

A Charlie Woodend Mystery

Fatal Quest

Woodend's First Case

SALLY
SPENCER

"This is a cracking good series, with this latest entry
quite possibly being the best yet"

Booklist on Dying Fall

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By Sally Spencer

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FATAL QUEST

Woodend's First Case

A Chief Inspector Woodend Mystery

Sally Spencer



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Except where actual historical events and characters are being described for the storyline of this novel all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental.

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The girl looked around her in total panic. But she could not see far, because the smog – that swirling layer of yellow filth which sought out the weak-chested and mercilessly clamped itself around the throats – had all but isolated her from the rest of the world.

‘Get in the car,’ the man said, his voice harsh and commanding.

‘I ... I don’t want ...’ she protested.

‘Get in the car!’ the man repeated.

And she did.

Even though her every instinct screamed that she shouldn’t.

Even though she already knew it was a mistake, perhaps the biggest – and last – mistake she would ever make.

Because she was too afraid to do anything else.

It was a dead city through which they drove. The buses had stopped running hours earlier, and now the few cars still in evidence moved at a crawl, like wounded animals desperate to return to their lair.

The girl grasped her right arm with her left hand, and her left arm with her right, and hugged herself tightly. She felt all alone – and so she was.

From somewhere deep inside herself, she found the courage to speak.

‘Where are we going?’

The man said nothing. She wasn’t even sure that he knew the answer himself, because most of the time he wasn’t looking at the road ahead of them at all, but at the pavement.

The car slowed, then came to a halt.

The man opened his door. ‘Stay there!’ he said.

She stayed. She had no choice. Her legs felt like lead. Her head was pounding. There were so many things she needed to say, but she couldn’t find the words.

The man walked around the front of the car and opened the passenger door.

‘Get out!’

‘I ... I don’t think I can.’

The man grabbed her arm and yanked her out of the car.

‘You’re hurting me!’

He didn’t reply, and she realized that he didn’t *care* if he was hurting her – didn’t care about her *at all*.

He dragged her round the car, across the pavement and onto a piece of waste land. The ground was rough, and several times she stumbled. But the man kept his tight grip on her, and wouldn’t let her fall.

When they had gone perhaps a dozen yards – and looking over her shoulder, she could no longer see the pavement – they came to a stop.

The man swung her around, so that she was facing him.

‘What were you doing, back there?’ he demanded.

Back there!

He meant the place in which she’d first caught sight of him, and then – with a look of horror quickly coming to his face – *he’d* first caught sight of *her*!

'I ... I ...' she began.

~~'Tell the truth, because if you're lying to me, I'll know,' he said menacingly.~~

And she believed him – believed he could see right through her.

'I ... I was looking for you,' she confessed.

The man nodded sombrely. 'That's what I thought,' he said

And then he put his free hand into his overcoat pocket, and when it emerged again, she saw it was holding a razor.

'Please, no!' she gasped. 'I didn't mean to ... I only wanted to ...'

But even as she spoke, she understood that she was wasting her breath – that the emptiness and yearning which had been eating away at her for years would soon be gone.

Because *she* would soon be gone.

The barman in the buffet of Whitebridge railway station had been studying the racing form, but now he laid the paper down on the counter and turned his attention to his sole customer – a big bugger in a hairy sports jacket – who seemed engrossed in a tattered paperback.

The man had an interesting face, the barman thought. Like the rest of him, its features were well proportioned – large – long nose, wide mouth, square jaw. It was not an unattractive face, but it did somehow manage to give the impression of having been hastily carved by a sculptor using a blunt chisel.

The barman knew who this customer was, of course. Anyone in Whitebridge who had an interest in crime – or even someone who'd simply picked up a local newspaper in the last decade or so – would have known.

'Another pint, Chief Inspector?' he called across the empty room.

Woodend looked up from his book – which was Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. 'What's the latest news on the delay?' he asked.

'No news at all. But if you want my opinion, it'll be at least another couple of hours before normal service is resumed. It always takes that long when a train comes off the track.'

Woodend nodded. 'In that case, another pint would be in order,' he agreed. 'An' by the way, it's no longer *chief inspector* any more. As of yesterday, I'm retired.'

'Good for you!' the barman said, trying not to sound as if he envied the other man his retirement and *almost* making it.

The door swung open, and a blonde woman walked in. She was probably in her mid to late thirties, the barman thought, assessing her with a professional eye, but she had a cracking figure which – by all rights – should belong to a much younger woman.

The blonde walked over to the table, and sat down without waiting for an invitation.

'What are you doin' here, Monika?' Woodend asked. 'You should be at my farewell bash.'

'So should *you*,' Monika Paniatowski pointed out.

Woodend shrugged awkwardly. 'Aye, well, I've never been much of a one for makin' myself the centre of attention when I didn't have to. An' as long as there's plenty of booze flowin' – which there should be, because it's cost me a packet – the lads won't even notice that the guest of honour isn't there.'

'You never *did* quite appreciate how popular you were, did you, Charlie?' Paniatowski asked.

'I've never really given a bugger about whether I was popular or not,' Woodend said, in what was almost a growl.

Paniatowski smiled. 'I know you haven't. That's one of the reasons why people like you so much. She paused, to light up a cigarette. 'Well, are you going to buy me a drink, or what?'

