SHADOW ROAD

Michael Donovan was born in Yorkshire and now lives in Cumbria. A former consultant engineer, his first novel *Behind Closed Doors* won the inaugural Northern Crime competition.

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SHADOW ROAD

MICHAEL DONOVAN

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CHAPTER ONE

Burke and Hare would approve

The shop was on a back street behind Balham High Road, an oasis of calm clear of the commercial frenzy. Its bare display windows reflected our grey silhouettes, hiding the interior. What was on sale wasn't for the casual passer-by. Everyone needed the place but didn't want to be reminded. Lucy stood alongside me, checking the facade, and I sensed doubt for the first time. But what's doubt but a P.I.'s adrenaline? It floods in before most action. I grinned down at her.

'Show time,' I said.

Lucy's eyes showed nothing behind her dark glasses. Her voice was kind of quiet.

'Yeah,' she said. 'Let's do it.'

I dropped my grin in case anyone was watching and opened the door for her.

We went in. There was no chime to announce our arrival. Just still life and quiet. A bare room, teak floors and counter, a display of memorial stones along the wall. A maybe-plastic potted plant. The lighting was subdued to give a sense of eternal overcast. And the silence once the door had closed was a deep silence. Even the minuscule street noise had gone. If I'd had a pin I'd have dropped it just to raise hell.

But this was not the time for frivolity. I looked at Lucy's sad face and snapped my own into a matching set and we waited.

After a minute I began to wonder if anyone was going to come out. There was no desk bell, and the solid door behind it gave no clue about whether anyone was back there. Lucy looked at me. I threw her an encouraging smile and shrugged. The heavy silence felt like it might last all afternoon. Then just as I'd decided to go out and come in again with a good slam of the shop door I heard footsteps in the back.

The rear door opened and two men stepped smartly through as if they'd just hurried along a mile-long corridor. My guess was

that we'd tripped a buzzer on the way in, and since the premises weren't a mile wide the delay was probably simple decorum. Funeral businesses don't like to project haste. Dignity is all. Emphasis on the long-term.

The two men wore identical black suits and ties under their wesk'ts but they'd beamed down from different planets. One was ancient, with a tall frame that exuded the leathery sadness of an ancient carthorse. He watched us with glistening eyes that had the melancholy of a wet Sunday, broadcasting a solemnity developed over a lifetime of digging. He was the comforting hand you needed close by when you buried a loved one, though I guess you'd avoid him on dark streets. The younger guy was a foot shorter and thirty years fresher and sported a comb-over to get Bobby Charlton rolling in the aisles. His face was padded by too-good living that left his shallow grey eyes projecting their simple cunning from out of baby fat. He'd be marching up front with the baton when they did the ceremonial cortege, the picture of dignity and sorrow, but whistling like nobody's business by the time he got the cheque to the bank. Whatever his act, you knew right away it would lack depth.

He was the one who spoke.

'Mrs Gallagher?' His mouth shot sparks of gold across the shadows.

Lucy dabbed at her shades.

'Please come through.'

He stood aside to let the old guy lead us through the door and down the corridor. We followed, sandwiched between them, and entered a small chapel of repose. The two stopped outside.

'Come back through when you're ready,' Baby Fat said. He reached and closed the door.

We waited a few seconds until they were clear then Lucy took a last dab at her eyes and pushed her glasses up.

'Jeeez, Eddie,' she said, 'this is creepy.'

I grinned at her.

'Part of the job,' I said. 'Creepy. Devious. Reprehensible. Stay with it and you'll be out of adjectives before you know it.'

She threw a shudder and walked over to the casket. The thing was nice. Ornately carved in an expensive wood I couldn't name. A top of the line model for sure, though you wouldn't want to be the passenger. I joined her and we looked down at Tom Gallagher, slumbering peacefully. Either Tom had mandated high-end in his will or the casket was simple exuberance on the part of the guy. With Tom's reputed wealth and no surviving family a little exuberance on the part of his executor – who was his long-time lawyer – was in order. As far as we knew the only person Tom had talked to regularly in the last five years was his lawyer, a solicitor called Jimmy Diamond whom I'd met and quite liked. I didn't see the guy working cheap though.

The home had done a good job on Tom. His cheeks were so rosy he looked set to jog to the cemetery. He lay back in creamy silk upholstering, peaceful and sad in his absolute healthiness.

