

CLASSIC LONDON CRIME



GWENDOLINE
BUTLER
COFFIN
AND
THE PAPER MAN

GWENDOLINE BUTLER

Coffin and the Paper Man



HarperCollins*Publishers*

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CHAPTER ONE

The Day of May 25 and on to May 27

GRIM. GRIM. the word was going out over the police airwaves at Nineteen hundred hours precisely on this day, May 27, 1989.

GRIM. GRIM. Rope Alley, Leathergate.

This was the code word in the police district under the command of John Coffin (thought intellectual and elusive by his new Force, where his code name was WALKER, but never judged arrogant or uncaring), for what they were beginning to call gender murders.

Gender murder: the killing of a woman in circumstances of a sexual assault. GM. Because the word rape came up, the letter R got itself into the code.

The code was beginning to creep into use all over the many areas and peoples that make up modern London. The two Londons, the many Londons.

London is a collection of villages. They stretch out on either side of the river into the flat lands of Essex, and up towards the hills of Kent.

Some are very old with their names in the Domesday Book and even earlier records. Such are Wapping and Billingsgate and Greenwich. Under other names, the Romans probably knew them too and cursed them for being barbaric and remote from the warmth and comforts of their home town. Some, like Mayfair, are relatively new. New as these things go, owing their existence to the shift of fashion westwards from the old city clustered around the Tower. Interestingly, the centres of crime have shifted westward with the centuries, keeping in touch with fashion.

Most of the villages are happy ones, but some are happier than others and one or two are unhappy. For various reasons.

The old village of Leathergate was very unhappy at the moment. It had known some rough times in the past, when murder and violent death had been almost a home industry, but the present days were uneasy, with the new rich in their smart new apartments irritating the old poor, while the new poor, some of whom had known better days, were even crosser. A mini war of the classes was brewing up in Leathergate.

Leathergate was part of the new Second City of London whose policing was in the hands of the new Force directed by John Coffin, Chief Commander. Together with Spinnergate, and Swinehouse and Easthythe and other old villages both south and east, it was a whole new urban concept. Old in history but with a new Royal Charter and lots of hopes.

In Leathergate that May 25, a girl lay dying in an alley.

She had been beaten and raped, and then a knife had penetrated her ribs, cutting through to her lungs. She did not die at once.

She was still alive when a boy with his dog discovered her, still alive as the

ambulance arrived.

She spoke to the ambulance men.

‘Get the man who killed me,’ she whispered.

The ambulance driver, a senior man, turned to his junior. ‘Lift her up carefully, she’s going to go.’

They were always careful, it was his emotion that spoke. He knew the girl.

At that moment, she died.

Anna Mary Kinver was sixteen years old, looking eighteen. She had long fine blonde hair which was tangled and bloody in the mud. The same mixture, red and black, spread over her check mini skirt and white shirt. It was the day before her birthday when she had a party planned at a local disco and in the alley beside her was her new party dress for next day and a pair of silver slippers, one of which was missing.

Poor little Cinderella who would never get to the ball. Rope Alley ran between the old Clover Rope Works, now converted into smart apartments, and the former Lead Works, now an art gallery. It is as well to get the geography right in this complicated district with its palimpsest of history.

The narrow path between the two high buildings was the way home between the shops in the North Ferry Road and Elder Street.

Anna Mary Kinver, one of the new poor, descended from a long line of the old poor, had lived with her father, new poor/old poor nicely mixed up, in a house in Elder Street. He was there now, waiting for her to come home. She was never going to come.

A policewoman knocked on the door of No. 13. She too had known Anna Mary Kinver, having been in the top class of the large comprehensive when Anna Mary had arrived, a skinny eleven-year-old, to be educated into believing that there was a rich world outside into which, if she learnt French, German, mathematics and how to use a computer, she could be inserted. Thus she was rich, then poor, almost at once afterwards.

Still rich in hope and expectations on the day she died, but poor in any practical delivery of what she wanted, and only able to afford a pair of silver slippers from Mr Azzopardi’s Bazaar rather than from Maud Frizon in Bond Street. She knew about Maud Frizon though, and had stared in the window at her pretty shoes.

The policewoman hated the task she had been given. It was monstrous, horrible, and sad. But it was her job and she was going to do it.

She did not mention death as she first spoke to Fred Kinver, she just spoke of a bad accident and the hospital. She would get round to the rest of the message as she drove him to where he must go.

If he hadn’t guessed. People did guess.

The exact circumstances of Anna’s death had been passed on to the WPC by her sergeant, but these she would not transmit. He’d find out soon enough.

She meditated for a moment on the fact that he would have to identify the body. Oh dear. Fred Kinver was not going to be able to bear doing that, but he would have to. He had the look of one of those who would turn aside from a dead rabbit. She was not unlike that herself, but after several professional visits to the police mortuary she had learnt the knack of not seeing more than you must.

Of course, for him that would be difficult.

Fred Kinver sat beside her in the police car, having a pretty shrewd idea of what lay before him. He had that sick feeling in the pit of his stomach that assured him that the worst had happened.

‘The wife’s out,’ he said. ‘Hasn’t got back from her work. She has an evening job. I shall have to tell her later.’

‘We’ll do that for you, Mr Kinver.’

