Chapter One

August 1958, Notting Hill Gate: *Puncture wound to chest, entered right hand side in 4th intercostal space, 4 ins deep, penetrated to the heart...*

DI Stratton shifted irritably in his office chair – it was half-past midday and sweltering and his shirt seemed to be plastered onto his back – and pushed the pathologist's report aside. In the black and white photographs Herbert Hampton looked more annoyed than dead, and the stains on his clothing might easily have been the result of carelessness with ketchup or HP sauce. Seated on the floor in his underwear, with a bald head and a petulant expression, he made Stratton think of a giant baby who'd been pushed to the floor by an older sibling and was preparing to start howling about it. At least, Hampton's top half made him think this. His lower half – a map of varicose veins and a partially visible scrotum so low and loose that it looked like pebbles at the bottom of a pigskin bag – just made him think of the sad indignities of getting old and being murdered in your vest and underpants.

He'd been found by a girl. Shirley Maples, aged seventeen, typist, on her way home from the ABC Royalty, Ladbroke Grove, where she'd attended the 6 o'clock performance of a film with her friend Sandra Mills. Glancing at the map of his new manor, he saw that Shirley Maples lived in Colville Terrace and Sandra Mills – also a typist – lived in Talbot Road, which was just around the corner. Stratton thought he could picture the streets: rusted railings, crumbling front walls, and rows of tatty, five-storey Victorian houses, each one occupied by a dozen – or perhaps even two dozen – people.

Both girls lived with their parents. They had watched Raintree County, which apparently, with the rest of the programme, lasted three whole hours, Shirley arrived back home at half-past nine. When she'd climbed all the stairs to the family's top floor flat, her father had sent her back down again and across the road to give the week's rent to Mr Hampton, and, while she was at it, to fetch him a bottle of Mackeson from the pub down the road. He never got his beer. Stratton imagined her pushing open the door of Hampton's flat and standing hypnotised, before she began to scream. He shuffled the papers until he found her statement. Scanning to the end, he read: *My Dad says it's the coloureds that do these things*.

The office door swung open and a large man he recognised as PC Jellicoe – two days into his new post, he hadn't got all the names down yet – appeared with a cup of tea and a rock cake on a plate. ''Ot, ain't it? 'Ere you go.'

The voice was an exaggerated Cockney – the London equivalent of the country dweller's exaggerated yokel act, put on for strangers – and there was a sort of menacing joviality about it, as if daring him to pull rank. Stratton, visualising his new colleagues huddled and expectant in the corridor, wondered if he'd been put up to it. As the first appointment of a Superintendent who'd only been there a year himself, he was bound to be an object of suspicion, especially as his first task was to investigate a crime that the natives had failed to solve.

PC Jellicoe, who'd put the tea and bun on the table, nodded encouragingly. 'Thought you might like a cup of tea after your lunch.'

'Thanks,' said Stratton. He took a sip of the tea, and picked up the rock bun.

'Just like Muvver useta make.'

Stratton took an experimental bite and encountered a concrete-like substance. 'Yes, if Muvver was a brick layer. Still, it's the thought that counts.'

No snorts of laughter from outside, so it obviously wasn't a set-up, just Jellicoe having a sniff round the newcomer and, presumably, reporting back. Jellicoe studied him in a manner that made think of a man trying to decide whether a piano would fit through a doorway. After a moment, his face broke into a grin. 'They are a bit of a facer.' Pointing at Stratton's map, he added, 'That's where that bloke Hampton was done a couple of Saturdays ago, isn't it?'

Stratton, well aware that Jellicoe knew exactly what he was looking into, took this to be an olive branch of sorts and said, 'That's right – Colville Terrace.'

'What that little lot'- Jellicoe nodded at the papers on the desk – 'won't tell you is that all round there, Colville Terrace, Colville Road, Powis Terrace, Powis Square... most of them houses belong to Danny Perlmann. He's got quite a lot in St Stephen's Gardens, too,' he indicated the street with a stubby finger, 'and Chepstow Road, Westbourne Gardens, Pembridge Square... Got a bloody great mansion in Hampstead, I heard, and he drives about in a Roller full of blondes. Hampton was one of the rent collectors. But,' Jellicoe heaved a big, puffy sigh. 'It's a disgrace, really. Not saying it hasn't always been a problem round there – gypos and all sorts, more your criminal class than your working class, if you see what I mean – but now with the darkies everywhere, it's got to be the worst slum in London. Some of them club together and buy a house and then they want the tenants out so they can bring in their own sort. We had a Nigerian bloke a couple of weeks ago trying to evict a bunch of Irish – brawling in the street, they were, furniture thrown about all over the place, and what with that business in Nottingham over the weekend, coloureds stabbing whites and all sorts...'