It was warm outside but I'd needed my jacket buttoned as we came through. I opened it now and pulled out the equipment. Started with the mike. Lucy leaned over to watch.

I cut a slit in the lining by Tom Gallagher's feet, close to the staples. Pushed the mike and its transmitter in. The transmitter was half the size of a matchbox and held the electronics and a lithium-ion pack. It disappeared amongst the foam padding like a mouse in a duvet. The mike sat right by it. I set the transmitter switch and stretched a six-centimetre wire out under the silk. The receiver-relay would be staying in this room and when they rolled the casket back to the rear I needed the transmitter to be good for seventy-five feet. When everything was set up I superglued the slit and dropped the pleats back over. The equipment was invisible. I pressed the area. Felt nothing. I leaned close and sneezed. Good and loud. A detonation to give the unwary a heart attack. Testing one-two-three.

Two LEDs in the relay I was holding flowered into life. Amber confirmed that the two-minute transmission was coming in from the mike and green said that the relay's own signal was going out fine.

Next I went round the casket and clambered over a backdrop of fake petunias onto the windowsill to Blu-tack the relay behind

the pelmet. Skipped back down. I wasn't going to win any prizes for subtlety but the funeral home wasn't going to be sweeping the chapel for bugs.

The tricky job was the cam. I needed a good field of view, and for various reasons neither the silk lining nor Tom Gallagher's suit jacket were going to work. Harry had made a suggestion that was entirely reasonable and practical but depended on the fact that he wasn't the one doing the job. His recommendation was to use the shoes. I was hoping for other options but just in case we needed to go with that one Tom's niece, aka Lucy May, had ordered that he be laid out in a pair of his favourite brown leather brogues that were just right for the job with their convenient lace eyelets. Lucy had also requested a simple laying out: just Tom in his suit and shoes. No quilt cover to scupper the cam view. But to bug a shoe meant getting the shoe off. I'd handled cold bodies in my time but the idea of wrestling with a dead guy's foot seemed less attractive to me than it had to Harry. And funeral people usually have to fight like hell to get the shoes on in the first place. I didn't see it being easier now. I searched the casket again for a more favourable location but the conclusion was clear: Harry's idea was the only idea.

I loosened the lace on Tom's left foot and got the brogue off with a bit of muscle and a few horrified clucks from Lucy. I grinned viciously. In any reputable business it would be the apprentice doing the dirty work. I re-threaded the lace to by-pass one of the eyelets and prised out the plastic collar to give me a two-millimetre hole. Then activated the cam and taped it behind the eyelet. Punched mini staples through the tape to hold it in place. Then taped the shoe tongue behind the cam to protect it and slid the footwear back on. This involved more contact with cold socks than you'd want but I heard that chiropodists spend years training with dead feet and look at the cars they drive.

I pulled the lace tight and re-tied it. Apart from a small bulge under the leather you'd never notice. The cam had a rated field of view of sixty-degrees. This was cut to maybe forty-five by the eyelet but with Gallagher's foot resting against the side of the casket those forty-five degrees were pointed right where they

should be. And the field of view was not likely to be disturbed. Whatever action went down, Coffin Cam would get it. Lucy leaned to check out the shoe in what I interpreted as admiration. I threw her a modest shrug. This one had to be a contender for some kind of sleuthing prize. I'd remind Lucy to get the forms.

The cam was activated by a light-sensitive switch. As long as light was hitting the lens the camera would snap one black-and-white frame per second and store it in a two-Gig flash memory. It was a nice bit of kit with the only downside being that it had no transmitter. If you wanted the pics you had to retrieve the cam. The delights of this job were far from exhausted.

I checked my watch. Eight minutes, start to finish. I threw Lucy a grin. Enough grieving. Time to go. I gave Gallagher a comforting pat on the shoulder and Lucy gave me one of her looks and pulled her shades back down. Then we opened the door and went back out. Walked through to where the two guys were waiting in the shop. The old one stood to stooped attention and observed us with a look of profound gloom. Baby Fat stood formally in the middle of the floor, hands clasped in front of him and a glint of impatient sympathy in his eyes. He rocked on his feet. Worked up a sad smile.

'Will Mr Gallagher be receiving any more visitors?' he asked.

Lucy shook her head. Spoke in a faint voice.

'Mr Gallagher has no other relatives, Mr... ?'

'It's Stephen,' he said. He proffered his first name as a comfort.