Woodend grinned. 'You want me to buy you *a drink*?' he asked, feigning astonishment. 'I'd have thought you sank enough last night in the Drum an' Monkey to have lasted you a lifetime.'

Paniatowski returned the grin. 'I wasn't alone in that,' she said. 'You and Beresford more than matched me.'

'Aye, I will say that for Sergeant Beresford – he's turned into no mean boozier.'

'And no mean detective,' Paniatowski said, in defence of the man who would soon be her second-in-command.

‘An’ no mean detective,’ Woodend agreed. He signalled to the barman. ‘A vodka for Chief Inspector Paniatowski, please. On second thoughts, make it a double.’

‘I’m not a chief inspector yet, Charlie,’ Paniatowski hissed, as if she was embarrassed to hear him use the title.

‘That’s true,’ Woodend agreed genially. ‘But you will be tomorrow.’

‘And where will *you* be tomorrow?’ Paniatowski asked, more sharply than she’d intended.

‘I’ll be in London, with Joan an’ our Annie,’ Woodend said.

‘And next week, you and Joan will be in your castle in Spain,’ Paniatowski said – and now there was a definite hint of bitterness to her tone.

‘Scarcely a *castle*,’ Woodend said. ‘But it *is* a pleasant little villa, with a view of the sea.’ He paused. ‘I had to go *sometime*, you know,’ he continued gently. ‘It’s the way of the world. I move on an’ you move up.’

I don’t *want* to move up, Paniatowski thought. Not without you there to watch me – not without you there to *approve* of me!

But all she said was, ‘No regrets?’

‘Some – but not a lot,’ Woodend told her. ‘There are a few things I’ll miss, like best bitter an’ mushy peas. A few people, too – an’ you’re right up at the top of that particular list.’ He chuckled. ‘It’s a real turn up for the books, isn’t it, Monika?’

‘Isn’t what?’

‘My leavin’ the Force of my own free will – exitin’ with an engraved clock rather than a notice of dismissal.’

‘It *is* a bit of a miracle,’ Paniatowski agreed.

And so it was, she thought, because in order to count the number of times that Woodend had nearly been kicked out – and her along with him – she would need the fingers of both hands.

They fell silent, and in that silence Paniatowski found herself wishing that she could bring herself to tell her boss how much he had meant to her over the years. But from early on in their relationship, the exact nature of it had been too deep to put into words, perhaps even – on occasion – too *dangerous* to put into words.

The silence continued, until Paniatowski felt it would choke her. She needed to say something, she told herself. Something superficial. Something that could pass as banter.

‘Of course, the real miracle isn’t that you stayed a DCI for so long – it’s that you ever got to be one in the first place,’ she said.

‘Now that hurts,’ said Woodend, seeming as grateful to be playing the game as she was. ‘That cut me to the quick. You’re surely not suggestin’ – are you, Sergeant Paniatowski – that I was never chief inspector material?’

Sergeant Paniatowski, Monika noted. As if they were back in the old days, when he was her guide and her teacher and would *always* be there for her.

‘What I’m suggesting, Charlie, is that you’re awkward and unorthodox, that you play by nobody’s rules but your own – and that if there’s any way to get right up a superior’s nose, you’ll find it in record time.’

Woodend smiled as if she’d paid him a compliment – which, in fact, she had.

‘You’re right, of course,’ he agreed.

‘So how did you get to be a DCI, Charlie?’ Paniatowski asked, realizing to her own surprise that she really *did* want to know.

Woodend gave the matter some thought. ‘I suppose the short answer is that I earned my promotion

by arrangin' to have somebody killed,' he said finally.

'Is that meant to be a joke?' Paniatowski asked, slightly shocked.

Woodend shook his head – seriously.

'No,' he said. 'It may be an over-simplification, but it's certainly not a joke.'

'Then tell me more.'

Woodend shook his head again. 'I've already said too much. I've already told you somethin' that only three men knew for sure – an' two of them are already dead.'

'You can't leave it there,' Paniatowski insisted. 'You just can't. It wouldn't be *fair*.'

'Life rarely *is* fair,' Woodend told her. Then his face softened and he turned to the barman and said

'Any news on that train yet, lad?'

'Not a dickybird,' the barman replied. 'Like I said, you could be here for another two hours.'

'Which leaves you plenty of time to tell your story,' Paniatowski said firmly.

'Which leaves me plenty of time,' Woodend agreed. 'Well, it happened like this ...'

Sitting at his desk on the third floor of New Scotland Yard, Detective Sergeant Charlie Woodend watched as the smog tightened its grip on the city. Ten minutes earlier, he had been able to see the mighty River Thames – albeit hazily. Now the extent of his vision stretched no further than halfway across the Victoria Embankment, and though he had no doubt the river was still there, he had no way of proving it.

The phone rang, and he picked it up.

‘DS Woodend.’

‘A girl’s been killed!’ a woman’s voice shrieked at him down the line.

But though it undoubtedly *had* been a shriek, it had been a shriek delivered in a *whisper* – as if, despite her emotional state, she still didn’t want others to hear it.

And there *were* others around. Woodend could detect both a background hum of conversation and even further away – some sort of music blasting out.