‘The Chief Constable said that wasn’t a racial riot,’ said Stratton, who’d spent quite a lot of the previous Sunday morning reading about the ‘milling mob’ of fifteen hundred people who’d rampaged through the streets of St Ann’s.

Jellicoe sniffed. ‘Not a racial riot my arse – wouldn’t have happened if the darkies hadn’t been there. Anyway, bit different from your old patch in the West End, isn’t it?’ In other words, thought Stratton: let’s see what you can do in a really tough manor, glamour-boy.

Jellicoe did have a point, though. Stratton’s old division, C – St James, Soho and the surrounding area – certainly had its problems, and a fair amount of poverty, too, but there wasn’t anything that approached the sheer, unrestrained squalor he’d seen on his brief tour of the Colville and Powis area.

‘Perlmann’s got a club up West, too,’ said Jellicoe, ‘but you’d know about that.’

‘I don’t, actually.’

Jellicoe looked surprised. ‘It’s called Maxine’s.’

Stratton had only once glimpsed inside Maxine’s plush interior, but he knew it, and its smart clientele, by repute. ‘I know Maxine’s. It’s in Wardour Street. I didn’t know it was his, though.’

Jellicoe nodded. ‘Him and another bloke. He’s got another club in Earl’s Court. Rumours of unlicensed gambling, though he’s never been had up for it.’

‘Sounds as if he’s doing all right for himself.’

‘Not short of a bob or two, that’s for sure.’

At least, Stratton thought when Jellicoe had taken himself off, I’ve got one potential ally. There was no record of money being found in the man’s room, which made robbery a likely motive and the money stolen would, presumably, have belonged to Perlmann, from whom he could find no statement. Putting the map and Shirley Maples’s statement to one side, he turned back to the photographs. There were five or six, and the police photographer had done a better-than-average job: different angles and everything in sharp focus. The accompanying plan of the third floor flat showed a living room – where Hampton had met his death – with a tiny kitchen partitioned off on one side.

In the first photograph, Stratton could see, next to Hampton’s body, a television set encased in a wooden cabinet with doors that hinged out on either side like an altar piece. It surprised him: from what he’d seen of Colville Terrace so far he doubted if many of the residents could have afforded such a luxury, but presumably Hampton, as the rent collector,

had been in an unusually privileged position. On the top of the cabinet was a lace-edged runner, on which stood a china donkey and a framed photograph of a young woman. Stratton wondered if this was Mrs Hampton, who, according to the notes, had died the previous year. The television, according to Shirley, had still been on when she'd entered the room.

The second photograph showed a collection of empty and unwashed milk bottles on the other side of the mantelpiece, cluttered together with opened tins, two overflowing ashtrays and several plates of congealing leftovers, one of which was furred with mould. Clearly, Hampton hadn't kept up with the housework after his wife's death. The lino, Stratton could see from all the pictures, was haphazardly strewn with newspaper. As Hampton was sitting on some of it, he felt it was unlikely to have been put there by the man's assailant – more likely it was a feeble attempt to keep the floor clean. The pages weren't crumpled or dirty: Stratton could clearly see advertisements for Radio Rentals, Double Diamond and, by Hampton's left foot, Kellogg's cornflakes – the sunshine breakfast with the wide-awake taste. Squinting and turning the photograph through 90 degrees, he made out another advert – Chilprufe vests, a must for the school outfit – and a headline: 'Little Rock says shut schools to bar Negroes'. The paper was the *Daily Express*. Obviously recent, but he couldn't make out the date underneath the masthead – he supposed it would be somewhere in the notes.