All part of the act you pay for. Or, in this case, Tom Gallagher was paying for.

If Stevie was already aware that Gallagher had no other relatives he didn’t let on.

'Then we shall see you next Wednesday,' he said. He looked at his old guy who turned to open the door. We thanked him and went out.

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When you drive to Balham you don't expect to park but the funeral shop had some kind of deal with the council. Had its own
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space reserved for business hours. Good for one smallish car. The hearses loaded up round the back. The smallish car of the moment was a Frogeye Sprite with a brindle Staffie waiting on the driver's seat. The dog was Herbie, my sometime footslog assistant and company mascot. Lucy hopped in and Herbie shifted to her lap. I jumped in and pressed the button and we moved off.

The dearth of parking might have been a problem but Harry knew a guy ran a timber and DIY business down the road. We drove down under the railway and pulled in through reinforced gates to where a rust-specked Mondeo was parked by the fencing. A big guy in a leather-patched herringbone jacket was leaning on the wing watching the clouds.

Harry Green, our tech guy. Out taking the sun.

We pulled alongside. Jumped out.

Harry quit his cloud-gazing to give me a gimlet look.

'Whassup?' I said.

'You going down with a cold, Eddie? Or has the dead guy got hay fever?

Lucy pushed up her shades. Smiled at Harry in that "you know how it is" way.

'Next time you're gonna sneeze like an Italian on pepper-spray give me some warning,' Harry said. 'Save my eardrums.'

I grinned.

'You want me to go "testing-one-two-three" in a chapel of rest? What kind of respect is that?'

'How about respect for my eardrums?'

'These people might have been listening. I figured natural was best.'

Harry shook his head. 'You called that natural? Sounded like you were taking a choking fit. I'd have run round to put a Heimlich on you if I didn't know Lucy was there.'

'Heimlichs I can do,' Lucy said. 'If you ever choke give me a call.'

'I take it the reception's good,' I said, back to the point.

'Loud and clear,' Harry agreed. 'Is the cam in?'

'As per your advice.'

Harry's turn to smile.

I slid into the Mondeo and he dropped into the other seat. Leaned over to lower the glove compartment flap. The receiver and flash memory were taped inside, powered by a lead from the fag lighter. The device would stay live for a week if need be, assuming no one decided that the Mondeo was worth climbing the security fence for. Which was unlikely on balance. The receiver and flash were safe. Harry would be visiting the car twice a day. When the mike tripped we'd have the alert we needed to back in for the cam.

Harry locked the Orion up and we went over to squeeze into the Frogeye. Lucy was heading off for her afternoon gig at her uncle's Bethnal Green shop which was lucky since the Sprite doesn't fit three. She threw us a breezy wave and headed off for the Northern Line. Herbie waited until Harry had got the Sprite's door closed then vaulted it. The springs creaked and Harry grunted as twenty kilograms touched down. I jumped in myself and backed out. Gave Lucy a toot and headed for the river.

Harry spoke over the wind roar.

'What's next, Mr Hare?'

'Burke,' I said. 'You got the wrong one.'

'Sure. I'll be Hare. You're Burke. Both our names are mud if it gets out we're bugging stiffs.'

'We do worse.'

Harry thought about it.

'You gotta point,' he said.

'What's next is wait and see. Gallagher's funeral is next Wednesday. If nothing breaks by then the operation's a flop.'

Harry and Herbie both grinned. We'd talked about this after we'd signed the contract. The job had sounded pretty easy before the ink dried. But the reality was that all the gadgets had to work flawlessly and someone had to open that coffin lid or we'd have nothing.

Still, look on the bright side.

Bugging stiffs.

Worst case, we'd have a new line to add to our services portfolio.

CHAPTER TWO

Legal smoke

We crossed back over the river and drove up through Fulham. Raindrops started hitting our foreheads. I kept an eye on the sky, wondering if we were going to beat the downpour. Summer in London. Harry was making the same calculation, probably wishing he'd brought his umbrella. His only protection was from Herbie, sitting upright in his lap. I put my foot down and swung east towards Paddington.

'You think they'll bite?' Harry said.

'The bait's juicy enough.'

Harry grinned. Stayed hunched down to let Herbie soak up the shower.

'Is it Unwin?'

Stephen Unwin: the business owner. Baby Fat.