‘Are you still there?’ the woman demanded, as if hours, rather than seconds, had passed since he last spoken.

‘I’m still here,’ he said reassuringly, as he reached across for a pencil. ‘Keep calm, madam.’

‘Keep calm? How *can* I keep calm? The girl is dead!’

From her accent, she sounded well educated, Woodend thought. And though, given the near hysteria in her voice, it was difficult to pin her age down, he would guess she was in her mid-thirties.

‘I’ll need your name,’ he said.

‘I’m not telling you that!’

‘I’m afraid you have to. It’s standard procedure.’

‘I don’t care. I *won’t* give you my name.’

It seemed pointless to try and push her any further. ‘In that case, if you could just give me some details ...’

‘Mitre Road! She’s on a bomb site in Mitre Road!’

‘And you’re sure she’s dead?’

‘He *said* she was dead. And he doesn’t lie. Not about things like that. He’s not that kind of man.’

‘He?’ Woodend repeated. ‘Who are we talkin’ about here, madam?’

But by then, the woman had already hung up.

The smog turned the short walk to Mitre Street into a journey of almost epic difficulty. Woodend got lost twice, ending up back at the river the first time, and in front of Waterloo Station the second. He met only a handful of other pedestrians, and even these few – with their heads down, moving with the heavy reluctance of men wading through water – seemed more like phantoms of the night than real people.

Finally, nearly an hour after receiving the phone call, he arrived at his destination, the bomb site on Mitre Road. Even then, he might have walked straight past, had it not been for several thin beams of light which were dancing around erratically in the soupy air.

He was reaching into his inside pocket for his warrant card when one of the beams moved toward him, and a uniformed constable in his mid-forties stepped out of the murk.

‘Just keep on walkin’, son,’ the constable said gruffly. ‘No point in trying to rubber-neck, ’coz there’s nuffink for yer to see ’ere.’

‘I’m from the Yard,’ Woodend told him, holding up the warrant card. ‘It was me who called you out.’

The constable ignored the card, and instead shone his torch up and down Woodend’s body.

‘Yer don’t *look* much like a detective,’ he sniffed, noting that instead of the expected suit, Woodend was wearing a hairy sports jacket and cavalry-twill trousers. ‘Don’t sound much like one, eiver.’

Meaning I don’t sound like I was born within the sound of Bow Bells, Woodend translated mentally.

Meaning, in addition, that since I don’t have a Southern lilt to my voice, I must be some kind of yokel.

‘From the Norf, are yer?’ the constable asked.

‘From the North, are you, *Sergeant!*’ Woodend snapped back, in much the same tone as he would have used when he’d been another kind of sergeant – one who wore battledress.

‘No need to take the hump,’ the constable said. Then, after a while, he came to something like attention, and added a reluctant, ‘Sorry, Sarge.’

‘Where’s the body?’ Woodend asked.

‘This way. Mind ’ow yer step.’

Woodend followed the constable over the heaps of rubble which must once – before a Luftwaffe bomb paid it an unwelcome visit – have been part of a substantial building.

There were thousands of sites like this all around London, because even though the War had been over for five years – and even though there was a desperate housing shortage – the capital city (like Britain as a whole) was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, and simply could not *afford* to rebuild.

Four men were gathered around the corpse on the ground – three uniformed officers and a civilian whose stethoscope and black bag conveniently identified him as the police doctor. Despite the gaggling smog, they were all smoking cigarettes, and Woodend felt his own hand reach automatically in his jacket pocket for his packet of Capstan Full Strength.

‘DS Woodend,’ he told the doctor, as he lit up. ‘What’s the story?’

‘She’s a girl, and she’s dead,’ the doctor replied curtly.

‘And?’

‘I’ll save the details till your guv’nor gets here, because there’s no point in me saying everything twice, now is there?’

‘My guv’nor won’t be comin’,’ Woodend told him.

‘A bit too damp for him, is it?’ the doctor asked.

‘Somethin’ like that,’ Woodend agreed.

Although what DCI Bentley had actually *said*, when Woodend had phoned him at home, was, ‘I’ve spent years arsing round this city, cleaning up other people’s shit, Sergeant – and now it’s your turn.’

‘I’ll have a look at the body now, if you don’t mind,’ Woodend said.

‘Be my guest,’ the doctor replied indifferently.

Woodend knelt down and shone his torch on the girl’s face.

‘Bloody hell!’ he said.

‘Didn’t I mention the fact that she was a nigger?’ asked the doctor innocently, though his tone suggested that Woodend’s obvious surprise was a source of some amusement.

‘No, you didn’t,’ the sergeant replied coldly.

He objected to the use of the word ‘nigger’ on principle and, in fact, though she had black curly hair

and a broad nose, this girl was not particularly dark at all.

~~‘I don’t expect you’ve got many niggers up Norf, Sarge,’ one of the constables said.~~

‘I’d like you to refer to her as “coloured”, if you don’t mind,’ Woodend told him.

‘Oh, come on, Sarge, what’s the harm?’ the constable asked. ‘It’s not as if she can hear me, is it?’

‘An’, in case I didn’t make myself clear, I’d like you to refer to her as “coloured” even if you don’t mind,’ Woodend said, with an edge to his voice.