Stratton read through the statements from the neighbours, who struck him as an exceptionally cagey lot. As far as he could tell, there seemed to be fourteen different people living in the same building as Hampton – not counting any children – and none of them had noticed anything unusual. What was interesting was that all of them, whether white or black, seemed to have liked Hampton: words like 'kind', 'helpful' and 'nice' kept recurring. Several of Hampton's immediate neighbours, plus quite a few from surrounding houses, agreed with Shirley Maples's dad's assertion that 'it was coloureds', but without elaborating further. None of the coloured neighbours had an opinion as to what might have happened – or anyway not one they were willing to voice – and, thinking about it, Stratton couldn't blame them.

He lit a cigarette and had another look at the pathologist's report: *Caused by a single-edged knife... wound edges protruding, probably owing to rapid withdrawal of instrument... no other marks of violence about the deceased... No evidence of rigor...*

Hampton's last meal – consumed, according to the report, at least three hours prior to his death – consisted of minced lamb, peas and potatoes. This, Stratton knew from the statements, had been taken in a nearby cafe, along with a cup of tea, between – approximately – 5.30 and 6pm. The pathologist estimated that Hampton had been dead for between two and

four hours before he was discovered by Shirley Maples at approximately 9.45pm. That would mean that he'd been killed sometime between, say, 6.05 and 7.45. At that time, thought Stratton, the older children would be coming in for their tea, and the adults, either home from work or off out for the evening, it being Saturday. Anyone in the house who had a television would have been watching it, as Hampton had been: the *Six-Five Special* for the kids and later, *The Black and White Minstrel Show* for the whole family.

Perhaps, though, the neighbours weren't being as cagey as all that. With fourteen adults and Christ knew how many children clumping up and down the stairs – never mind the all the other noises – the place wouldn't have been exactly quiet. Any stranger would simply have been assumed to be an acquaintance of another of the inhabitants, one of whom, Stratton could see from a handwritten note helpfully pinned to her statement, was thought to be on the game.

At the bottom of the pathologist's report was a handwritten note: *It is possible that this wound was caused by the deceased rushing at his assailant while he (the assailant) was holding the knife in his hand. In the absence of other evidence to the contrary, I am unable to suggest any satisfactory theory by which the wound could have been self-inflicted.*

Stratton was just about to go through the paperwork again to check he'd not missed anything significant, when the door opened, revealing the immaculately suited and ramrod straight form of his new boss, Detective Superintendent Matheson. Stratton started to rise from his chair, suddenly very conscious of the sweaty and crumpled appearance he must present.

'No, no. Stay where you are, man. How's it going? I see they've given you all the gen.'

'I'm catching up as fast as I can, Sir. Just about to go down to Colville Terrace.'

'I told the station sergeant to make sure there's a car at your disposal.'

'I thought I'd walk this time, sir. Get the lie of the land, so to speak.' As he said this, Stratton was aware that, as in their previous exchanges, he didn't sound like himself but like something out of a war film: decent, doughty, doing his damndest in a gruff, self-effacing sort of way. It was the effect the man had on him: the clipped, upper-class tones, distinguished countenance and military bearing, not to mention the background and reputation, plus the fact that, at forty-two, Matheson was a whole eleven years younger than himself. He had – as anybody who read the papers knew – joined the Met in the thirties, under Commissioner Trenchard's ill-fated scheme for recruiting an officer class. At the time Stratton had, like most serving policemen, viewed the Hendon 'boy wonders' as a bunch of ineffective public-

school washouts, which a lot of them were, but not Matheson. His successes had been celebrated, the newspapers had fawned on him, and five years ago he'd become the youngest officer ever to be appointed Detective Superintendent by Scotland Yard. And – as if this weren't enough – he'd had a good war, too: he'd been a captain in the Desert Rats and taken part in the Normandy invasion.

'Jolly good,' said Matheson. 'I'll leave you to it. Take whatever time you need to talk to people – learn a bit about them. Come to my office whenever you've finished. I've a fair bit to do myself, so I shall be here until at least eight o'clock this evening. You can give me your ideas over a drink.'

'Yes, Sir. Thank you.'

Blimey, thought Stratton, there's a turn-up for the books. In all the years working under Lamb at West Central, he could only remember being offered a drink once, and that was because the man was retiring. Dragging his jacket over his uncomfortably sodden shirt and gathering up his notebook and cigarettes, he headed for the lobby to inform the desk sergeant of his whereabouts for the next few hours.