purgatory to Leyden. He enjoyed being out on the streets.

Blunt – five years older and two stone heavier – was keener to take life easy.

'You're well in with the new skipper.' Having enjoyed the spat, Blunt moved on to more important matters. Like all desk-bound coppers, he was finely tuned into office politics; tracking who was in and who was out, who was a rising star, who was going to leave a crater when they crash-landed.

'I bumped into her at the Bailey this morning,' said Leyden. 'She was really decent about last night's fight – unlike Begley.'

Blunt looked towards the doorway. 'He has done a runner, you know.'

But even as he spoke, Cochrane emerged, three pints in his hands.

'Christ. Look at that! Well done, Carlo.'

Cochrane sat down. He did not appear very happy.

'I tell you who's looking good,' said Blunt, taking a pull at his lager. 'Sue Bigtits.'

'Don't let Begley hear you say that. Not only is Sue Jones a woman but she's a black woman.' Leyden put on his Begley voice. 'It's officers like you, DS Blunt, who give the Metropolitan Police its reputation for institutionalised racism.'

'Begley's a tosshead who couldn't catch a tea leaf if he was running down a street bollock-naked with an old lady's handbag, hollering, look at me,' said Blunt.

'No one's arguing with that, but you're right – Sue is looking good,' said Leyden. 'Perhaps she's got a new bloke.'

'Got to be better than that Darren.'

The squad were fond of their administrative assistant. Sue Jones was a bubbly black girl in her late twenties with an infectious giggle and an incongruous West Country burr. She had made herself indispensable: fetching sandwiches, buying presents and flowers for wives and girlfriends, helping book holidays, and – not least – resolving IT problems.

In return, they were fiercely protective of her. And, behind her back, called her Sue Bigtits.

Her last bloke, Darren, had been a wastrel who'd made the mistake of treating Sue like dirt in front of Leyden. The next day, Leyden had stopped by the building site where Darren worked as a brickie and marked his card. Darren and Sue had split up soon after.

'If Sue Bigtits is looking good, what about Patsy Chalke then?' asked Cochrane.

'Don't even dream, mate. You're not in her league,' scoffed Blunt.

'Do you know what she did last weekend?' asked Leyden.

'I'm a copper, not a fucking clairvoyant.'

'Went to see Elton John in concert.'

'So? My Moira's been to see Elton John.'

'Not in New York, not for the weekend. And flying business class.'

'Shit!'

'I thought she looked knackered on Monday.'

'I've never flown business class in my life,' said Cochrane.

'You're so fucking mean, Carlo, you'd wing-walk to save money.'

'How do you know she'd been to New York?'

'She mentioned it on the way back from the Bailey. I think she regretted telling me afterwards.'

'Christ! I'd tell everybody,' said Blunt.

'That's the difference between you and Patsy, mate,' said Leyden. 'She's got class. You ain't.'

Patsy Chalke decided to leave her car at the nick and take the Docklands Light Railway home. It was a toss-up which of Greenwich's two stations was closer.

She thought the town centre one was, but then there were steps and a long escalator. On the other hand, if she went for the DLR at the main railway station, she'd have to walk almost the whole length of the platform.

Chalke decided on the town centre, detouring through St Alfege's churchyard, an oasis of tranquillity away from the snarl of traffic. She promised herself that she'd bring sandwiches and a book here for lunch one day – if she ever had time.

She left the DLR at Heron Quays on the Isle of Dogs. It was a short walk to her penthouse flat overlooking the river. The porter bade her a respectful good evening and held the lift. The apartment smelled musty and tired after the day's sunshine. She opened the windows, stripped to her underwear and poured a glass of Bandol. The bottle was less than half full. She must have drunk more than she'd thought last night.

She really must cut back on her drinking. She said the same most nights, usually as she was going to bed. The vow had come early tonight.

She wrapped herself in a silk kimono and went onto the balcony for a cigarette.

Even in her own home, she felt guilty about smoking.

To avoid the Terry Rich trial preying on her mind, she started thinking about Stan Figgens. It would have been nice not to think

about work at all but Patsy couldn't help it. Patsy was a worrier, although she hid it well.

She thought of herself as a swan. On the surface all elegance and unruffled plumage, while under the water, out of sight, two huge ugly webbed feet were working like the clappers just to stay in the same place.

It looked as if the Dim Reaper had killed someone and disposed of his victim in such a way as to conceal their identity. Clever. But why had he left Stan Figgens behind Bell's desk? Had he been interrupted? Did he have a warped sense of humour? Was he trying to give Bell a heart attack? It didn't make sense.

Patsy sipped at her wine and tried to relax. From her sixteenth-floor eyrie, she could see all the way downriver, past the O2 Arena, to the Thames Barrier and beyond. Closer, at the entrance to Greenwich Creek, she picked out Lucymar's block.

Poor girl. She'd sold her body and her soul to get to London but she wouldn't last long once the Dim Reaper discovered that she was partying in his absence. Out on the street, visa expired, no money, drug habit to fund. Only one way – down. She'd find a pimp or a pimp would find her. Pimps and drugs went together like flies and shit.

Patsy decided to call Lucymar.

'Hello.' The girl answered on the third ring. She sounded flat and tired. There was a TV on in the background. Patsy found she didn't know what to say.

'Hi, Lucymar. It's Patsy Chalke. I was just wondering how you were.'

'I'm okay.'

If Patsy had binoculars, she'd be able to see in the windows of Lucymar's apartment. She didn't tell the girl that.

'Not heard from Dave?'

'No.'

'Is this normal for him when he's in London?'

'No. He's only ever stayed away for one night before.'

'Has Dave been having business problems? Anything been worrying him?'

Lucymar was slow to reply. 'There was a phone call a day or two after he arrived,' she said. 'From Cyprus. He was quiet for a while then he cheered up.'

'How do you know the call came from Cyprus?'

'Because Dave asked where this man was calling from. Then Dave said, "North Cyprus! Christ! You sound as if you're just down the road."'

'What did they talk about?'

'I don't know. Dave took the phone into the bedroom.'

Chalke made a note to trace the call. 'When Dave gets back, ask him to call me. You've got my mobile number.'

She rang off. The sun was beginning to set and the evening stretched ahead. Now she was home, she felt restless. She wished she'd gone for that drink with Weaver. She needed to shake herself out of her torpor. There was a swimming pool and gym in the basement. She'd go and work off the tensions of the day – and stop her bum getting bigger.

Before she left, she checked her mobile phone.

It was dark by the time Patsy returned, glowing and virtuous. She poured herself another large glass of wine, telling herself that she'd earned it. She took the drink back onto the balcony and lit a cigarette. She enjoyed London at night, the million pinpricks of light, the orange reflections on the river; the laser beam from Greenwich Observatory along the line of the meridian. A river disco boat could be heard rounding Limehouse Reach.

She finished off the Bandol, opened another bottle and put her meal in the microwave. Eastern spiced chicken with apricots and bulgar wheat, courtesy of M&S. Sometimes she thought she kept their ready-cooked foods department in business. She was glad she had shares in the store.

It was almost eleven when she took the last of the wine and the new Anita Shreve novel to bed.

She had made herself comfortable with Joni Mitchell on the BeoSound when her mobile rang. She checked the number.

'What time do you call this?' she asked.

'Sorry. Difficult to get away. I had to say that I was –'

'Where are you?' she interrupted.

'Outside.'

'Letting you in now.'