

CLASSIC LONDON CRIME



GWENDOLINE
BUTLER
A COFFIN
FOR CHARLEY

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HARPER

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'So I said to Charley ...'
Traditional theatrical cover-up when the
speech drops dead.

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PROLOGUE

A brief Calendar of the life and career of John Coffin, Chief Commander of the Second City of London Police

John Coffin is a Londoner by birth, his father is unknown and his mother was a difficult lady of many careers and different lives who abandoned him in infancy to be looked after by a woman who may have been a relative of his father and who seems to have acted as his mother's dresser when she was on the stage. He kept in touch with this lady, whom he called Mother, lodged with her in his early career and looked after her until she died.

After serving briefly in the army, he joined the Metropolitan Police, soon transferring to the plain clothes branch as a detective.

He became a Sergeant in 1958, and was very quickly promoted to Inspector a year later.

By 1969 he was a superintendent and nine years later became Chief Superintendent.

There was a bad patch in his career about which he is reluctant to talk. His difficult family background has complicated his life and possibly accounts for an unhappy period when, as he admits, his career went down a black hole. His first marriage split apart at this time and his only child died.

From this dark period he was resurrected by a longish period in a secret, dangerous undercover operation about which even now not much is known. But the esteem he won then was recognized when, in the late 1980s as the Second City of London was being formed, he became the Chief Commander of its Police Force. He has married again, very happily, to an old love, Stella Pinero. He has also rediscovered two siblings, a sister and a brother.

CHAPTER 1

Monday. Towards the river

Darkness.

The two people stood facing each other. The girl with her back to the wall, the man looking at her legs apart. He held out his hands.

'I never like being killed,' said the girl. She moved her hands forward as if to protect herself. She had long beautiful nails, painted bright red; on her left hand was a deep, diamond-shaped scar. Almost as if she had been branded.

'It's happened to you before?'

'Several times. I'm the type, I suppose, and I never enjoy it. It's so awkward. They never get it right.'

'They?'

'The killers.'

'Oh, I will get it right. Think of all the things I've been doing ... Watching you, admiring you, loving you, hating you. I'll get it right.'

'You will?'

'I'll get it so right you'll never know you are dead.'

Quite a promise.

Darkness absolute.

'Shall we move in for the kill?'

But he wouldn't be killing her just yet. For that, she would have to wait. Wait in hunger, wait in darkness.

Light.

One light, a spot above the dressing-table, focused on the lovely face of Stella Pinero, actress, now for a single rocky year Mrs John Coffin. An up and down year. But she forgave her husband. Always, she had contributed her share.

I must put a bit more lipstick on; I'm looking pale. I blame last night. Possibly blame was the wrong word, not one to be associated with the evening before. Sex was good for you and improved the complexion, but sometimes fatigue made you pale.

The dressing-table had its full equipment of make-up, sticks of colours, pots of creams, tubs of powder, sprays of scent, Stella took a professional interest in her looks.

She smiled reminiscently as she considered the night. That was a bit of the up and down. A quarrel and a reconciliation.

It had been her fault. Probably her fault.

A rocky year. Right to marry, of course, but they had difficulties.

All the same, she'd enjoyed the twelve months and she rather thought he had too. Not a man to want a quiet life was John Coffin. He thought he did, thought of himself as the reserved scholarly type more interested in editing his rakish mother's rakish memoirs than anything else, but in truth he liked battle. Or anyway, a bit of a skirmish. Wouldn't have become a policeman else, would he?

Well, he had had one big battle but not with her, and won it. His management of his Police Force i

the Second City of London had come in for criticism on various grounds—not of inefficiency, it was agreed that he was very competent, but because with some people he was too friendly and with others too remote.

And then there was his relationship with her (well, that had sorted itself out) and his connection with his highly successful sibling Letty Bingham, property tycoon and owner of St Luke's Theatre Complex which contributed handsomely to Stella Pinero's income.

Or had done. This recession was biting sharply into Letty and so into Stella. It had taken a year or two for the slump to hit the theatre but it had done so now.

Property developers were not popular in the Docklands of the Second City where they had erected great office blocks and compounds of luxury flats which the local population resented. This had counted in the whispering campaign against John Coffin, but he had faced up to it, and also to the overt criticism of his Police Committee, and he had won.

But it had not made for an easy first year of marriage.

I was sensible to keep on my own flat, Stella decided. If the Queen can have a separate bedroom then I can have a separate flat. Somewhere to hide when things got too hot. Also, she was performing this season in St Luke's herself as well as producing two plays and she liked to have her friends after a performance or after a particularly gruesome rehearsal and her friends did not always fit well with the murder and mayhem that was part of her husband's life.

They loved it, of course, but she found their questions difficult.

She lived in St Luke's Mansions which had been converted from the tower of an old Victorian church which had fallen into disuse. The St Luke's Theatre Complex was adjacent. The main theatre the round was in the old church itself while a theatre workshop had been built across a small courtyard.

I am attractive, she told herself, and I am a well known, if not exactly a famous, actress. Which is why that man watches me.

Hangs around, follows me, watches me.

Like all actresses, she had had followers, men who called with flowers, met her at the stage door, wrote little notes. It was part of theatrical tradition, the Stage Door Johnny. She had liked it, even found some of the men attractive; she was no prude.

But this was different.

She went to her window to look out. The dark-coated figure was not to be seen but he was probably there. She never got a good look at his face because he wore a hat which he pulled low, and dark spectacles.

Not a pleasing sight.

So that's it, she said to her reflection. I'm a *femme fatale*. The *fatale* bit did not please her.

She could tell her husband who would certainly act. What was the point of being married to a policeman if you could not call upon him when you were alarmed.

She was alarmed.