'The guy's the type. Inherited the family firm, believed not too enamoured by the business but too sluggish to sell up and try something else. Sympathy and service aren't his thing, I'd say. It must put his blood sky high to fake the empathy. He looks good to me.'

We parked behind Chase Street and went round. Normally I'd have taken thirty, grabbed a sandwich, but Lucy had left an appointment on my desk that was dangerously specific on time. That's Lucy: there when she's not there. We went up and I rooted out a pig's ear for Herbie then went to search the clutter on my desk.

No need.

Lucy had planted the Post-it on the exterior of the pulled-down roll top. The appointment was one-thirty. Someone called Leach and Howling who had the sound of a legal firm. An address over in Islington. I dropped into my seat and raised the top. Grabbed my laptop and checked online.

Confirmed my hunch. Leach and Howling were actually Leach & Howling Solicitors LLP whose service list covered everything

modern man needed. Family law, immigration, property disputes, criminal defence, financial crimes and sexual misdemeanours. The gamut. You do it, they've got your back. But there are always legal activities that need a P.I. to dig out who actually did what and whose back needs stabbing. This firm was new to me. I checked their address and estimated that thirty minutes would get me there, of which I had twenty-eight left. I told Herbie to fetch his lunch and left Harry to lock up. Jogged back down and drove across the city.

The firm had offices in a grey brick commercial building on Islington Green, squeezed between estate agents and salons, bookies and cafes with vacant outdoor seating. Where Leach & Howling stood out was in their special touch: they'd put up an entrance surround of low-relief fluted columns supporting a blocky lintel that clashed magnificently with the brickwork. The lintel displayed the firm's name in gold but the columns sounded hollow when I rapped them, like those structures on film sets. Probably a message in there somewhere.

The tiny reception dispensed with the ostentation. Just a plain room with five chairs on coarse commercial carpet, a desk with a heavily decorated receptionist behind it. She raised her falsies and threw a smile. I gave her my name and she stood to escort me up to the top floor. The building didn't run to lifts so the senior partner must have plumped for the height on the basis of the view up there. My chaperone huffed her way up three flights as if she was resigned to this – I guess it saved on gym fees – and tapped on a door with the name Rupert Leach up on it.

For a small jobbing firm the boss's office was decked out impressively. Teak and reproduction 18th Century oils everywhere. A room fit to impress the most opulent client, though my guess was that Leach met most of them downstairs: it's hard to be impressed whilst you're receiving CPR. I crossed the green and gold Axminster to shake the hand of a tall, sixtyish guy in a sober wool suit who'd stood from behind his desk. His mop of prematurely white hair and fresh vacation tan gave him the air of a semi-retired salesman, but the gleam of his teeth as he gripped my hand flagged a guy who was still swimming with the sharks.

The grip was short before he turned to introduce me to a young woman who was also rising from a seat beside his desk.

Her name was Susan Abbott and apparently we were here to talk about her business. She was about my height, thirtyish, with a pretty, thin face framed by the stylish cut of her short red hair. I shook her hand and wondered. Legal jobs rarely put P.I.s in touch with the end client. We're brought in as helping hands, back-room operatives digging out the stuff the lawyers can't get by more linear methods. The end client and their issues are usually of no relevance. We're hired to go out and gather, bring back the goods, cash the cheque. Seemed this was one of those rare cases when we'd be in the know. Leach invited Susan to sit again and gestured to a second chair then sat himself back down.

I ignored the chair. Jabbed my hands in my pockets and went to check out the front window. More or less what I'd anticipated. A prime view of Upper Street's commercial fronts. Rooftops and high rises behind. We were facing the wrong direction for the City skyline. The damn climb was for nothing. I turned and smiled at Susan.

'How can we help?' I said.

Leach twisted to keep me in view. Struggled to hide annoyance. Business conducted with a wrenched neck was not the normal protocol.

'Ms Abbott has a family problem,' he answered for her. 'Her brother is missing. I recommended the services of your firm.'

He stated this like a warning. We've done you a favour here. You'd better shape up.

I nodded. Missing persons we do. Although when people go missing their nearest and dearest tend to come to us directly. No need for the legal angle.

I looked at Susan.

'How long has he been gone?'

'Two years,' she said.

Quite a while.

'You've heard nothing from him in that time?'

'No. He's completely vanished. He hasn't been in touch and we've not been able to contact him.'

'Has it ever happened before?'

'No. He's always done his own thing, might not call us for a few weeks. But he'd never lose contact entirely.'