‘Better do it myself.’

We’ll see, thought the WPC. See how you feel.

Fred Kinver had worked in the biscuit factory in Deen Street till it moved to Slough, somehow managing to let Mr Kinver float away from it. Then he had worked in a small bakery until that was swallowed up by a supermarket. He had gone free from that too, although several other employees had been taken on. To encourage the fresh-bread-baking smell over the wrapped bread counter, the cynics said. Since then he had done odd jobs around the new local theatre, the Theatre Workshop founded by Mrs Lætitia Bingham, where his wife worked for one of the actresses as dresser cum handywoman.

Anna Mary had been studying computer programming at the local Sixth Form College with a grant from the City firm which had promised her a job on completion. The grant was a good one, more than her father earned in a year, so that he called her one of the rich. But the Crash of ‘87 with the doldrums that followed had obliged the firm to declare redundancies. Anna Mary lost her grant and her offer of a job. So she was one of the new poor before truly she had ever been one of the new rich, it had all been hopes and dreams. But at her age, she said, it didn’t matter, and she loved dancing at discos where she had any number of friends.

WPC Flo Rusher, Flurry to her friends, drove carefully towards the newly built police headquarters, taking back streets like Pavlov Street and Down Road and Peterloo Circus, to avoid the traffic. Nice area, she thought, live around here if I could.

‘Nearly there.’

‘Remember what this was like in the old days?’ asked Fred Kinver as if it mattered to him.

‘Not really.’ She swerved expertly round an illegally parked Porsche. She knew Mr Kinver although he didn’t seem to know her. Broken Biscuits, they’d called him. Anna Mary had always had a bag of broken biscuits in her pocket.

‘Slums. Packed little houses. Full of people and mice. But friendly. Look at it now. Too bloody rich to speak to the world.’

She looked at his thin hands twisting restlessly in his lap. This is going to be one of the really bad ones, she thought.

Fred Kinver suddenly sat up alertly. ‘Wait a minute, this isn’t the way to the hospital.’

How to tell him that his daughter had died as the ambulance men touched her, and would therefore have been DOA and hence not taken to the hospital but to the police mortuary? Or for all Flurry knew, she might still be *in situ* in Rope Walk, being measured and photographed.

‘Not just at the moment, Mr Kinver,’ she said soothingly. ‘Our DI wants a word with you first.’

Suddenly aware of what lay ahead of him, Fred Kinver began to scream.

In one of his rare moments of leisure, John Coffin had speculated that the so-called Second City of London together with his new Force had been invented to annoy him. His patch was ripe with murders and crimes of violence, rich in sophisticated villainy. Had been for centuries, they had nothing to learn.

Two days after the murder of Anna Mary, on May 27, in the course of one of his unscheduled and unannounced forays of inspection around his new headquarters he had seen the report on Anna Mary.

Not one of our better jobs, he thought, but routine for round here. The thought did not cheer him up. He had gone through a lot since he took up his new command. Too much, perhaps.

To his surprise, however, he had no more grey hairs and was no thinner now than two years ago when he had been appointed. Perhaps his expression was more cautious.

‘You look so canny these days, John,’ his half-sister Letty Bingham had said only that morning, Saturday, May 27. She had called from New York where she was visiting her husband. Or so Coffin supposed; his name was never mentioned and possibly had long since been banished. It was not a subject he was going to raise with his sister, especially on the telephone, where he was always frugal. But time and distance made no difference to Letty when telephoning, she would call as readily from the States as from across London and talk as long in the small hours as at noon.

‘That’s because I’m always watching my rear.’

‘As good soldiers do. And you’re a good soldier, John.’

‘Think so? And a good politician too, I hope, because I have to be that as well.’

They shared the same mother but had different fathers and had experienced vastly different upbringings. Letty, offspring of a GI father, had been educated in English schools and an American university. She was a lawyer, and had been married twice. Coffin wondered about the state of this second marriage to a property magnate of some wealth, but, granted they never seem to be in the same continent together, it seemed to be holding.

Letty had a daughter, and both of them shared another half-brother called William who was a Writer to the Signet in Edinburgh.

After years of thinking himself alone in the world, Coffin now found himself with respectable family connections. And remarkably, as he had pointed out, they all seemed attracted to the law in one way and another, so there had to be something in ancestry after all.

Their elusive mother who had bred them all, choosing her mates eclectically, was dead, but her presence lingered on in the shape of some amazing diaries that Letty Bingham declared should be published.

Over my dead body, Coffin thought. A certain theatrical-ism hung over Mother’s memoirs and this quality had rubbed off on Letty (possibly all lawyers had it), who was now engaged in turning a piece of property, an old church owned by her husband in the New City, into a theatre and a theatre workshop.

The workshop was in operation, the theatre was still on the planning board, but the luxury flats which were meant to help pay the way of the theatre were complete and occupied.

John Coffin lived in one, and although he had flinched at the cost of his apartment in the tower of old St Luke’s Church, he now enjoyed living there very much. He liked

looking down from his high window on the world below where he must keep the Queen's Peace.

There were two other tenants, one of whom, the actress Stella Pinero, he knew very well, and the other, recently moved in, he had not yet met. A man, so he was told. An art dealer, rumour had it, who had bought the Lead Works Art Gallery. Or was it his friend who had bought the flat, Sir Harry Beauchamp? Rumour and invention were still working on the story.