‘Fair enough,’ the constable replied sulkily.

He’d been right about one thing, though, Woodend thought – there *were* no coloured people in Lancashire, and the first time he’d ever seen a black face, it was in London.

‘Cause of death is a slit throat,’ the doctor said.

‘I’m no medical man, but I think I might have been able to work that out for myself, even if you hadn’t been here,’ Woodend replied, shining his torch on the violent gash beneath the girl’s delicate chin.

‘Do you think she was on the game?’ the doctor wondered.

‘It’s possible,’ Woodend said cautiously.

‘Wouldn’t be the first time a prostitute’s met a sticky end in London, would it, though?’ the doctor asked jovially. ‘Shades of Jack the Ripper, eh?’

‘Not you as well!’ Woodend growled.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Can’t you show a little respect for the dead, for Christ’s sake!’

The doctor shrugged. ‘You see a lot of death in my business, and I suppose you just get used to it,’ he said, in what might – or might not – have been a vague apology.

I’ve seen a lot of death myself, too, Woodend thought. *I’ve* seen mountains of bodies piled up inside a German concentration camp. But that doesn’t make this particular death any less tragic.

‘When was she killed?’ he asked.

‘Three hours ago at the earliest, two at the latest.’

From the near distance came the sound of a bell chiming midnight.

‘Big Ben,’ said one of the constables, as if he thought that the yokel sergeant with the Northern accent would need the information.

Woodend stood up and looked back towards the pavement. There was no way the woman who’d called him could have seen the girl’s body from the road, he thought.

But then she’d never *claimed* to have seen the body, had she?

What had her actual words been?

‘He said she was dead. And he doesn’t lie. Not about things like that. He’s not that kind of man.’

She not only knew there’d been a murder, but she knew the murderer’s name. So why wouldn’t she tell him that name? Why wouldn’t she even give him her *own* name?

Both those questions would be answered if he could find her – but how the hell was he supposed to *do that*?

It was a long walk through the smog from the scene of the crime to the dingy one-and-a-half-bedroom flat which Woodend was still reluctant to call 'home', and it was a quarter past two in the morning before he finally opened the front door and saw that his wife, Joan, was sitting in the living room, half asleep.

'I wish you wouldn't do that, lass,' he said.

'Do what?' Joan asked innocently.

'Wait up for me.'

Joan yawned. 'Who says I was waitin' up?'

He grinned. 'I'm a detective, love. It's printed on my warrant card. An' usin' my detectin' skills. I've deduced that you were waitin' up because you're still here.'

'The reason I'm still here is because I wasn't *tired* enough to go to bed,' Joan lied. 'Anyway, you're be wantin' somethin' to eat.'

'I don't want to put you to any trouble,' Woodend told her.

'An' I've got just the thing,' Joan continued, with the showmanship of a magician who was just about to pull a rabbit out of his top hat. 'What would you say to some nice lamb chops?'

Woodend's stomach turned over. 'I'm really not hungry,' he said.

He felt guilty about disappointing her, but the simple truth was that, after seeing the girl with her throat cut, he no longer had any appetite.

'I had to queue in the butcher's for over an hour to get them,' Joan said, disapprovingly.

'I'm sure you did, but—'

'I got the very last ones he had. You should have seen the way the women behind me in the queue glared at me. If looks could kill ...'

'I'm sorry, love, I really am,' Woodend said.

Joan nodded, as if she'd suddenly understood. 'Another murder?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'A nasty one?'

'Very.'

'You take it all too personally, Charlie.'

'I know,' Woodend said. 'But that's the way I am.'

'Yes, that *is* the way you are,' Joan agreed. 'Still, I suppose I shouldn't complain, because if you *hadn't* been the way you are, I'd never have married you in the first place.' She paused. 'Are you sure you wouldn't fancy the chops?'

'Maybe I'll have them tomorrow,' Woodend said.

'An' maybe you won't,' Joan replied, as if she had already foreseen what the next twenty-odd years of their married life held – her buying the food, and Charlie being too wrapped up in his work to eat it.

'You get yourself off to bed,' Woodend said.

'An' what about you?'

'I'll just have a last fag, an' then I'll join you,' Woodend promised.

'Make sure you do,' Joan warned, as she headed for the bedroom.

Woodend slouched back in his chair, lit up the cigarette he'd promised himself and traced in his

mind the events that had led him, a Northern lad who had always considered Southerners a breed apart – and who had never even *been* to London before the War – to be actually *living* there now.

‘How did you end up in London, Charlie?’ Paniatowski asked.

Woodend smiled. ‘A few minutes ago you were clamourin’ to hear how I got a man killed, an’ now you’re askin’ for my life story. Which is it you want?’

‘Both,’ Paniatowski said.

And she meant it. By asking about Woodend’s first case, she had inadvertently found the key to part of her boss’s life she had known nothing about – had stumbled on the opportunity to build up a more complete picture of the man she was already missing, even as she sat there opposite him.

‘I suppose the decision was taken in Berlin, back in 1945,’ Woodend said. ‘You should have seen the place at the time.’ Then he noticed Paniatowski shudder, and added, ruefully, ‘I’m sorry, lass, you didn’t see it, didn’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Monika agreed. ‘I did.’

