

1950

Chapter One

METROPOLITAN POLICE TELEGRAM

30-11-50

THE FOLLOWING TELEPHONE MESSAGE RECEIVED FROM POLICE,  
MERTHYR-TYDFIL (TELE. 541). BEGINS:-

A MAN NAMED JOHN WILFRED DAVIES HAS COME TO THIS STATION THIS  
AFTERNOON AND STATED THAT ON 8-11-49 AT 10, PARADISE STREET, W.C.,  
HIS WIFE HAD A MISCARRIAGE AT THAT ADDRESS AFTER SHE DRANK  
SOME LIQUID WHICH HE OBTAINED FROM A LORRY DRIVER SOME TIME  
PREVIOUS AT A CAFE IN IPSWICH. DURING THE NIGHT OF 9-11-49 BETWEEN  
1AM AND 2AM HE DISPOSED OF HIS WIFES BODY DOWN A DRAIN OUTSIDE  
THE FRONT OF THAT ADDRESS. HE HANDED HIS 14 MONTH OLD CHILD TO  
A MAN NAMED NORMAN BACKHOUSE AT THE SAME ADDRESS WHO  
STATED HE COULD HAVE THE CHILD TAKEN CARE OF. HE ALSO SOLD THE  
FURNITURE AND LEFT THE ADDRESS. WILL YOU PLEASE CAUSE  
ENQUIRIES TO BE MADE. A WRITTEN STATEMENT HAS BEEN TAKEN FROM  
DAVIES. ENDS.

FORWARDED FOR NECESSARY ACTIONS ON DIRECTIONS OF CH/SUPT

Detective Inspector Stratton closed the door of his superior's office. He stood for a moment, staring at the piece of paper, and then he looked out of the window, where the end-of-November morning sun was struggling, feebly, to shine through a sooty yellow blanket of smog that had turned the West End sky the colour of a dirty duster. Over four years after the war's end, sunshine seemed to be rationed, in line with pretty well everything else – apart from the grime and drizzle through which the weary citizens moved, herd-like and damp-macintoshed, or shuffled, grumbling in perpetual queues.

Stratton felt every day of his forty-four years, and then some: he'd had a cold since the middle of October, his chilblains were itching like buggery, and the last thing he

wanted was a walk. If only he could lay hands on a pair of shoes that kept out the wet... He scanned the telegram again, shaking his head, and went to find Sergeant Ballard.

The sergeant was at the front desk, attempting to calm down an obviously drunk woman, whose ravaged face, beneath the rouge, had an ominous greenish pallor, and who was missing the high heel of one shoe. Spit flew from her mouth as she berated motherly Policewoman Harris, who'd bought her in, the words spilling out loud but sloppy: 'Take your hands off me, you lesbian!'

'What's the problem?'

'It's Iris, Sir,' said Ballard. 'She's been making a nuisance of herself again.' Despite the fact that his face was scratched and his dark suit was smudged with chalky powder where the woman had stumbled into him, he still managed, somehow, to look as smart as paint. That, thought Stratton, was also how you could describe most of the local tarts, who were certainly better dressed than the rest of the female population – except for the odd one like Iris Manning, who was clinging on, by ragged fingernails, to the Soho beat she'd had since before the war. Iris was one of their regulars: drunk, disorderly, soliciting, and once, wounding another girl in a fight over a punter. Hearing Stratton's voice she turned unsteadily, supporting herself on the desk, and tottered in his direction. Stratton, detecting the odour of decay and stale perfume, stepped smartly backwards. 'Inspector, you'll help me, won't you? I haven't done nothing. It's all a mistake. Won't you help me? I'll make it up to you.'

Shuddering inwardly at the idea of this ghoul – drunk at that – being let loose on his private parts, he said, 'That's very nice of you, Iris, and I appreciate it, but I'm afraid it's out of the question. You'll be much better off here.'

'But it's *her*,' Iris wailed, pointing a grubby, trembling finger at the policewoman. 'She's always had it in for me.'

'No she hasn't.' Stratton exchanged glances with Miss Harris. 'She's got your best interests at heart. Now, you be a good girl and go quietly and I'm sure-' he grinned encouragingly, '-that she'll make you a nice cup of tea.'

Behind her, Harris grimaced, and Stratton made an apologetic face at her. Iris Manning, still looking mutinous, allowed herself to be led away, limping.

'Thank you, Sir,' said Ballard, as they left West Central. 'That was getting nasty.'

'Poor old Iris.' Stratton peered through the fog for the police car that was to take them to Paradise Street. 'She's not been the same since the Yanks left.' It was too thick to see very far down the street, but they could hear the hiss and splash of tyres in the wet, a shouted curse, and a lot of coughing.

'Paradise Street's next to the Goods Yard, off Euston Road,' he told the driver, as they climbed in.

'On Mother Kelly's doorstep...' sang Ballard, *sotto voce*.

'That's Paradise Row,' said Stratton. He handed over the paper for Ballard to peer at.

'What's he doing in Wales, Sir?'

'Dunno. Name's Davies, so he's Welsh, I suppose. Did his wife in and went back home to Mum.'

'A drain, though... three weeks...' Ballard made a face.

'Look on the bright side – it's not the middle of summer. And it seems pretty straightforward – as long as we can find the baby, that is.'

'Seems a bit odd just handing the kid over like that, Sir.'

'That's what I was thinking, but as long as it hasn't come to any harm, it should be plain sailing. We can fetch out the body, fetch Davies up from Wales and have it sorted out by the end of the week.'

A fleet of lorries loaded with building materials – destined for the Festival of Britain site on the South Bank, Stratton guessed – was blocking Regent Street, so they went through Piccadilly Circus instead. Peering out of the window, Stratton just managed to make out, through the smoggy air, the oversized Bovril advert and the dramatic 'Export or Die' sign beneath it. Men in the unvarying civilian uniform of drab demob macs and trilby hats hurried along the pavements beside the car before being swallowed up by the fog, and occasionally Stratton caught a glimpse of something more colourful as a man pushing a grocer's barrow or a woman in a bright coat went past. The sootily looming Victorian buildings thinned out somewhat as they neared the Euston Road, broken up by bombsites untouched except, in the summer months, by swathes of purple rosebay willowherb.

They drove past shops selling second-hand clothes – a lot of grey stuff that looked suspiciously like demob suits – and war surplus in bundles of khaki and air-force blue, and rows of skinny, dilapidated three-storey houses with crumbling windowsills and walls that soaked up the damp like blotting paper. It was unusual enough to see a freshly repaired and painted building even in the fashionable parts of London; here, it would be a miracle, and Paradise Street seemed even more dingy than the rest. It was a cul-de-sac, ending in the brick back wall of the goods yard; a Victorian horror of blackened brick and rotting woodwork, one of the end houses shored up by a temporary plank buttress rising from a sea of mud that must once have been a garden. The terraced houses looked as if they had the plague, and the inhabitants, such as could be seen, didn't seem much better. The doors opened straight onto the street, and a grubby little girl of about six with scabs around her mouth, clad in a worn coat and a pixie hood and sitting on a front step, looked up as they passed. 'Sssh...' she admonished, one finger to her lips, then pointed to an equally filthy doll lying in her lap.

'Is your dolly asleep?' asked Stratton, bending down to her.

'No,' replied the child in a matter-of-fact tone. 'She's dead.'

A Capital Crime

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