Letty had made money on all that enterprise, but she was now much preoccupied with creating her theatre, which was why she had telephoned.

'I want to call it the Ellen Terry. What do you think of that? We must get the name settled soon because of the publicity.' Letty always thought about the publicity, good or bad. Any was better than none, she believed.

'Have you asked Stella? She usually has good ideas.'

'I think Stella is more worried about the lavatories at the moment,' said Letty tartly. 'She's always so practical.'

Stella Pinero, that distinguished actress, had accepted the appointment as resident director of the Theatre Workshop, with the implied assumption that she would continue with the main theatre when built. Times away for other work in TV and films and the other companies had been carefully negotiated, and she had just finished a six months' stint on the West End stage in a long-running comedy and was back to appear in the Workshop Theatre, richer and ready for a change.

'I've got to live,' she had pointed out to Letty, 'and what you pay wouldn't keep a cat alive.' She had a cat, as it happened, or a half share, as Tiddles lived part-time with John Coffin.

'I thought it was security that worried her.' Letty Bingham's enterprise in converting the disused St Luke's Church into several luxury apartments, together with a Theatre Workshop and the planned main theatre, was popular in the district as bringing lustre on the neighbourhood, but lately a certain Them and Us attitude had marred the good will.

Stella had not liked having GO HOME YUPPIE painted all over her posters for her last production, *The Birthday Party*, and a load of rubbish deposited outside the stage door. Nor having one of her cast beaten up on his way home.

'That too, but she feels happier now she's got Bovvy End on her team as assistant director; he's so huge she feels he ought to be able to protect them against most things.'

Though you can't be protected against everything, thought Coffin, his mind going back to the latest murder in Leathergate.

'Anyway, I am flying back tonight,' said Letty. 'That's why I am telephoning. How are you getting on with Mother?'

'I've read most of her production. Her handwriting is terrible, though. Slows me down.'

'I suppose she did mean it as truth? Has it occurred to you it might be a work of fiction?'

'I think she was a bit of a liar, our mother, if that's what you mean.'

A liar and an escape artist as well: she had produced three children by three separate fathers and managed to abandon them all.

‘There’s a very interesting murder going on here,’ ended Letty conversationally. ‘A girl’s head in a bathtub, and bits of her turning up everywhere. They’re looking for her feet now. I declare I’ll be glad to be back in London.’

We have our murders too, thought Coffin, as Letty’s presence (he could nearly always see Letty when they spoke, she seemed able to project herself visually) in his room melted back across the Atlantic. And I’m looking for a shoe.

Since he had to speak to DI Young on other business (they were both on a committee setting up an under-fifteen football club in the old Brush Lane ground down by Beowulf Dock), he was able to ask: ‘And have you found the other silver shoe?’

‘Not as yet. But we will.’ DI Young sounded confident. As he always did. He had decided early on in his career that this was the right way to appear and so far had seen no reason to change his attitude. At home was different: his wife was smarter than he was, better educated and was climbing up the career ladder (she too was a police officer) faster than he was. At home he was more cautious.

Coffin nodded. ‘Let me know. I’ll be interested.’

‘Right, sir.’ Cheerful as ever, Archie Young had added: ‘We’ll soon have the whole thing wound up. Several interesting leads. A witness who saw a man near her. A woman who heard her call out. Didn’t do anything, of course, but heard her. That gives us time. And then there’s what she said herself.’

Get the man who killed me.

Yes, that was interesting. But how did it help?

‘We know it was a man, anyway,’ he said to Young.

‘It means she didn’t know him.’

He was pleased with himself. Got the old man there, he thought.

But John Coffin, as he put the receiver down, picked up his briefcase, and patted the cat, thought: I wonder. I wouldn’t count on anything. Long experience had taught him, what was it, canniness?

Archie Young was sharp enough to pick up the implications of his boss’s voice. ‘I have the names of her friends from A to Z,’ he said to the well-filtered air of his office.

Behind the big new police station which was the Force Headquarters and which had been designed by a neo-modernist architect so that it looked like a Venetian Gothic castle in red brick (but was bullet-proof and fireproofed and so air-conditioned that not one natural breath could be drawn in it) was what had once been the choicest area of Leathergate in which to live. The street where the few professionals like the doctor and the solicitor and the undertaker had made their homes. It was still a nice district and a few of the old families clung on.

Feather Street curved down a gentle slope and up the other side until it looked down on the railway embankment, solid Victorian houses with large gardens which backed on to each other so that cats, dogs and even humans could pass freely between them. At the bottom of the hill were a few shops such as a dairy, and a baker’s and a shop renting videos out.

Here still lived Dr Leonard Zeman, his wife Felicity, who was a pediatrician, and his son Tim, who was an architectural student at the Poly. Across the way was the house of his widowed mother and her unmarried niece. The Zeman houses were No.5 and No.22 respectively. Felicity had a white pekinese dog and her mother-in-law had a

mongrel called Bob.