But though she had managed to keep her voice flat and emotionless, her heart was beating fast and there was a pounding in her head.

It was all over half a lifetime ago! she thought. More than half a lifetime! So why does it feel like it only happened yesterday?

After six years of wandering Europe as refugees, she and her mother, hoping to make contact with the victorious Allies, had reached Berlin just after it had fallen. And what they had found was a city devastated by RAF bombs and Russian shells.

A wasteland.

A true vision of hell.

They had looked on as German civilians, clad in little more than rags, sifted desperately through the rubble, looking for something they could use or something they could sell. Or perhaps even just something – anything – that would remind them of their old lives, before the inferno.

They had looked on, and they’d felt something they’d thought they’d never feel for the enemy – pity.

‘Anyway,’ Woodend said hurriedly – as if he could see the pictures in Monika’s head himself, and felt a strong urge to distract her – ‘anyway, I was sittin’ in this jeep with Major Cathcart, who I was servin’ under at the time, when the major turns to me an’ says, “So what are your plans once you’re demobbed, Charlie?” An’ I told him the first thing I was goin’ to do was to get married.’

‘To Joan?’ Paniatowski asked, as a little of the colour returned to her cheeks.

‘Of course to Joan. There was never anybody else but Joan. So then the major says, “Good idea. We could all do with a little of the peace and stability that marriage brings.” An’ that was when I made the mistake of askin’ him if he was married himself.’

‘Why was that a mistake?’ Paniatowski wondered.

‘Firstly because it’s not an NCO’s place to go askin’ officers intimate questions. But secondly – and more importantly – because of the effect it had on him.’

‘What effect was that?’

‘He was older than me by a good ten years, but suddenly he seemed much younger an’ much more vulnerable. “No,” he said. “No, I ... er ... never quite seemed to get around to it.” Well, I apologized for pryin’, an’ he told me it didn’t matter – though it clearly did. Then he shifted ground – which is what people do when they find themselves in sticky situations – an’ he said, “Tell me, Charlie, have you given much thought to how you’ll support a wife and – soon enough, I would imagine – a family?”’

'And you said, "Well, I've always had this burning ambition to work for the Metropolitan Police Force"?' Paniatowski suggested.

'No, I didn't,' Woodend replied. 'The fact was that even though I wouldn't admit it – even to myself – there was a part of me which believed that if you had any plan for a future, you wouldn't get on, whereas if you expect to be killed, you just might survive. Still, the major was clearly expectin' an answer to his question, so I said, "I'll probably get a job as a tackler in one of the mills. It's what I did before the War."'

'And how did he react to that?'

'Didn't like it at all. He was back in control of himself by this point – very much the officer again, an' he clicked his tongue disapprovingly an' said, "You disappoint me, Sergeant. There's no future for you as a ... as a tackler, was it?"'

'Cheeky bastard!' Paniatowski said. 'He had no idea what a tackler does, did he?'

'No, he didn't,' Woodend agreed. 'But he meant well. "The mills are finished," he said. "Everybody knows that." Not in Lancashire, they don't, I thought. But aloud, all I said was, "Is that right, sir?' "Yes, it certainly is," he told me. "In ten or fifteen years' time, all the cloth we buy in England will be made in India or China. And even if the mills weren't finished, that's not the kind of job to really stretch a man of your obvious abilities, now is it?'

'A man of your obvious abilities!' Paniatowski repeated, teasingly. 'Do you think he fancied you or something?'

'No, I don't,' Woodend said firmly. 'There was nothin' even vaguely homosexual about Major Cathcart – as you'll find out for yourself if you stop interruptin' an' just listen to the story.'

'Sorry, Charlie,' Monika said, with mock humility.

'Anyway, I asked him what he thought I should do,' Woodend continued, 'and he suggested I should think about becomin' a bobby. "I was a policeman before the War," he told me. "In the Met. And when I'm demobbed, that's what I shall be again." I said it was certainly worth thinkin' about once I was back in Lancashire, an' that's when he started clickin' his tongue disapprovingly again.'

'Why did he do that?'

'He said, an' I think I'm quotin' exactly here, "If you're going to paint a picture, set out to produce a masterpiece. If you're going to write a book, aim at it being the best one ever written. And if you intend to become a policeman, join the best police force in the world – which is the Met." I pointed out that would mean livin' in London, an' he laughed an' said, "Well, of course it would – so there's another advantage for you."'

'That's the problem with Londoners,' Paniatowski said. 'They believe there are only two kinds of people – those who live in London and those who want to live in London.'

'Those were exactly my thoughts at the time,' Woodend agreed. 'An' there were other considerations to be taken into account. "I'm not sure my fiancée would fancy the idea of movin' down South, sir," I told him. "For God's sake, Charlie," he said, "you're going to be the head of a family, so you'd better start thinking like one, even before you're married. The Met's desperately short of good men at the moment, and for anyone who's even halfway competent – and you're much more than that – it's a golden opportunity. If your wife has anything about her, she'll see that, and want you to do whatever's necessary to get on in life. And if she doesn't like it, well, as I said, you will be the head of family, so she'll just have to lump it, won't she?"'