John Coffin, Chief Commander of the Second City Police Force, looked out of his window in his office. He got a better view from the sitting-room of the tower in St Luke's Mansions, where he lived sometimes with Stella and sometimes without her, but his view had improved since one tower block of council flats had been knocked down before it fell down so that he got a distant view of the river. He enjoyed looking out ...

It was something he did quite often. Partly because it gave him pleasure to look down on the

London which he loved (although he would not have admitted to the feeling) and partly because (and again would he have admitted it?) he liked to keep an eye on it.

It was a rough world down there and famously criminous. New wealth had not changed old ways. There were groups of streets where Victorian Peelers had refused to go except in pairs; there were still streets in which constables on the beat liked to feel they had good back-up. But he did not allow N GO areas. Everywhere was policed.

It was the Queen's Peace he was responsible for keeping and he trusted she was grateful. Whispe had come to him about the next Honours List, so he supposed she was. He already had the Queen's Police Medal, awarded when he took up his present position.

If he did get an honour it would be a surprise since he had had several close brushes with his local MP and the Police Committee. The fact that they then passed what amounted to a vote of confidence in him did not mean they loved him the better.

Within his authority he had the old boroughs of Spinnergate, Leathergate, Swinehouse, and East Hythe, whose very place names testified to their antiquity. The Vikings had got as far as these four Anglo-Saxon settlements in their ravages up the Thames, the Norman warlords had swept in replacing the old English landowners, but the indigenous population had survived and their descendants, spiced with immigrants from every land within the old Empire, were there now, tough, wily and ready to cause trouble. They had never been particularly law-abiding and recent events had done nothing to change their mind. New money had poured into the district in the last decade turning old warehouses and dockside buildings into offices and luxury apartments, and the old poor still in their terrace houses or council housing were resentful. Ill-feeling had turned to wicked mirth as the new rich became victims of the recession.

He had in his bailiwick several hospitals, a university, numerous schools, and a high number of bookmakers' shops. One legal casino and one illegal gambling house that moved on and reopened as soon as it was closed down. He had at least two brothels which called themselves Party Clubs, a flourishing transvestite night club, and a variety of religious foundations including chapels, churches and one man who was building a replica of Stonehenge in his back garden. Very handsome it was to say if necessarily on the small side. Its creator, Mr James Eldon, told the local press that he was not a Druid or worshipping a Bronze Age goddess, his motives were purely æsthetic: he just fancied it. He had invited the Chief Commander to a glass of nettle wine and a view of his henge.

Coffin had not gone but he had warmed to Mr Eldon as one of the most harmless of his eccentrics.

As he continued looking out of his window, he knew that at any one time he had in his area a number of juvenile delinquents, several rapists, a clutch of child molesters, numerous sexual deviants more or less within the law, at least one murderer who was known but against whom they could not get proof, one killer who was about to be arrested, and possibly more than he cared to think about that were secret and undetected in their murders.

It was these last ones that worried him most.

He turned away from the window with a yawn. Tarts, rogues, evil-doers and saints, he had them all in his care. He had known one saint himself but she was dead; it was really just as well because otherwise he might have been obliged to send her to prison.

He yawned again. Detective Chief Inspector Young looked at him with sympathy. He was tired of himself having been up all night on a murder inquiry.

'It's the heat,' said Coffin. He was talking to Young because he was dealing with the case, which was a sensitive one in which an MP had been, still was, involved. 'Go on.'

'He said: "It's nothing to do with you who I fuck or who I don't. Push off."'

‘Nice fellow.’

‘No witnesses,’ said Young briefly. ‘He knew I couldn’t quote. He was drunk,’ he added in a neutral voice.

Job Titus, MP. He had started in one political party, crossed the floor of the House to join another and finally set out his own stall. No settled party, continually changing his opinions, an Independent very popular in his constituency, but as someone once said: ‘Of no fixed abode intellectually.’ A drinker, famous for it, violent, and famous for that too, and twice divorced. ‘Where does he get his money?’ people asked. ‘Where does he get his energy?’ others said. He had a crest of yellow curls and bright blue eyes. A political gigolo.

‘And the girl’s dead?’

‘And the girl’s dead.’

Silence for a short space.

‘How was she killed?’

Young pursed his lips. ‘There was a bit of doubt at first, but the informed opinion is that there was an attempt to strangle her and then she was smothered. Manually. Hand over her mouth and nose.’

Marianna Manners had been a ballet dancer, out of work, but hopeful of joining a big London company. Meanwhile she had tried for all sorts of other parts because she could act a bit and one thing could lead her to another. In her case it looked as if it had. She had a wide circle of friends and lovers, one of whom might be Job Titus, MP, but there was no proving it. She had said Yes to her friends, had said No to the police.

‘Nasty ... And Job Titus?’

‘No evidence that points to him in a strong way. He’s been seen drinking in the Balaclava Arms talking several times to one man and that makes me wonder.’

The Balaclava Arms in Spinnergate had a bad reputation. It was known as Drinking in Hell.

‘And he knew her. And she claimed it was more than that. They both lived in Swinehouse in the same block of flats. And I’d love to get him for it.’ He didn’t say the last sentence aloud.

‘Yes,’ said Coffin, agreeing with what hadn’t been said. ‘That’s it for the moment, then?’

‘Right.’

‘What sort of a girl was she?’

‘Nice-looking, of course. Well made-up, well turned out. Quite expensive clothes. One strange thing for a girl like her ... she had badly bitten fingernails. Didn’t really try to cover them up, either. No varnish or anything like that. Almost as if she didn’t care.’

The two men had a friendly relationship which stretched outside working hours because their wives were friends. Stella Pinero and Alison, the ambitious, brilliant young wife of the Chief Inspector, had met at an official party and taken a great liking to each other.

The police service being what it was, Coffin and Young had to keep a certain distance at work (although well aware that the married lives of both had come under female discussion), but it made for friendliness.

It enabled Archie Young to say: ‘Annie Briggs has been in again.’