The Annecks were the owners of No. 10 and the Darbyshires lived in No. 13. They had Jack Russell terriers, brother and sister, who hated the sight of each other, fought whenever they could and had to be exercised separately at different hours. The families had worked out a rota of dog departures and entrances and a bell was rung before setting out to make sure the enemies did not meet. They were suspected of having killed a cat a piece. These were the families that knew each other best in Feather Street. Mrs Anneck was a local councillor, Harold Darbyshire worked in the Bank, and everyone knew Dr Zeman.

They were all very busy people, fond of their animals but not good at exercising them, so they were walked accordingly to a strict timetable by Jim Marsh, the son of the milkman (C. Marsh, Daily Deliveries, who had not always been a milkman but had been into Flower Power and Love is All and being a Free Soul, only a man must live), who was hoping to be a vet. He was a kind of professional dogwalker, and, as a matter of fact, it was he who had found Anna Mary's body. With him at that time was the better behaved of the Jack Russells, but even so he had had to pull back the dog from licking at the blood on the pavement.

The dog-walker was a quiet, thin boy, over eighteen but looking younger, who loved the dogs, but even he found this hard to bear. When he got home, he was sick in the kitchen sink before preparing a meal for his father. His mother was dead.

The policeman who had brought him home had been kind but not really understanding. The ride in the police car had been interesting, although not enjoyed by the dog he was walking.

'You know, Mum,' he said—he still spoke to his mother sometimes, although she had been dead some months now, and she seemed to pay more attention than she had in the past. 'It was bad. Bad.'

He too had heard the words that Anna Mary had spoken.

Coffin, having completed his call to Archie Young, prepared to depart for yet another committee meeting, this time one he would chair. He was a desk man these days, and the novelty had worn off with only the boredom remaining. But he was learning how to turn the boredom to his advantage; he could convert it into a kind of anger, and spread it round the committee so that they all shared the desire to get on with the matter in hand speedily. If you enjoy a committee meeting, was his dictum, you are doing it wrong.

He walked down his winding staircase in what had once been the bell-tower of St Luke's, wondering if his car, left parked overnight in the street, would or would not be vandalized. Last week, some hand, which had in his opinion to be masculine and under fifteen, possibly half of that, had scratched on it several phallic symbols. They might have been cacti or bananas but he thought not.

He could hear voices from the hall where his entrance adjoined that of Stella Pinero in St Luke's Mansions.

A light silvery voice was saying: 'They didn't worry about where the lavatories were in the Globe.'

Stella Pinero could be heard loud and clear, her voice rarely failed to hit its mark: 'I don't think they had lavatories in the Globe: they just used the back wall.'

They were standing in the hall, Stella in brown trousers and a cream shirt with a blue scarf tied round her hair. With her was what could only be their new neighbour: a tall, grey-haired man in a suede jacket as pale as his hair. He too wore a blue scarf, but his was knotted round his neck over his matching shirt. He looked distinguished. Was distinguished, since Coffin recognized him as a famous photographer.

Stella turned round.

‘Oh, you’ve got Tiddles.’

‘Have I?’ He looked. He had. Tiddles had come down the stairs behind him, and was now discreetly emptying himself out of the room in the way cats have.

‘You know Sir Harry, don’t you?’

‘By reputation.’ He held out his hand. Harry Beauchamp, recently knighted, was famous for his photographic portraits and revealing group and street scenes. He had an eye. Younger than Cecil Beaton and older than Snowdon, he looked set to beat them all.

‘And I know you,’ said Sir Harry, giving him a tight, hard shake. ‘Saw you in court when Edith Martiner came up for trial. She did it, of course.’

‘Oh yes. She was lucky to get off.’

‘I was doing a series of photos of different types of women. She was a type all right. Wouldn’t have liked to be shut up in a room with her. Thought she’d eat me as it was. Wonder what’s happened to her.’

Coffin, who knew, said nothing.

‘I heard she went to Tibet, beat up a soldier and got shot.’

It was not quite the story Coffin knew, but it might have been truer than the version he had. There were so many ways of telling the truth.

‘I’d be surprised if she’s dead ... I thought you were our new neighbour,’ he said.

‘Dick? I’m going to share with him. You’re getting us both.’

Over his head, although tall Sir Harry was shorter than she was, he met Stella’s amused, informed smile. Always do, always have, her lips breathed: a twosome.

‘Sir Harry’s going to do some photographs of our Work in Progress. One of the Sunday supplements is taking it. Lovely publicity for us.’

‘Take some of you, if you like,’ offered Sir Harry. ‘Got any good crimes going? I like a bit of background material.’

There was a screech of brakes and an angry shout from outside.

‘That’s Tiddles crossing the road against the lights,’ said Stella with resignation. ‘He will do it.’

As Coffin got in his car, he saw a middle-aged man and woman standing on the pavement. He knew the woman’s face, he thought she worked in the theatre for Stella. He thought they were studying him, but he did not hear what they said.

‘Is that him?’ asked the man.

‘Yes. He’s late to work today. Very punctual as a rule.’

‘He looks that sort.’

‘You won’t—’ she hesitated—‘do anything, will you, Fred?’

‘No. I just wanted to see him. Get to know his face.’

‘How can that help, Fred? How can it help Anny?’

‘It helps me,’ said Fred Kinver. He strode forward, feet heavy and fast on the ground, he had always been a mover, played football in his youth in the days when

there were such things as wingers and a man had to be able to run. She had a job keeping up with him.