A smile played on Paniatowski's lips. 'And did Joan "just have to lump it"?' she asked.

'As a matter of fact, she raised no objection at all,' Woodend told her. 'What she actually said was "I've got faith in your judgement, Charlie. After all, you showed enough of it to be pretty desperate

marry me, now didn't you?"

Paniatowski laughed. *'That sounds like Joan,' she said. 'But tell me, Charlie, did you ever regret taking the decision?'*

'Now an' again,' Woodend admitted. 'On nights like the one I've just been talkin' about, when the smog was so thick it settled in your lungs an' didn't seem like it would ever go away, I did get a bout of the blues an' start to yearn for home, where even the industrial filth seemed to taste better. But when that happened, there was always somethin' – one thing – I could do to lift my spirits.'

'And what was that?'

'Go an' look at our Annie, sleepin' peacefully in her little bed.'

Woodend stood in the doorway of his daughter's bedroom. From the illumination provided by her nightlight he could see that she was deeply asleep, but still he held his breath for fear of waking her.

She was a wondrous child, he told himself. A precious gift that – most of time – he felt unworthy of.

She had been born just before the move to London, and, after much thought, he and Joan had christened her Pauline Anne. Woodend was still not sure which of the two names he preferred. And neither, it appeared, was his daughter, since for weeks on end she would insist on being called Annie and then – completely out of the blue – would recognize no other name but Pauline.

He realized suddenly that the War – or at least *his* War – had been for her. That before she'd even been conceived, it was for her future – for the future of children everywhere – that he'd been fighting.

But there was one child who would *have* no future, he thought with rising anger – one child whose future had been drained out of her, as if she were no more than a stuck pig, on a sordid bomb site.

The sudden and unexpected ringing of the telephone in the living room filled the silent flat with noise which sounded loud enough to waken the dead. Woodend glanced anxiously down at his small precious daughter, saw that she was still sleeping peacefully and retreated from her bedroom as quietly as he could.

Once in the hallway, he clicked his daughter's door gently closed and turned to face the instrument which had dared to shatter the peace.

He was sure the call must be a mistake – who the bloody hell would be ringing *him* at half-past twelve in the morning? – but since the only way to silence the infernal racket seemed to be pick up the receiver, that was what he did.

'Detective Sergeant Woodend?' asked a man's voice.

Not a mistake, he told himself.

And not the Yard, either – because the first thing someone from the Yard would do would be to identify himself.

'Yes, I'm Woodend,' he said.

'Well, yer 'ave been a busy boy, ain't yer?' the caller replied.

'Who is this?' Woodend demanded.

'Fing is, yer don't want ter go takin' this case too seriously,' the other man continued.

'What are you talkin' about?'

'The girl, you wally.'

'The murdered girl?'

'Unless yer can fink of any uvver.'

'If you've got any information on the murder, it's your duty to report it.'

'I ain't got any information, *as such*, but what I 'ave got is a bit of advice for yer.'

'Go on,' Woodend said.

‘Yer want to tread carefully.’

‘An’ what does that mean, exactly?’

‘It means that nobody expects yer *not* to investigate the case wot’s been assigned to yer. That’s yer job, after all. That’s ’ow yer earn yer crust and keep a roof over yer ’ead.’

‘Get to the point!’

‘All I *am* saying is, if yer know what’s good for yer, yer won’t do that job *too* thoroughly.’

‘That sounds like a threat,’ Woodend growled.

‘Now yer catching on, Charlie boy,’ the other man agreed. ‘It’s a threat. Start making too many waves, and somefink very nasty could ’appen to yer.’

‘An’ who’ll be makin’ this “very nasty” thing happen to me?’ Woodend wondered. ‘You?’

‘Could be.’

‘I hope it *is* you. I hope we get a chance to meet face to face. Because if we do, I’ll rip your head out.’

The other man sighed. ‘Well, don’t say I didn’t warn yer,’ he said.

And then he hung up.

By morning, a favourable wind had blown away the smog, and with its departure the events of the previous evening had assumed an almost dreamlike quality.

Except that they hadn't been a dream at all, Woodend said to himself, as he marched along the Victoria Embankment, towards the imposing red-brick building that was New Scotland Yard.

Because even though the visible signs of the smog had gone, its sulphurous fumes still hung heavy in the air as a reminder.

And even though the poor coloured girl would, by now, be housed in much less sordid surroundings than the ones in which she'd initially been discovered, she was still dead!

He reached the main entrance to the Yard, and nodded to the two constables on duty there.

'How are you, Sarge?' one of them called out to him.

'Fine,' he answered.

But he wasn't – he bloody well *wasn't*!

DCI Bentley's office space was divided into two unequal sections by a wooden partition wall. The larger of the sections – the outer office – contained five desks, and was inhabited by Woodend and four detective constables. The smaller section, known unofficially as the Wolf's Lair – a name shared, only partly ironically, with Hitler's mountain retreat – was reserved for the exclusive use of Bentley himself.

Somewhere in the dim and distant past the chief inspector may well have lived up to his lupine nickname, Woodend thought, as he stood in the doorway of his guv'nor's office, studying the man in the photograph hanging on the wall behind him – in which he was shaking hands with a minor royal – certainly seemed to suggest there had been a time when he had been lean and hungry, capable of single-mindedly stalking his prey for days on end. But the man that he had become – the man with his feet up on the desk, flicking through the newspapers – had none of these qualities.