Coffin frowned. ‘What is it this time?’

‘She thinks she’s being watched.’

‘She might well be.’ He walked to the window again to look out. ‘Haven’t been any death threats lately, have there?’

‘No. None that I’ve heard of. But they’re a grudging lot, the Creeley clan, and they never forgive. Pity they came back from New Zealand, I was a lot happier when it looked as though they

emigrated. But they're back and in the same street, the same house. Well, the boy is, there's only his left now, he came back and moved in.'

'Wonder how he managed that?' Property being what it was.

'Never sold it. Just moved back in.'

Coffin was curious. 'What sort of household does he run there?'

'Not as bad as you might think. It was very mucky, the tenants not having been as careful as might be, but the young one, grandson Eddie, has been painting and gardening. He's on his own at the moment although the odd cousin has been to stay.'

'How do you know all this?'

'Community policing,' said Young. 'The local officer managed to insert himself in the house for a look round. He had a word with Eddie about car parking, Eddie Creeley has three old bangers parked outside and the neighbours were complaining. Eddie's a car mechanic as hobby but he's working in hospital. Our man reported favourably on him. I think he liked him.'

'I didn't think you could like a Creeley.'

'The old lady's gone, of course. But her spirit lives on. Anyone who does a Creeley down gets back in spades. They've never forgiven Annie, that's the story. Or you, for that matter.'

'They won't do anything now. It's too late, too long ago. Oh, writing on her front door, dog dirt through the letter-box ...'

'They did all of that in the past, but not lately, not since the shift back from New Zealand. Perhaps Eddie's different, who knows?'

'I know old Mrs Creeley said one or other of them would kill Annie in the end. They never took them back. Never did much about it, either.'

'She still sees it coming.'

'She's lived a long while with that on her mind. How long is it now? Over twenty years? We can watch all the time.'

'I've been told that Lizzie Creeley is being given parole. The brother's had a stroke, he'll get out too but go straight to hospital,' said Young. 'I dare say Annie has heard the news.'

'How old is she now?'

'She was about eight then. Thirty-odd now. A daughter of her own. The sister lives with her. She wasn't born then.'

Twenty-odd years ago when John Coffin, even then a controversial figure with friends and enemies had been called across the river from his own area to consult on a case which seemed to have a parallel with a murder he was dealing with. Whether the death of old Addie Scott had a connection with the Creeleys had never been established, but the Creeleys had gone down anyway for another crime. Coffin knew this area of old, because as a raw young constable he had lived here in what was those days a working-class district of the great metropolis. Lodged with 'Mother'. She had not been his mother, of course; nobody's mother, certainly not his.

A child, Annie Dunne, hiding in the garden of her home one foggy night had heard strange noises she had crawled through the next-door hedge to watch and had seen two people burying an old man and his wife.

Coffin had been the man who persuaded her to talk.

The killers were a brother and sister, Will and Lizzie Creeley. Without Annie's testimony the bodies might never have been found nor the two convicted. The Creeley family swore to get her.

Annie had grown up, had married, and had a child herself. But for some time the Creeleys had stayed lived three streets away. Bad years for Annie, until the family had emigrated, but one by one they had

drifted back. Eddie was the latest. Creeleys had lived in Swinehouse for many generations and were embedded in the district like weeds.

‘She wasn’t believed at first, you know, when she told her story.’

Archie Young nodded.

‘But I believed her ... And then, of course, the rumour went round that there were other bodies buried in the garden. As if it was a kind of cottage industry that the Creeleys had there: killing for money. But there were only the two, as if that wasn’t enough ... I suppose Annie’s heard about the murder?’

‘I don’t suppose she thinks Marianna was murdered instead of her.’

‘She did live two streets away.’ Marianna had a tiny flat in the Alexandra Wharf block, and Napier Street, where Annie Briggs lived was only a few yards away.

‘They didn’t know each other. Not as far as we know.’

‘I bet she hopes that if the Creeley boy did it we get him for it fast.’

‘Doesn’t look like a Creeley crime, they were strictly business as far as we know, and there was no profit in Marianna. Straight sex there, I reckon.’ Young added wistfully: ‘If I had to choose between getting Job Titus or a Creeley for Marianna I don’t know which I’d go for.’

‘Hard choice,’ said Coffin.

‘But poor Annie. I mean, she’s a nuisance, always popping in with crisis calls, but you can see why.’ He looked at the wall. ‘She’s got in a private investigator.’

‘My God, who?’

‘The Tash Agency,’ said Young, still not meeting Coffin’s eyes.

‘Tom Ashworth. My wife used him on her divorce.’ Stella had claimed her divorce was amiable on both sides, Coffin had only learnt later that this was not quite true.

Young, who knew this, he made it his job to know everything about his boss that he could, kept silent.

Then he said: ‘Annie says she liked him, trusts him ... Whatever that means.’

Stella had said the same. ‘I think it means he’s attractive,’ said Coffin.

He had discovered that where Stella was concerned he was capable of quick and ready jealousy. He kept quiet about it and hoped she had not noticed, but it was there. To his surprise, jealousy was cold, not hot, and penetrated everywhere like a gas.

Stella was naturally flirtatious, and meeting desirable men all the time. She said there had to be chemistry, it was all part of the job. Very likely it was.

‘There aren’t so many people Annie Briggs trusts. Her husband left her, couldn’t stand it.’ Young kept in touch with his world. ‘She’s got a social worker who calls in, the sister gave them a bit of trouble once. Can’t blame her, it’s hardly been a normal life.’

Coffin said: ‘She is on my mind and on my conscience all the time. I’ll go and see her.’

He knew what was lined up for him in his diary, so it wouldn’t be today or tomorrow, but sometime. Soon. Might get Stella to help, unofficially, of course. She was good with women.