‘Walk on,’ he commanded.

‘They’re doing what they can, Fred.’

‘Doesn’t it matter to you that the police haven’t got the man that killed your daughter yet? It matters to me. I screamed when they told me.’

‘I heard you,’ said Mrs Kinver. ‘You kept it up.’

‘You just sat there quiet.’

‘Everyone grieves differently.’

‘I’m not grieving. Not just grieving. I’m working at it. That’s why I wanted to see his face. You can get at that one. Get through to him. I feel better now I’ve seen that. I shan’t let him alone.’

‘Walk on.’

They walked on. Beyond St Luke’s Mansions where Coffin lived and the theatre was rising, past the new police building, down the slope of Feather Street where the Zemans and the Annecks and the Darbyshires lived and where the small dairy, home to Jim Marsh and his father, clung to the bottom of the slope.

‘That’s where he lives,’ whispered Mrs Kinver, ‘the boy who found Anny.’

‘That tart’s son,’ said Fred Kinver mechanically. He strode on.

I am vengeance, thought Fred Kinver, and I will have my way.

Jim Marsh looking down from his high window saw the two of them and picked up what Fred Kinver was feeling. Something about the hunch of Fred’s shoulder and the way his head was thrust forward. Vengeance personified, he thought, and his own imagination caught fire.

CHAPTER TWO

Tuesday morning through to evening, May 30, to Wednesday, May 31

Five, nearly six days after the finding of the body in Rope Alley felt like three months in Leathergate and the neighbouring area of Spinnergate, for unease spread over here too. Murderers came from anywhere, this one could be far away by now, but he could be local. Was most likely local, everyone said, because of knowing about Rope Alley, dark even in sunlight and with several hiding places in it as well as a quick exit at each end.

‘I think it’s as bad about the boy as anything I’ve ever heard. I mean ... him finding her. After his mother.’ The elder Mrs Zeman spoke to her niece. They were sitting over the tea-table, Mrs Zeman favoured a strong blend of Darjeeling, procured at her own special shop in Brook Street. She sipped her tea which was piping hot, just how she liked it. ‘His mother,’ she repeated, between sips. ‘It must have reminded him.’

‘She killed herself, Aunt Kay.’

Her niece had her own small pot of Earl Grey; as with so much of their life together there were carefully defined boundaries. Tea was one of them. Coffee, decaffeinated or not, was another.

Aunt Kay Zeman sniffed. ‘She always was unreliable.’

‘She managed that all right.’

Mrs Zeman did not relent. ‘I’ve always thought it was an accident.’

‘And he didn’t find her. No one did.’

Not for several months anyway, until the river finally delivered her on a muddy bank down the estuary. But of course they knew where she’d gone and where she’d gone in: she left plenty of evidence around. It had never been Clare Marsh’s idea not to punish someone. The only thing was, reflected the niece, she had punished plenty of people who didn’t deserve it.

‘Not entirely the husband’s fault,’ said Mrs Zeman judicially.

‘I should think not indeed.’

‘All the same, he’s trouble. Not really suitable to be your lover.’

‘He is not my lover.’

It was Mrs Zeman’s idea that her niece did have a lover somewhere, but she had not so far been able to get positive proof of the victim’s identity although she had her ideas. She thought of him as a victim. In her experience, lovers were victims, as well as victors, torments, and objects of delight.

She said no more, contenting herself with this probe. Her niece, child of her younger sister, long dead, was called Valerie, which Mrs Zeman regarded as an awkward, unlucky name. Valerie had certainly been some witness to the truth of this belief since she had been a failure as an artist (she had a wooden studio in Aunt Kay’s garden, rent: looking after her aunt), and as a woman with a string of abandoned

relationships behind her.

‘You must try and attract someone, Val, hold on, instead of being always a failure.’

‘A lucky failure,’ she retorted at once to this probing sally of Aunt Kay’s, ‘because I’ve ended up happier than you by a long shot.’

Katherine Zeman did not believe this: in her eyes no woman was happy without a settled marriage and at least one son.

‘Happiness is not what an adult expects,’ she replied. ‘A woman should hold on to her man. I held on to mine. You did not. You are a bad chooser.’

‘Someone will kill you one day, Aunt Kay,’ said Val, ‘and it just might be me.’

Mrs Zeman poured another cup of tea. Milk first, she always said, otherwise it stains the cups. Her son had told her that her tea, dark and strong, had long since stained her gullet and stomach deep brown. She did not believe him. Her body would naturally not allow such liberties. She and Val, both strong characters, enjoyed, in fact, a happy relationship in which their sharp differences of opinion were not only allowed but pleasurable. Each knew the frontiers over which not to step and if Mrs Zeman sometimes, as now, strayed too far over them, then she felt it allowed to her as an old woman. It was one of the taxes she levied on Val’s good humour, part of her rent.

‘The girl wasn’t one of Leonard’s patients, was she?’

Valerie occasionally acted as Dr Leonard Zeman’s receptionist and secretary, keeping his records in her fine clear handwriting, so she knew who was on his list.

‘No, I believe she’s with the Elmgate practice.’ The Elmgate Health Centre was a large group of some six doctors near to the Spinnergate Tube station, and was popular with all the company at the St Luke’s Workshop theatre. Dr Greer was the company physician. ‘But Tim knew her, of course.’