Bentley had put on a lot of weight in the years since the photograph had been taken, weight he had either not noticed or decided to ignore. His hair had thinned dramatically, but he continued to plaster it with as much hair cream as he had done when he'd had a full thatch, so that now the pink skin on his scalp glowed with a sheen of grease. And as his cheeks and jowls had expanded, his features had retreated, leaving him with piggy eyes and a tight, disapproving mouth.

The chief inspector lowered his newspaper and glanced across at the clock on the wall.

'A quarter to eight,' he grunted. 'So this is how you carry on when I'm not here, is it, Sergeant – no bothering to put in an appearance until it's practically time to take a tea break?'

That was rich, coming from a man who rarely turned up himself before ten o'clock, Woodend thought, but he contented himself with saying, 'I had a late night, sir. There was a murder I had to investigate.'

Bentley sighed, theatrically. 'So there was,' he said. 'Well, I suppose you'd better tell me about it.'

Woodend gave him a concise summary, and when he'd finished, Bentley said, 'Was there anything on her to identify her?'

He'd only been half-listening, Woodend thought – half-listening at best.

'No, sir, as I've already explained, she didn't have a handbag, or even a purse,' he said.

'Still, even without formal identification, putting a name to her shouldn't be much problem, should it?'

it?’ Bentley asked.

‘Shouldn’t it?’

‘Of course not. After all, there can’t be that many niggers in London who match her description now can there?’

‘There can’t be that many *coloured* girls, no,’ Woodend agreed. ‘I read somewhere that the entire *coloured* population of the British Isles doesn’t come to much more than eleven thousand.’

It was a mild rebuke, and he knew it, but it was as far as he dared go with the man who held his future in his hands, and he could only hope that Bentley would take the hint.

‘And most of the niggers who aren’t too bone idle to earn an honest day’s pay have jobs on the docks, don’t they?’ Bentley said, with complete disregard. ‘So the chances are that this particular girl will have *lived* near the docks.’

‘That’s probably true,’ Woodend agreed, resignedly.

‘Then all you have to do is go around the dockland police stations with her photograph and find a local copper who knows her. And once you’ve done that, I expect the same local copper will be able to tell you who killed her.’

‘How would he know?’ Woodend wondered.

‘He’ll know because he knows *these people*,’ Bentley said, speaking more slowly now that he realized he was dealing with an idiot. ‘And because he knows them, he’ll also know which of them was that this girl managed to rub up the wrong way.’

‘So you’re assumin’ she was killed by a coloured man, are you?’ Woodend asked.

‘Of course I am,’ Bentley said. ‘It’s the only *logical* assumption to make, and I don’t see why you’re not making it, too.’

‘I don’t think that the woman who reported the murder was coloured,’ Woodend said.

‘What does that prove?’ Bentley asked dismissively. ‘She doesn’t have to have been coloured to have seen the murder and then report it, now does she? Where’s your problem with that?’

‘She didn’t *see* it at all, sir. She was *told* about it.’

‘So?’

‘So why would a *coloured* man tell a *white* woman that he’d just committed a murder?’

‘To impress her,’ Bentley said easily.

‘To *impress* her!’

‘He was probably trying to get into her knickers, and thought that he’d have more of a chance if he gave himself a dangerous edge.’

‘Do you really believe that’s possible, sir?’ Woodend asked, incredulously.

Bentley shrugged. ‘Well, I admit it’s not something you or I would have done if we were trying to get our ends away,’ he said, ‘but then these jungle bunnies don’t think like us, do they?’

‘An’ I don’t think like you, Woodend thought – but if I ever start to, I promise I’ll shoot myself.’

‘Mitre Road’s a fair way from the docks,’ he pointed out. ‘What was the victim doin’ there at all unless it had something to do with white people?’

Bentley sighed again. ‘Do you know what the trouble with you keen young coppers is?’ he asked.

‘No, sir.’

‘It’s that you’re always trying to make things seem far more complicated than they actually are.’

For a moment Woodend considered telling Bentley about his second phone call, the one in which the caller – again, obviously white – had warned him not to investigate the girl’s death too enthusiastically. But he’d just be wasting his breath, he decided – because the chances were that the chief inspector would either tell him it was of no importance or – worse – would suspect him

inventing the whole thing in an effort to advance his own theories.

'I don't suppose there's any *real* harm in you indulging in your flights of fancy for a while—as long as, ultimately, they don't get in the way of good police work,' Bentley said magnanimously. 'So you just go ahead. Come up with as many ridiculous theories about white men being involved as you like. But I think you'll find, when you've completed your investigation, that I was right all along – and it was a nigger wot done it.'

'Did you say *my* investigation, sir?' Woodend asked, almost sure he must have misheard.

'That's exactly what I said,' Bentley confirmed. 'I'm putting you in sole charge.'

'But it's a *murder* case, sir!'

'No doubt about that. She certainly didn't cut her *own* throat.'

'An' I'm only a sergeant.'