At the door, Archie Young paused. ‘Supposing the man that Job Titus was seen drinking with was the Creeley boy? Sounded like him. May be nothing in it.’

Driving home that night Coffin thought: Supposing Job Titus got a Creeley to do Marianna in, and then Titus promised to help the Creeleys get Annie somehow?

It was an interesting idea. He could feel sorry for Titus if he let the Creeleys get a hook in him. He might be a smart political operator but the Creeleys had millennia of criminality behind them.

Creeley man or woman, the women being fully as bad, had probably conned a Roman centurion and then slit his throat.

He let himself in, wondering if Stella would be home. Sometimes she was and sometimes not, but she always left a note around saying where she was. 'At the theatre.' 'Downstairs.'—This meant in his own flat. 'Gone to see Jay.'—Jay was her agent.

He was beginning to enjoy what he called 'Stella's little notes'. Part of his new life, he always felt in touch. They had promised never to be apart for long. When you marry late, then you cannot afford too many absences.

On his desk that day he had found a card and invitation: *Phæbe Astley invites you to celebrate her promotion*. An address in Birmingham and a scrawl: *Why don't you come up and see me?*

Phæbe had occupied a niche in his life before Stella came back into it. She was post-Stella and pre-Stella. She had moved away, joined another force and risen sharply. Clever girl, Phæbe, but I won't be coming. I shall be home with my wife.

Tonight he smelt cooking. So she was home. Here. His spirits rose. Darling Stella.

And he smelt cigarette smoke: so that meant Letty too. He liked his sister and admired her. She had been around a lot lately. She and Stella were putting together a scheme to help beat the recession in Luke's Theatre by opening a small drama school which local youngsters would be encouraged to join. A keep-the-kids-off-the-streets scheme. There had been a lot of idle vandalism lately.

It would help the neighbourhood and, with local sponsors, would assist the theatre too. It was going to be very professional.

For so long resistant to economic stress, the theatre was now getting the full effects. And just at a time when Letty's property investments were in decline. More than decline, rushing precipitately down hill. But he backed Letty, he had noticed that nothing had stopped her buying her new autumn wardrobe in Paris and New York, and he took that as a sign, while being grateful that Stella could fund her clothes at less expensive outlets. Not that he bought her clothes. She bought her own and always had.

The cat and the dog were home too. He knew that from the two food bowls on the staircase by the living-room. Why they chose to eat there he did not know. Stella said it made them feel free, but he thought it was because he had once tripped over their bowls and had fallen down the stairs. They were waiting for him to do it again.

Both women turned round to look at him as he came in.

'Talking about me?'

'Thinking about you.'

'Always, I hope.' He gave Stella a kiss. 'Hello, Letty.'

Letty raised an eyebrow, it was an eyebrow trained to rise. 'Oh, come on, she's got other things to do.' Letty's marriages never prospered because she always had other things to do.

'Rescue me,' said Coffin's eyes to Stella. His beautiful sister could terrorize him on occasion. He suspected she was like their eccentric, errant, delinquent mother who had abandoned her children one after the other. Letty was wearing black silk jeans with a leopard print silk blazer in which she looked sinewy and alarming. 'Help me out.'

Stella almost did. 'Well, not all the time, not when I'm learning my lines or on stage, but underneath, darling, I think about you and I expect I always will.' When necessary, Stella could deliver lines as if from a Coward play.

He sniffed the air. 'What are you cooking?'

‘One of my chicken casseroles.’

He knew better than to criticize Stella’s cooking efforts. ‘Do you think it could be burning?’ His tone was tentative, questioning humbly.

‘No, I think it’s meant to smell like that.’

‘Ah.’ He certainly hoped so, but it seemed doubtful. Was carbon an ingredient in the best meals? But they could always go round to Max’s Delicatessen and eat there. He had what he called his Bar, just a few chairs and tables, usually full of performers from St Luke’s Theatre grabbing something to eat. The comfort level was low but the food was excellent.

Coffin had eaten there a lot as a bachelor, as had Stella Pinero, but just lately she had decided it was her duty to be the Perfect Wife. A part for which she was not naturally gifted.

He knew he would have to live with the idea until she got tired of it, but he had preferred the former, unreconstructed Stella.

‘That is, I think so,’ she said. She too could smell something dark and burnt. ‘I wonder if I ought to go and look.’

‘Forget it,’ said Letty. ‘Past praying for, I expect.’

‘Someone will murder you one day, Letty.’

‘One or two have tried,’ admitted Letty. ‘But I was too strong for them.’

‘Don’t joke,’ said Stella. Her tone was sharp. She went to the window. Nothing there. Well, even lurkers, Stage Door Johnnies, go home.

Coffin looked at his wife. ‘What is it? You’re worried.’ He drew her away from the window. ‘Come on, sit down and tell me.’

Nervously, she said: ‘There’s this man ... hanging around. Sometimes he’s outside the theatre. I’ve seen him near the old church hall where we rehearse. This last week he’s even got as far as the TV studio.’ Stella was filming a new series in which she had a plum part as a female detective. ‘He was further away there because of the security patrol GTV have there, but I know it was him.’

‘Is it always the same man? Have you seen his face?’ *I’ll kill anyone who touches Stella.*

‘Only a glimpse, he wears dark spectacles and hat. A wig too, I think, not a good one, something cheap.’ As an actress, Stella knew a wig when she saw one. ‘And yes, I’m sure it’s the same chap, same clothes, same posture.’

Coffin frowned. ‘Go on talking. Give me all the detail you can. How long has it been going on?’ He wanted to observe Stella. Many successful actresses (and some unsuccessful ones too) had people who stalked them: men and women who were ardent fans and wanted to get to know them. Or to watch them come and go from the theatre. Stella had had her share of those, and she knew how to deal with them. They did not make her nervous.