‘Sweet on her, was he?’

‘I don’t know, Auntie. She was very pretty.’

‘Wouldn’t be surprised, then.’ In fact, surprised if not. Tim Zeman had an eye for the girls, thought his grandmother complacently. She knew less about Tim than Val did. ‘Well, he wasn’t with us that day.’

‘No, Auntie.’ In fact, they hadn’t seen him for some time. Old Mrs Zeman minded, although she hated to admit it. ‘I believe he was with some friends in Kent.’ The young Edens, Angus Eden had been at school with Tim. He had an even younger and prettier wife.

‘Have you seen him since?’

‘No, he’s been keeping himself to himself.’

‘Upset, I expect.’

‘I think he’s just working for his exams, Aunt Kay.’

‘Certainly what he ought to be doing. Pour some more tea, dear.’

Another cup of dark liquid went down to join the buttered tea-bun and the toasted tea-cake. Yet she was not fat, as Valerie, who put on weight quickly, noticed and thought unfair.

‘Anyway, it’s not Tim, I’m worried about.’

‘I didn’t know you were worried.’

‘I am always worried.’

‘All right. Who especially this time?’

‘I’m worried about Leonard.’

Val drank some tea. 'Why Leonard?'

'I don't think he is happy. And I am sure that Felicity is not.'

'Well, it's probably her job. Always dealing with sick babies. It's a wounding profession.'

'She cures them.'

'Sometimes, but not always. Not often, probably. She gets all the serious cases.'

'It's her marriage. Something wrong there. I feel it.'

Valerie shrugged. If Aunt Kay Zeman felt it, then she would go on feeling it, and nothing would shake her.

'Do you think she's got a lover?'

'Really, Aunt Kay, I don't know.'

'And wouldn't say if you did know,' said Mrs Zeman in a not unamiable way. 'I like loyalty in a woman.'

Val shrugged. So did she, but it was a hard commodity to come by. 'Sex isn't always the trouble.'

'It mostly is. Think of that poor girl. Sex killed her.'

'All right. I suppose it did. Being the wrong sex.' Boys got killed too, of course, but not so often. Not nearly so often. And hardly ever by girls, usually by a member of their own sex.

'So what do you think is the trouble with Leonard?'

She wasn't going to give up, this was developing into what the family called 'searching sessions'. Search being the operative word.

'Do you think he's got a lover?'

'Why don't you ask him?'

'I did, and he just laughed. His father wouldn't have laughed. I didn't know what to make of it.'

'I expect the answer is No, then,' said Val, 'and he just didn't want to disappoint you.'

'He's very in with that theatre crowd,' said Mrs Zeman broodingly. 'And so are you. Get me tickets for their next production, will you? I don't trust that Pinero woman. Got a roving eye.'

'Oh, Aunt Kay,' said Val. 'People don't talk that way any more.'

'They act that way, though,' retorted Katherine Zeman with grim pleasure.

Val took the two tea-trays through into the kitchen. Her tray with the china pot of Earl Grey tea from Fortnum's and the thin coconut biscuits from the same shop, and Mrs Zeman's large silver teapot of the best Darjeeling with the covered dish of hot tea-buns. They occasionally raided each other's supply of eatables (there was a rich chocolate biscuit cake which they both liked) but never the teapots.

Through the open kitchen door Val could see down their garden to the garden across the way. The Annecks, that would be. Their lilac tree was in full bloom, a pleasure to behold, but in return the Zeman roses would presently be scenting the air for the Annecks.

On the skyline she could see the tower of St Luke's old church, now called St Luke's Mansions, where dwelt, among others, her friend Stella Pinero whose reputation she had just defended. There was a small Theatre Club in Feather Street of which she was secretary; all of them were Friends of the St Luke's Theatre and got

special rates for a season's subscription.

She poured a bowl of tea and milk for Bob, the black and white dog; he liked Darjeeling, liked it weak and lukewarm. Now he tongued it up with great slurping noises, he was not a neat dog.

The telephone rang on the wall in the kitchen. All callers were well aware that Kay Zeman, wherever she was in the house, might grab an extension.

Val lifted the receiver. No, she couldn't hear Aunt Kay's breathing, but that didn't mean she wasn't there.

'Hello?'

'Leonard here. I want to talk. Is it all right?'

He meant who's with you.

'I'm in the kitchen on my own,' said Val with caution.

'The police have been questioning Tim about the Kinver girl. Her murder, that is. Asking how well he knew her, where he was that day and so on.'

Where had he been. Val wondered. 'I expect they are going round all the girl's friends,' she said.

'So I suppose.'

'Who told you?'

'Not Tim,' said his father with feeling. 'Mrs Anneck rang up. They had Peter in.'

'Well, there you are then. The police are just doing the rounds.'

'Don't tell Mother. I don't want her worried, her heart's bad.'

Val sighed. 'She'll pick it up. She's sending out signals like a TV station as it is. She might very well be listening now.'

'About the murder?'

'Not only that. She wonders if you have a lover.' She held the receiver to her ear, listening carefully.

Leonard Zeman managed a laugh; he too had heard the sound of breathing. Mother had arrived. Where had she been until now? Probably cleaning her teeth after all that strong tea.