'Exactly,' Bentley agreed. 'And there are plenty of DCIs in this place who wouldn't trust the sergeants to do a job like this. But I'm not one of them, you see. I realize that if you're ever going to develop your skills as a detective, you'll need the experience of handling a case on your own. So I'm giving you the chance now.'

Or to put it another way, since the victim in this case was only a 'nigger', he couldn't be bothered to get off his fat arse and investigate the case himself, Woodend thought.

'Thank you, sir, I appreciate the confidence you're showin' in me,' he said.

'Think nothing of it,' Bentley told him. 'But bear in mind, I shall expect an arrest by lunchtime.'

'By lunchtime!' Woodend repeated.

Bentley chuckled throatily. 'Just my little joke, Sergeant,' he said. 'Some time tomorrow will be early enough.'

The doctor who had carried out the post-mortem on the dead girl was fresher, younger – and seemed altogether less callous – than the one who had examined the body at the scene of the crime.

'I expect you're surprised that we've managed to get the whole business of the PM over and done with so quickly,' he said to Woodend, as he led him through the morgue.

'Yes, I am rather, sir,' the sergeant admitted.

Sir! he repeated silently, with just a hint of self-disgust.

What he'd *wanted* to call the other man was not 'sir' at all, but 'Doc', as a more seasoned detective would have done. But somehow, despite the fact that they were more or less the same age, he simply hadn't been able to force the word out.

'Because of the smog, things have been pretty quiet around here, you see,' the doctor continued. 'But we know from experience that that's just the lull before the storm. By this afternoon, we'll be swamped with bods whose respiratory systems have packed up. So, bearing that in mind, I thought I'd get your girl out of the way while I had the chance.' He slid open a refrigerated drawer. 'There she is. Want to take a closer look at her?'

'If you wouldn't mind, si— Doc,' Woodend said.

The doctor pulled back the sheet, and the sergeant looked down at the victim.

The girl's face was frozen in a death mask which seemed to combine horror with panic, but even that could not entirely disguise the fact that she must have been quite pretty in life.

'What can you tell me about her?' Woodend asked.

'She was probably sixteen or seventeen,' the doctor said. 'Whoever killed her did a professional job – her throat was cut with a single slash, rather than being hacked at. And if you asked me what the killer used, I'd put my money on it being a cut-throat razor.'

Shades of Jack the Ripper, Woodend thought, remembering what the other doctor had said the night before.

‘Yes, my guess would be a razor,’ the doctor repeated. ‘Which is a rather old-fashioned sort of weapon to employ, don’t you think?’

It was, Woodend agreed. Modern criminals preferred to use flick knives, or – when they could get their hands on them – guns.

‘The girl was healthy and well nourished,’ the doctor continued. ‘It’s true there’s evidence of contusions on her legs, but I don’t think that’s something you should be particularly concerned about.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because it’s not the kind of bruising you’d expect from a deliberate beating. My guess would be that it’s evidence of some kind of sporting injury – most probably hockey.’

Hockey! The more he learned about this girl, the more of an enigma she became, Woodend thought.

‘Was she a virgin?’ he asked.

‘Yes, she was.’

Not a prostitute, then.

But despite some of the evidence pointing that way, Woodend had never really thought that she was.

‘Was she sexually interfered with in any way, before – or after – she died?’ he asked.

The doctor shook his head. ‘Absolutely not. There’s not a trace of bruising around her private parts.’

The knowledge that she’d at least been spared that humiliation should have made her death a little easier to take, Woodend told himself – but it didn’t.

‘I’d like to look at her things, now, if that’s all right with you,’ he said.

‘No problem at all,’ the doctor replied. ‘I’ll get one of the porters to take you to where they’re stored.’

The porter was an old man with a pronounced limp, and as he led Woodend slowly down the corridor he chatted away about the experience of working in the morgue during the War.

‘At the height of the Blitz, with all them bombs dropping on London every night, we had so many bodies in this place you could hardly move for them,’ he said. ‘If I’d have been of a mind to, I could have done in the missus and got clean away with it, because the doctors were so run off their feet that they’d never even have noticed it wasn’t natural causes wot had laid her out.’

Woodend grinned. ‘But I take it that you *weren’t* of a mind to?’ he said.

‘No, I wasn’t,’ the porter agreed, shaking his head seriously. ‘With all that was going on, you see, was far too busy. An’ besides,’ he added, almost as an afterthought, ‘I’d have missed her cooking.’

The room in which the dead girl’s effects had been stored was at the end of the corridor. There was only one piece of furniture in it – a metal table close to the door – and around the walls there were cardboard boxes stacked to waist height.

‘Some of these boxes have been here for years,’ the porter said. ‘We all know nobody’s ever going to claim them, but we have to keep them anyway, just in case anybody does.’

‘What about the personal effects that I’m interested in?’ Woodend asked.

‘They’re over there,’ the porter said, pointing at the table. ‘All neatly laid out for you.’

Neatly, but almost heartbreakingly, Woodend thought.

There was a red dress (covered in dark brown stains which could only be blood), a brassiere, a pair of knickers, a suspender belt, a pair of nylon stockings (heavily laddered), and the girl’s shoes.

Woodend picked up the stockings, and – though he knew it was hardly appropriate – found his mirror.

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