'What was he doing at the time?'

'He'd just finished university and was thinking about careers. He'd decided to take a break, tour the country.'

'By car?'

'Hiking. Hitching.'

'And he went off to do that?'

'We thought he'd just gone up to Town for a few days. He hadn't told us specifically that he was on his way. But the UK trip was his plan so we assume he went straight out from London.'

'Two years ago.'

'Yes.'

'Could he have extended his tour? Decided to cut contact for a while?'

'That would have been way out of character. He'd know we were worrying.'

'So when did you decide he was missing?'

'After a few weeks without contact. He didn't get in touch and wasn't answering calls. There was obviously something wrong.'

'Did you talk to his friends?'

'The few we knew, but none of them knew anything.'

'Did you inform the police?'

'Yes. But there was nothing they could do, especially since Chas had stated his intention of taking time for himself. They told us to get back in touch if he didn't reappear and that was it. And when we did go back to them a year later they still couldn't do anything. They just had him on a list in case any reported incidents came in that might relate to him.'

The story was familiar. The police handle around two hundred thousand missing persons reports a year and most of those can be categorised as own-initiative, clear up after a few days or weeks. And the couple of thousand that stay unresolved are assumed to be mostly people who don't want to be found. A university graduate taking time out to kick things around wasn't going to trip alarms. I turned back to my view. Rain spattered the windows and

the high rises dissolved into unbroken grey. A wet afternoon coming in.

'I recalled a similar case you took on a year ago,' Leach said. 'With impressive results.'

I stayed watching the sky. Grinned. Half truths and flattery. Because unless Susan's brother was a child then this was not similar. And Leach's remark, set against the result we got, had to be either flattery or delusion.

'How old is your brother?' I said.

'Twenty-three.'

'And let's be clear: this would be way out of character?'

'Yes. I guess.' Susan searched for the right words. 'He could be thoughtless sometimes. Moody, directionless. If something grabbed his attention he might wander off without telling anyone. But not for two years. And what really upset our mother was that our father died six months ago and Chas doesn't know.'

I nodded, still wondering why Susan had involved a lawyer in this.

'What did your brother study?'

'He'd graduated with a business degree at Exeter. By July he was back home in Alton considering options.'

'Meaning what?'

I turned.

'Chas was conflicted. He was never really interested in the business degree but Dad pushed him into it. He'd barely scraped through and decided that his career lay elsewhere.'

'What kind of elsewhere?'

'He had ideas. Some of them pretty wild. Farming; wildlife warden; setting up a wind farm; maybe living off the land – he mentioned a friend up in Scotland who was into crofting. Stuff like that. Chas was kicking it all around and getting into fights with Dad.'

'Why's that?'

Her chin came up. Her eyes glittered in the light.

'Dad was disappointed. Didn't see great job prospects for Chas and was annoyed that he didn't even seem to be looking.'

'Okay. So what happened prior to his leaving?'

'He was home kicking around, disappearing for odd days to stay with friends in London. Then he announced he was going to take some time, maybe a year. Travel around. That's when he and Dad had a row. Dad told him to do as he damn well pleased but he'd be paying his own way. And the next day Chas grabbed his rucksack and left. That was the last time we saw him.'

'He didn't call?'

'We called him but his phone was always off and he didn't reply to messages. It got to weeks then months. That's when we reported things to the police. But nothing happened and the months just stretched out. When our father died our mother was devastated that Chas wasn't at the funeral.'

Rupert Leach sighed and shook his head. Stood slowly and came over to the window to check out his view himself.

'It's always family affairs that are most upsetting,' he told me.

And most lucrative. The gleam in his eye wasn't tears. I stayed focussed on Susan.

'Did your brother have any issues? Vulnerabilities?'

'Only in the sense of being a little lost in life. My brother's not an alcoholic or drug user, if that's what you're asking.'

'Got it. So now you've decided to take some action.'

'We can't wait another two years.'

Leach spoke beside me.

'Let's not dismiss the possibility,' he said, 'that Chas *may* have a vulnerability. Perhaps his life took a downward turn after he left. Two years is a long time. Who knows what might have happened?'

He turned to cast a doleful frown Susan's way. Looped back to his seat and sat with a sigh then strained his neck again to see me.

'It's better to have him found, Mr Flynn.'