'Or if Felicity has one, or even me. But she thinks I'm a failure there.' Val did not mind repeating this; after all, it was no news to Mrs Zeman, whose breathing could be clearly heard now, and Leonard ought to know.

'Tell her I'm sending her medicine round, will you? It's a new tablet prescribed for her to try.' Not by him, of course, but by one of his partners, he did not treat his own family. 'See she takes the proper dose, will you?'

The conversation moved on to things medical which it was perfectly allowable for Mrs Zeman to overhear, and which, indeed, he was talking about so that she could.

He and Val had learnt plenty of tricks.

As she leant against the kitchen wall talking, Val could see Mary Anneck come out of her back door and walk down the garden path with her dog.

Mrs Anneck strolled down the paved way between the geraniums with her Jack Russell nipping at her heels. She was used to this, wore stout shoes and boots sometimes on purpose.

She knew she was right to have telephoned Leonard Zeman. She had the feeling that at a time like this they must stick together. The police had been in her house

interviewing her elder son, Peter, her daughter, her daughter's current boyfriend (although he hadn't been that last week and might not be next, they changed so fast), and her young son Adrian. She supposed that they had to question all Anna's friends, although it was hardly likely Adrian could be of much use to them since he was only twelve, but you never knew these days.

It was what you never knew that made her heart sink.

'Be quiet, Edie,' she said to the terrier bitch who had caught sight, or thought she had, of a whisker of her brother and best enemy through the garden hedge and was screaming in fury.

Mary Anneck concluded that the dogs would get no regular exercise until the dog-walker, Jim Marsh, had recovered his balance. He must be having quite a time with the police too, poor boy.

Like Kay Zeman she was worried about him. Life could be so unfair. She thought he'd had enough. He always looked so frail physically too, with those narrow bones and that thin face, but of course, he couldn't be, because he walked all the dogs and handled them beautifully. She must try and feed him up, she was a great believer in red meat and none of this vegetarian business that his mother Clare had gone in for. Anorexic she'd been in Mary's opinion and her death no disaster to anyone once they'd got over the shock.

It was a mystery why Clare had killed herself, but by all account she'd made one or two earlier attempts. Perhaps she just didn't like being a milkman's wife. And that was no joke, thought Mary Anneck, because Clare had almost certainly started out life with different ideas. Philosophy at Oxford, hadn't it been?

Then to her surprise, she heard the bell ringing from the Darbyshires' back door, which must mean that Jumbo (their little disaster of a dog was called Jumbo, although he was the smallest, shortest Jack Russell imaginable) was going out on his walk. And since Philippa Darbyshire had broken her ankle, and her Harold hated the dog even more than Jumbo hated him, it must mean that Jim Marsh was on the job. With any luck he would come for Edie next.

Philippa Darbyshire limped back to her chair from her bell-ringing exercise, thankful to see the back of Jumbo for a bit. With plenty of exercise you could just be in the same room with him; without a lot he was unbearable. He was always unbearable, Harold said, but that was unkind. Jumbo had defended Philippa from a mugger once, and although it had been a task after his own heart, and the mugger had felt desexed by his wounds for some months and had considered claiming damages, it had ensured Jumbo a longer life than might otherwise have been expected, taking his ferocious habits into account.

Philippa herself was still shaken from the death of Anna Mary. Since no payment was asked she had tutored the girl in extra mathematics for her computer studies out of love of the subject and sympathy with the girl, so ambitious, so pretty, so badly taught elsewhere. Harold had helped here too.

She had been questioned by the police and so too had Harold. She hadn't liked the idea of that interrogation, because that was what it had been judging by Harold's face afterwards, cross and white. What had Harold got to do with the death of this girl he hardly knew? He only saw her when she came to the house for tutorials.

The boys would be back from Scotland tomorrow, when no doubt the police would want to interview them too. They had been friendly enough with Anna, close even, she knew it and no doubt that smooth policeman Inspector Younger knew it too. They had not been in London the night she was killed. Presumably you called that an alibi.

She might have a talk with Valerie Humbertson about it, Val was about her closest friend, but she thought that Val had troubles of her own.

Stella Pinero could be more helpful, she knew how to give advice. Had been through the mill herself. Many a time and oft, as she had once said with feeling. Stella was not a close friend, but an admired one, and the girl's mother had worked for her. Still did, probably, if she was up to working for anyone now. Mrs Kinver had worked for Philippa herself once, but when the offer of a job at the theatre had come up, she had been unable to resist it. Philippa had understood, she was stage-struck herself.

It was a horrible business, but the police would soon sort it out.

On this hopeful note, she awaited the arrival of Jim Marsh to exercise old Jumbo.

Two days, three days, a week. Unease was still oiling itself all over Leathergate with Spinnergate feeling it too. The discomfort, quite physical for some people like the Kinvers, husband and wife, reached even St Luke's Theatre Workshop where the company directed by Stella Pinero had embarked on advance preparation for its most ambitious production so far.

They needed something popular so they were going to do *Cavalcade*, using local actors for part of the huge cast. Not that their cast was going to be Drury Lane big. Stella had pruned sternly.