Now she was nervous. *I’ll kill him.*

Dutifully, Stella went on, providing what meagre details she could. She had first observed the man almost a year ago, but his appearances had been sporadic at first and she had not taken them seriously. Now he was very regular. Of course, he couldn’t get into the St Luke’s complex of buildings easily, but he sited himself under the clump of trees across the road from where he could see her window. Kitchen and bedroom. Bathroom too for that matter, but she had clouded glass on that so it wouldn’t do him much good.

‘He can see your windows too. But it’s not you he’s looking for. I’m surprised you haven’t seen him yourself.’

‘Keeps out of my way, I expect.’ But from now on, he would be looking. ‘I wish you had told me before.’

Stella was silent. 'I thought I was being foolish to worry. It might have been kind of flattering ... Her voice died away. 'But it's not. Doesn't feel right.'

'Why does he frighten you?'

Stella said slowly: 'I feel his concentration. It's obsessive. Not admiration ... something else. Hungry.'

His sister Letty said: 'I think he's watching me too.'

'Oh, I don't believe that's likely.'

'Well, thanks, brother. You do know how to make a girl feel attractive.'

'What I meant was, men like that are usually, invariably, obsessed with one person at a time.'

'I've seen him there, too. I wish I'd said something sooner. He's just as Stella said: dark glasses, soft hat pulled over the face.'

'You're welcome to him,' said Stella. 'He's all yours and good luck to you.'

'There's another thing: I think he uses binoculars.'

'If you saw that you certainly should have told me, Letty.' Coffin was angry.

Letty shrugged. 'London's full of weirdos. New York is full of weirdos, so is Paris. The world is full of weirdos.'

I have a weirdo all my own. Charley, Stella thought without pleasure. Who would like to take over my Charley? Letty can have him.

Coffin stood up and went to the telephone. 'Stella, I should look at that casserole. There's burning and there's burning and there's incineration.'

'What are you going to do?'

'I can order a patrol car to call regularly, and the constable on the beat to look in as well. That ought to frighten the man away. If he hangs around, then we'll take him in.'

Stella nodded. 'It was a wig, you know ... and the face, there was something not quite right there. I swear it.'

'You serve the meal.' If it could be served, and not put out with water. 'And after I have made the call, then I will walk around and see if he's there now.'

Stella looked relieved. 'So silly to mind, makes me feel a fool, but he has worried me.'

'Me too,' said Letty, anxious not to be left out.

Coffin called the dog, 'Come on, Bob,' attached a lead to his collar and went out. Bob was, as ever, eager and dragged ahead, breathing heavily in expectation.

It was dusky outside with a light rain falling, the street lights were on, but the pavements were empty. The theatre was dark tonight, with no performance, but that didn't mean it was empty. A rehearsal, a rehearsal, or just a meeting of the Friends of St Luke's Theatre might be going on. There was never a really dead night. Letty and Stella encouraged activity.

He walked slowly, his thoughts anxious. He knew what the women did not: that there was a killer in the district.

He looked up and saw Stella profiled against the kitchen window. He could see her turn her head as if speaking to someone, she appeared to be opening the window and in the circumstances of the chicken casserole, he could see why; then she moved away out of his vision. He must remind her to keep the blind down. He felt very protective of her and yet awkward at the same time.

He was surprised how powerfully and vigorously that sight of Stella had affected him. Strong feelings came and went with him at the moment. He was floundering with Stella just now. It was odd about this marriage thing.

Although they each kept their separate apartments, and although they had, let's face it, been love

on and off for years, marriage had subtly and definitely altered their relationship. He was less sure himself with Stella than ever. She was trying to be everything she could to him, he could see that, but he didn't want her to try, he wanted her to be, just to be. Spontaneous. Happy.

He walked on. No dark-spectacled figure to be seen under the trees or on the corner or in a doorway tonight. He could go back and tell the two women that it was all clear. Although that did not mean the man had not been there or might be there again.

No need to alarm Stella and Letty by telling them that a girl called Marianna Manners had been strangled and then stifled. But he had to think about it.

It was possible that she might have been killed by Job Titus whom they both knew.

Or Titus might have contracted for her death with one of the Creeley family, a youngster with a violent reputation.

In both those instances, Stella and Letty were under no threat.

Or Marianna might have been killed by just the sort of man that was watching them.

He walked back to St Luke's Mansions. A patrol car passed him, slowed for a look, recognized him and passed on. So his orders were already being followed.

A prosperous-looking dark blue car was parked in the kerb near by. An expensive-looking car and he thought he had seen it before. He walked round the front to study the windscreen and saw on it a card which empowered the driver to park his car in the area reserved for Members of Parliament.

The last thing he wanted just now was a visit from Job Titus. There were good sound reasons for not entertaining in your home a man who might be a murder suspect.

He walked up his stairs quickly, arriving at the kitchen in time to hear Stella saying that they were going to eat at home but something had gone wrong with a casserole she was doing and she thought they would now be eating out.

Job Titus was sitting at the kitchen table holding a glass of red wine. He had been drinking already. Coffin could tell from his eyes, but had himself in hand. He was supposed to be able to charm a woman and Coffin thought he was doing so now. Letty was smiling and Stella would probably be asking Titus to join them at dinner if he didn't move fast to stop her.

Job stood up as Coffin came. 'John, of course we've met, you remember?' He held out his hand.

At a large charity dinner in the Docklands, if you could call that meeting. They had shaken hands no more. And as far as Coffin was concerned, they could leave it there.

They were not friends. Job had certainly joined in the late campaign to get his resignation, even though he had kept his name hidden. My secret enemy, he thought.

He left the outstretched hand hanging and after a second, Job withdrew it, covering the moment with a smile. 'I always believe in going to the top with a complaint. Your men have been harassing me. I don't want to make it official, cause trouble for you. I want to keep it friendly.'