I didn't disagree, though why a lawyer was making the sales pitch I couldn't see. What was in it for him? At best some kind of finder's fee for rustling up a detective service, unless Susan had paid these people a hefty fee up front to do a job they could afford to subcontract. But Susan Abbott didn't look the wealthy type.

'What do you do?' I asked.

'I'm an interior design consultant.'

So maybe a little wealth. But I didn't get the sense she was naive enough to throw money at a lawyer when there were a hundred agencies in the directory all claiming a speciality in locating the lost. So maybe Leach was just her personal solicitor. She'd sought advice and he was taking the finder's fee. I let it go.

'What about Chas' friends?' I said.

'We've talked to his old friends from home. They know nothing. And we don't know his university or London friends. All we have is two names. One friend in London, one Scottish girl he met at university.'

'Is Alton still his registered address? Does he get bank statements and phone bills there?'

'Yes. We've opened them all. There's nothing. His bank account and phone haven't been used in two years.'

Which was bad news. If her brother had left no paper or social trails he could be deep under the radar.

'Does Chas drive?'

'He didn't have a licence.'

Nix that line of enquiry too, though we'd make a quick check.

Without paper or electronic trails getting to Chas was going to take legwork. We could be talking weeks or months and Susan would be looking at a hefty tab. I walked across finally and sat down to give her my thoughts. Explained the financial aspect. Susan shrugged them off.

'Whatever it takes,' she said. 'Just find him.'

'Another thing,' I said, 'is that we'd be working for you, not your brother. If he doesn't want to be found we'll find him anyway and you'll have something he's trying to keep from you. You may have to live with that.'

'We'll deal with the consequences,' Susan said. 'Chas doesn't have the right to put his mother through all this. We want to know what's happened to him. After that it will be up to him.'

'Just find the young man,' Leach said. 'That's all we want.'

Spoken like a venerable uncle, sharing the pain. A good lawyer suffers right along with his client until the final cheque clears. I watched him. He still had that sad gleam in his eyes and I was still wondering what was in it for him.

Then he answered the question. He stood to bring over a form which was a contract covering our services. A retainer and weekly fee already inked in. The figures were pretty reasonable. The guy had done his homework. And his cut would be fifty percent on top, which would explain his sincerity.

Unfortunately we don't do subcontracts.

I grinned at Leach and handed the paperwork back.

'We have our own contracts,' I said. 'And we work directly for the end client in cases like this. If that's a problem, Ms Abbott can tell us now.'

Ms Abbott looked at Leach. I waited for him to start warning her about the dangers of going without legal oversight, but the guy just smiled and planted the contract back on his desk. Held up his hands.

'That's absolutely fine,' he said. 'I was simply trying to expedite things. Ms Abbott will be happy whichever way you work things. I'll only ask her to give me a glance at the contract before she signs. Just for her peace of mind.'

I held the grin. The guy could glance at the contract until he got migraine as long as he didn't try to change it. I'd just have to get Lucy to check the form before she printed it out. Make sure there were no long words or obscure terminology. Right now the only two bits of paper that mattered were the Retainer form that I had in my pocket and Susan Abbott's cheque that would cement our agreement. I pulled the form out and pushed it onto Leach's desk for his due diligence check.

The form said basically: I hereby retain the Eagle Eye Detective Agency at a non-refundable advance of _____ to act as my agents in the matter of _____ under conditions laid out in contract reference _____ .

Of which the key legal jargon was the "non-refundable" bit.

In matters of high urgency we sometimes skip the form, take an informal cash payment and let the contract catch up. But since we were all here and armed with pens and chequebooks, and since Chas Abbott had been absent for two years, rush didn't seem appropriate. Leach read and double-checked the wording and I inked in the details, informed Susan of the weekly fee and

explained about expenses and escalation hours if we needed more manpower. Then she penned her signature and we were done.

'We'll start tomorrow,' I said. 'I'll call in at Alton. If it's convenient then both you and your mother should be there.'

'That's fine,' she said. She sighed and I saw the weight come off her shoulders. After two years of worry something was happening. P.I.s are like dentists in that respect. Capable of bringing instant relief, the anaesthetising effect of the retainer.

Leach copied the form and I pocketed the original and shook Susan's hand and she smiled for the first time. Thanked me again.

'Thank us when we find Chas,' I said.

Leach's grip was strong and sincere. Almost as if he'd be involved in the day to day of this.

Which he wouldn't.

Though I was still wondering about him.