Using local talent was a wise political gesture (low cunning, some said) since the theatre received a grant on condition it hired graduates from the Drama Department of the new Dockside University. Using amateurs fulfilled the spirit of the thing, Stella maintained, with the advantage they did not have to be paid. She was always short of ready cash. Lætitia Bingham, her ultimate controller, kept them on a rolling budget.

Hopefuls were flooding in for audition, their arrivals organized by several amateur acting societies and the Theatre Club in which Mary Anneck and Philippa Darbyshire were prominent. But with this flood came also a spate of rumours and anxieties about the murder of Anna Mary.

She was surprised how guilty many felt. Guilt and alarm seemed spread about the community. Somehow it was their fault, they were a bad lot in Leathergate and getting no better.

John Coffin came in for a drink that evening, one full week after the discovery of Anna Mary's body in Rope Walk, bringing Tiddles with him. Tiddles liked a sweet sherry in a saucer.

'Any news?' She stirred a cocktail, she was learning to make them now, they were the smart thing, and anyway she wanted to get into the Coward mood.

'Don't make that thing too sweet, will you?' Coffin stared at what she was doing disapprovingly. 'I can't bear sweet drinks. About the murder? No, nothing much.'

'This brew will be as bitter as hell.' Stella handed over the drink.

He had seen all the usual reports, of course, forensic, technical, photographic, made a point of it, so his comment was not strictly true, but there was no news that counted. Not what she meant. No strong suspect in sight.

‘I miss Mrs Kinver. She came in to work today, but she wasn’t really with us, I sent her back home.’

‘She might have been better working.’

‘I thought of that, of course, but her husband turned up, was walking up and down outside, frightened to let her out of his sight. That worried her. Worried me, too. He’s in a bad way, John, taking it worse than the mother, really, although you can never be sure what’s going on inside.’

Coffin frowned and sipped his drink. Repulsive, he thought, and looked for somewhere to pour it away. ‘He needs help. I can probably get him some. We have a psychiatrist on the Force who specializes in helping victims of violence.’

‘Is he good?’

‘I think so. He helped me.’

Stella gave Coffin a surprised look, but he did not explain his words.

‘I think Kinver’d like to kill someone,’ she said. ‘Anyone, but preferably the murderer of his girl.’

‘Is that what his wife thinks?’

‘I bet it is.’

‘Then she needs help too.’

The telephone rang.

He managed to slip his drink into Tiddles’s saucer while Stella’s attention was diverted. Tiddles took a sip, then looked at him with a baleful green stare. Poisoning me, are you? the stare said. Well, I know what to do about that. Tiddles stepped in the saucer, overturning it.

She turned round from her desk. ‘It’s for you. How did they know where to find you?’

He shrugged. ‘They always know where I am.’

He took the telephone. His old friend Superintendent Paul Lane passing on a report from Archie Young. He listened. ‘Yes, that is interesting. Good. Keep me up to date.’

He returned to Stella. ‘Swinehouse have picked up a man with dried blood on his clothes. And a knife.’

Stella stared. ‘Wouldn’t he change his clothes? If he was the killer?’

‘Yes. If he could. This man could not. He couldn’t, didn’t have any.’

A vagrant. Living rough.

Next day was the day on which they had the first letter from the Paper Man.

It was sent straight to John Coffin himself, as if the writer wanted to be sure he got it.

CHAPTER THREE

Wednesday to Thursday, May 31

When they parted that evening, John Coffin to see an exhibition of designs of uniforms for his new Force and Stella to make a speech at a Charity dinner about 'Theatre in the New City', in a reversal of their usual roles, she said to him fiercely:

'Go and see this man they've detained. Go yourself. Don't feed me that stuff about it not being your job any more. It's all your job. Take a look yourself. The Kinvers deserve that you should.'

'Would you like me to make your speech for you?' he observed mildly. 'Then you can do my job and choose the uniforms.'

'Do what I ask. You always do what I ask.'

'Not always.'

'Oh, come on, you love me.'

'Like a brother.'

'I have heard of incest,' she said hopefully.

'Times have changed.'

'It's not times, it's people.' She put on her sad face and walked to the window, carrying Tiddles and her cocktail glass.

Beautifully done, he thought. 'Shall I clap?'

'Pig.'

'I'll see the man.'

'Not so changed, then.'

'I was going to anyway, you're not the only one with a personal interest.' He hadn't known the girl, nor her parents, but a long while ago he had been involved in a series of similar murders of women, and the scar of that terrible case remained.*

Stella, who had known him in those days, and nearly been a victim herself, nodded. 'We go a long way back, you and I. Go and select your uniforms. I'll be here when you come back. If you choose, that is.'

Outside the door, he leant hard on it so that Tiddles could not follow. 'I'm learning. How many years, and I'm learning at last.'

The man in the cell had been reluctant to change his bloodsoaked clothes for the fresh ones provided by the police. They didn't fit, he said, too long in the arm and short in the leg.

'I'm not a bloody gorilla.'

He had been in police hands for over twenty-four hours when Coffin saw him and in that time had said little else. But he had been picked up wearing bloodstained clothes and carrying a knife of the kind which could have slashed Anna Mary Kinver.

Forensic tests were now going on to determine if the blood was hers. (No wound on the man, who would not give his name, so the blood was not his.) The knife too was