'I can't discuss anything,' said Coffin stiffly. *Like to slit your throat.*

From Stella's startled look at him he guessed this notion came across to her. 'John ...' she began.

'It's all right, Stella, Mr Titus is just leaving.'

Job Titus stood up. He put his arm round Letty who showed no sign of resenting it. 'I just love the leopard lady. You aren't listening to me, John. I did not kill Marianna Manners. You might pass the word on to your murder squad. They are ill-mannered bastards who take a lot for granted and if you swore at them, then they deserved it. This was meant to be just a friendly warning for you to pass on. Next time I will make it official.' He moved away, knocking over the glass of red wine. 'Look, I told your men that Marianna had been complaining of a man trying to get to know her. Go for him, n

me.'

'I'll see you out,' said Coffin.

'Before we go, just one more thing: Marianna auditioned for a part in the amateur play in the Theatre Workshop here. She was out of work, you see, and she thought anything was better than nothing. Maybe she met her killer there. Bear it in mind.'

Coffin just held the door without answering.

Job Titus hesitated, then moved towards the door. 'Goodbye, Stella, goodbye, Letty. Mrs Coffin, suggest you tether your husband.'

'What did he mean by that?' said Stella as Coffin came back.

'Tame, tie up, he was just being offensive. He's frightened, I think.'

Stella started to mop up the wine. 'I wish he hadn't come here. I don't like it when your work and mine cross.'

'He's a madman,' said Letty. 'Attractive, but mad. Did he kill the girl?'

Coffin shrugged. 'I don't know.' He was watching his wife: she had not failed to notice the phrase about the man trying to get to know Marianne.

'It's your job to know.'

'It takes time. He may have had a hand in it.'

Stella said: 'I think we had better eat at Max's. The casserole got away from me.' She spoke of it as if it was an animal she had been training. No wonder she had trouble cooking, Coffin thought, if she was always trying to tame the meat.

'I booked a table while I was out,' he said. 'Let's go. Coming, Letty?'

'Why do you think I am dressed in Versace? I knew that casserole would never come to the table. I've too booked a table. You're my guests, by the way. I've got something to discuss.'

Over the prosciutto and chilled melon, Letty said: 'I wanted to tell you that my daughter has disappeared and that I have engaged a private detective to look for her.'

Coffin opened his mouth to speak but Letty stopped him.

'Don't say it. It is not a matter for the police. Elissa is eighteen, she sent a letter telling me she was going, and she has the money from a small trust fund. I don't think any police force is going to spend any energy looking for her, not even yours, brother.'

'Did she say why?'

'I am too dominating, too successful, she needs to lose me.'

'I see.' He wondered if he did. It was a fair description of Letty: successful, bossy. But were daughters supposed to mind that?

'But really, I think, she is our mother's descendant. Every so often she must shake herself free and depart.'

'You are taking it very well.'

'No, I'm not. I'm trembling with fear inside. Which is why I have engaged a private detective to find her. Just locate her ... Stella recommended one.'

'Did I?' Stella was surprised.

'Well, you talked of him. Tash. You probably know of him?' She turned to her brother.

'He's known,' said Coffin tersely. The Tash Agency had been around for some time.

'He's seems efficient and to have a good reputation. I inquired around. And he's attractive. I liked him for that. Lovely fair hair with bright brown eyes, and well groomed. I didn't want a seedier backroom sort of man.'

‘Certainly not that,’ said Coffin. ‘But he’s pretty much a one man band. Can he cover the field?’

‘I think he can do it; he has some help. I’m convinced she’s still in London. He thinks not.’—

Coffin still looked doubtful. In his opinion London was no place for a girl of eighteen to roam around in. Was she on drugs? Did she have a boyfriend? He considered asking Letty but decided now was not the moment. ‘You can always call on me.’

Letty smiled at him and nodded. ‘So now you know why I am taking the state of near-bankruptcy and the decline in the theatre with relative calm.’

Stella put her hand gently on Letty’s arm. ‘I too have a daughter.’

‘But you know where she is?’

‘Yes, she’s putting together a play for the Edinburgh Fringe. She’s in the family business, I’m afraid. I had a card from Fife. She was there last week.’

A small crowd was leaving the precincts of the Theatre Workshop as they came home. Most of them were young people and they were talking loudly and cheerfully.

Coffin raised an eyebrow. ‘What’s this?’

‘The Friends of St Luke’s Theatre are auditioning for their summer play. They’re throwing it open to all this year because we’re using it as preparation for the Drama School. See who comes in, sniff out talent, get local interest.’ Money, she meant.

The Friends, a redoubtable group of local ladies, would be one of the great supports of the new Drama School if she was lucky.

‘What are they doing?’

‘Oh, an Agatha Christie mystery. It usually is.’

In bed that night Stella turned to her husband. ‘It’s nice on the top of the tower like this. I think I prefer it to my place.’

Both the animals had come up with them, Bob on the bed and the cat watching from the window through which he would shortly depart on to a lower roof.

‘Open the window for Tiddles.’

Coffin, who was making a neat pile of his possessions on his bed table, coins stacked, clean handkerchief beside the pile, keys by a pad of paper with a pencil, obliged.

‘Funny business about Letty and the daughter,’ said Stella. ‘I don’t always understand her.’

‘Who does?’

Letty was his much younger sister, child of his errant mother and an American serviceman. There was a third sibling called William, issue of yet another father, who was a successful lawyer in Edinburgh. The one thing you could say about his disappearing mother (who must be presumed dead) was that her offspring were surprisingly different and surprisingly successful. He himself had lived in ignorance for years of his true parenthood and of the existence of Letty and William. Even now, he found it hard to believe in them. Well, not Letty. She was around so much. But he still felt surprised sometimes when she walked through the door.

‘Did you believe what she said?’

‘Well, you can never tell with Letty ... No, not altogether.’

‘What’s this private detective like?’

‘You know him,’ Coffin said tersely. He did not like to be reminded.

‘I met him once and I paid his bill, that’s all. Is he honest?’

‘As far as I know.’

Stella settled back against the pillows. Without any conscious effort, she had turned what had been

a bachelor's masculine bedroom into a feminine boudoir. The fourposter bed, an early extravagance of Coffin's, had been piled with pillows and silk cushions. She had brought in an embroidered bedcover and there was always a scent of rose geranium.

Coffin liked it but sometimes felt like a member of an alien species.

'John ...?'

'Yes?'

'Why did Job Titus say that about Marianna coming to the Theatre?'

'He just wanted to vomit in my backyard,' said Coffin with some bitterness.

There was silence for a moment.

'I don't like this stalker,' she said softly. 'Charley frightens me.'

He drew her down towards him. 'Don't worry, I'll look after you.'

And Letty, and Letty's child, and Annie Briggs and all the people in my command.

But he knew that whatever he said he could not offer total protection. The lunatic always got through.

Annie Briggs, formerly Dunne, was pleased to see her younger sister home. 'How did the auditions go?'

'I think I'm in. Just a small part, one of the policewomen in *Witness for the Prosecution*, was a male originally but they have more women auditioning. I've got some good lines.'

'I am glad, dear.' And glad you are home, I am always nervous when you are out late.

'I'm in the second company.' Anxious to take in as many young amateurs as possible, the ruling body, the Friends, had decided to have two casts who would appear alternately throughout the run of two weeks.

'You'd be surprised at the people who turned up. Even one of those Creeleys.'

'Ah.'

Didi did not share her sister's terror of the Creeleys, whom she regarded as harmless relics of the past. The younger Creeleys were different and of considerable interest to her. Especially Eddie Creeley.

'Lots of faces you'd know, Annie.'

'Don't tell me,' said Annie, trying as ever to shut out what she could not bear, past, present and future.

Didi drank the coffee that her sister had poured for her and ate a sandwich. Then swallowed what she was eating. 'Don't worry about the Creeleys, love. They're nothing now. The old ones were stinkers but the young lot are all right. I like Eddie.' She took her sister's hand and gave it a little pat. 'You've got Caroline in the flat upstairs.' It was true that Caroline seemed to her more of an absence than presence. 'You said yourself she helped.'

'She does,' Annie admitted. The flat at the top of the old house, with its own entrance up a metal fire escape, was let to C. Royal, it said so on a printed card. 'But she has a job. She's away a lot.'

'They were talking about the murder.' Didi had finished her sandwich. 'Marianna Manners. Wonder if we ever saw her? In the supermarket or getting on the Tube at Spinnegate maybe, but without knowing.'

She knew it was better to bring the subject of murder out into the open. 'Don't let her hide from the world,' the social worker had said. 'She can face it, she can do it, never you mind.' He was an Alex C. Edwards. Wonder what the C stands for, Didi had thought? He said he had to use it to distinguish himself from another A. Edwards, but Didi thought he liked it. Carolus, Cornell, or what?

He was a nice man, Alex C. Edwards, too nice really for this world. He's in love with Annie, of course. This ingenuous comment being her way of recording sexual attraction.

CHAPTER 2

In the Arches of the Years

Three people remembered the story of Annie Briggs. She had been Annie Dunne then, but she married young and never dropped entirely from the police's view.

The most important memory was that of Annie herself, but she had been so young that she sometimes wondered now how much she truly recalled and how much of it was what she had been told. But some pictures were so vivid she knew they were real. Had been real, were real, would burn into eternity. That was what eternity was, she told herself, an endlessly revolving kaleidoscope of horrors.

Lizzie Creeley remembered what Annie had said because she had been the subject of it, in comparison with a corpse or two and her brother Will, but since his stroke he had no memory.

Coffin had special memories of it all because he had always wondered if they got it right.

He had his own remembrances of this district to contend with as well, some of them peculiar to say the least. He had lived here as a raw young copper with the woman that politely but falsely he had called 'Mother'. She had asked him to do so. At the time he had understood that she was a distant relation of his father, a cousin, because the old lady who had certainly been his grandmother and the woman who had probably been his aunt and who had superintended what there was of his childhood had assured him she was and that he should take rooms with her. People did that sort of thing then, now they lived in bedsits. She had been his mother's dresser, or so she said, and was a bit mad.

She had given him ham for his supper and called it kippers and given him kippers and called it ham. But they had rubbed along all right. Every day he had travelled across to South London where he worked.

After a bit she had moved there to a flat above a shop in the Borough. Soon after this he had emancipated himself. But he sat with her when she died in Guy's Hospital. Died with some pain, still calling herself Mother. He had been the only mourner at her funeral and out of charity he had seen several wreaths in different names.

Never my true mother, but more of a mother than the other one.

He had come back to this district, then part of the Met, called in as a seasoned detective who was working on a similar case across the river, in time to hear Annie's story and receive Lizzie Creeley's confession. Where had Stella been then? Not with him, one of their early bitter partings.

His picture differed from both Lizzie's and Annie's because he had seen Annie and heard her talk, he had seen Lizzie and listened to what she had to say, while those two had never spoken face to face.

Annie remembered creeping out of the house on a foggy November night to go down the garden to what had been an old privy and now housed some pet rabbits to inspect her favourite Angora who she suspected of eating her litter.

In the dark she had heard voices and movements. She had crawled to the hedge, kept wild and uncut, to see two people, a man and a woman, dragging out from the house the old couple who lived there. Before her terrified eyes, they were tumbled bloody and perhaps not even dead (so the pathologist had reported later) into a pit and the earth thrown over them.

It had taken her a week to tell what she had seen and longer still to identify Lizzie and Will. She had done so from behind a special window that allowed her to see them while they could not see her.

She had been flanked by two social workers. One, a girl whose name she had forgotten, and the other very young man, Alex Edwards, whose name she had never been able to mislay because he visited her so often to this day. Several policemen had been present, one of whom was John Coffin.

Lizzie Creeley remembered hearing Annie's written testimony read out in court and biting her lower lip till the blood ran. Her counsel hardly bothered to raise a question. She knew she was done for at that point. She wanted to kill him as well, and see that Annie got hers too if she could. She had signalled as much to her father sitting watching.

In court, she had cried out: 'She's lying, the little bitch,' and been reprimanded by the Judge.

Coffin remembered Annie's pinched and terrified face, and Lizzie's fox-like fury, and never doubted the child's truth for a moment.

But as he knew, there are truths and truths.

CHAPTER 3

The same Monday evening

The house where Annie Briggs now lived and where she had spent her short married life and from which her husband had left her (not for another woman but for what he called another life) was not far away from her childhood home from whose garden she had witnessed the two Creeleys bury the old man and woman. Looking back, she thought she could remember them striking blows as well. Hitting them on the head. Skulls splitting like eggs. Had she heard that?

Two deaths it had been, people forgot that, she told herself, when they talk about letting those horrors out. Talk about pity and compassion and people having served their time. Those two cannot serve their time; for what they did such time does not run. I ought to know. I was the one who saw who heard.

And who testified.

She had hoped they would die incarcerated, but remembering.

Annie certainly intended to do her best to see that they did: on the anniversary of the killing she always sent them letters, one each, describing that night. People said that they did not get the letters but that the letters were intercepted, but she knew better. She knew they got to their destination, not to their heart, those two had not got hearts, but to their liver and guts where fear dwelt. She knew, she sensed it.

She was always sick herself on that day. It was interesting and might be no coincidence that on the anniversary day in her eleventh year she had started to menstruate and still kept that celebration with blood.

After hearing the killing in the garden of the two old people, she had been a 'disturbed child', a name she still wore like a label round her neck. A disturbed child is a disturbing child. Her parents had discovered that fact almost at once.

'Not that I went in for any of that poltergeist nonsense,' said Annie to herself. 'Although I could have done, I could have worked it, but it's stupid, that sort of thing.'

She had been anorexic, had tried a little thievery and gone in for a bit of arson. Nothing big, she wasn't a big person, but certainly 'disturbing' if you had to live with it.

Then someone, a boy, told her she was pretty and she shed all the 'disturbed' symptoms overnight and grew up.

You cannot be a disturbed adult, not if you are looking for sympathy, you are meant to pull yourself together, or they give you pills or electric shocks or put you away, or a combination of all three, and Annie wasn't having any of that. So she put that portmanteau of disturbance behind her, recognizing that it had been self-induced and not wholly satisfying.

Marriage she had enjoyed while it lasted. She was sad when it ended, not blaming Jack Briggs herself, thus proving to her own satisfaction that she was grown up at last.

The house in Napier Street where Annie and her small daughter and her young sister, Didi, now lived was one of three tall, narrow houses. The top two floors had been formed into a separate flat while Annie inhabited the bottom two. The top flat had its own front door reached by means of an iron fire escape of solid Victorian construction.

Miss Royal had rented the flat from Annie about eighteen months ago and had been an object of

interest to Annie ever since. To the neighbours as well when they got a chance to view her.

~~Miss Royal was blonde, leggy, wore trousers almost all the time, which caused the unkind~~ neighbours next door, Nancy and Bob Tyrrett, to say she must be a lesbian, and they didn't mean it as a compliment. The Tyrretts had watched her move in and kept their eyes open since but had not managed more than the odd fleeting glimpse. Miss Royal was a buyer in fashion for a large chain of department stores and not home a lot.

'She has to travel a lot on business,' Annie had explained to her sister. 'But she finds it fascinating and loves it.'

'She never says a word to me, just shoots past.' Not that she had done that lately either. Must have wings, thought sister.

'Well, she does to me. On occasion. When she feels like it.'

'And she's asked you to call her Caroline?'

'Oh, everyone does that now.'

'Does she call you Annie?'

'Sometimes,' said Annie, unwilling to admit that Miss Royal never did.

'Does she have a man up there?'

Annie blinked. 'Well, I'm her landlady, not her keeper. So what if she does? She's adult.'

Didi frowned. 'Thought I'd ask.' She drank some coffee. 'What sort is he?'

'The usual sort, I suppose. Why?'

'He looks,' she hesitated ... 'different. I saw him once.'

'Keep out of things,' advised Annie. 'She lives her life, let us live ours. Laissez-faire.' A new phrase on Annie's lips; she had left school too young and was now getting an education as a mature student. She knew who Metternich was, and Lord Palmerston, and had heard of Adam Smith.

Annie was doing a course at the local university, the new one, upgraded from a polytechnic. She had a small grant which just allowed her to eat while she studied Law and History but the great pleasure was that Maida, her child, went to the university children's group daily.

She had read all about Marianna Manners's murder even if she did not admit it. How could she think I was not interested in murder, I who know more about it than most.

'I wonder if she'd talk to me if I went up,' Didi speculated, more to see what Annie said than because she intended to try. 'I need to talk to someone about fashion if I'm going in for drama. I haven't got my image right.'

'She told me she specialized in fashion for the older lady,' said Annie. 'But you could try.'

That means don't bother, assessed Didi. As if I was going to, anyway.

The front doorbell rang.

'Late,' said Annie. 'I shan't answer.' She began to tremble.

'Not that late. Depends what sort of life you have.'

The bell rang again.

'I'm going to answer it.'

'Look out of the window first.'

Didi said: 'Oh, it's that man.' She moved fast. 'I'll open the door.'

'Who?'

'Tash.'

Tom Ashworth.

'What does he want so late?'

'Like I said: it's not so late if your life is like that.'

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