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A Capital Crime

Written by Laura Wilson

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WILSON

A Capital Crime

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To George, with love

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 7-11-50 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 8-11-50 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 brought 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 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 End 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. Wife dies and he goes 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 through the smoggy air, Stratton just managed to make out 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, but 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 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.’

Chapter Two

Diana Calthrop stared out of her bedroom window and watched the hunched, elderly form of Reynolds the gardener making his slow progress down the weed-strewn gravel that surrounded the soggy, untended parterre. Looking past him to the woodlands and fields beyond, she thought, I shan't miss any of it – not the vast, dank garden or the enormous draughty mausoleum of a house.

Sighing, she turned to resume her packing. Despite several years of wartime practice making up parcels for the WVS, she was too sad and distracted to make a decent job of it – clothes were strewn across the double bed and hanging over the backs of chairs, and cosmetics and scent littered the dressing table. They hadn't had a maid since Ellen left in 1944, and asking Mrs Birkett, the irritable, arthritic cook who was the last remaining member of the indoor staff, to help her, was out of the question. Besides, there wasn't really a great deal *to* pack – not much to show for fifteen years of marriage, when you came down to it. Not even a child. Five miscarriages had seen to that – and what was worse, she

hadn't really minded. Emotionally, she'd felt only dull resignation, never the sharp grief of loss. The only thing I was bred to do, and I couldn't even manage that, she sneered at herself. One of the miscarriages hadn't even been her husband's child, but the result of a wartime affair with a fellow agent while she was working at MI5. Guy had no idea of this, but her vengeful mother-in-law, Evie, who reigned supreme over both the house and her son, did, and had enjoyed making frequent, if mercifully oblique, references to it.

For the last few months, though, Evie – without bothering to hide the fact – had been grooming Diana's successor, the daughter of a local worthy. Round-faced, sweet-natured and undoubtedly virginal, Genevieve Collier was younger, more malleable, and altogether less tarnished than herself. Guy seemed happy enough to go along with his mother's plans for his future, but then, Diana thought sourly, he always had, hadn't he?

A tentative knock produced the subject of her thoughts, standing uncomfortably in the open doorway and bearing a fistful of white hellebores. Diana stared at him, bewildered. She hadn't seen him since the previous day's stilted and painfully formal exchange when she'd finally announced the inevitable. In any case, it was a long time since they'd felt easy in each other's presence, and an even longer time since they'd entered each other's bedrooms without knocking. The war – Guy had spent almost three years as a prisoner in Malaya and returned rail-thin, plagued by nightmares and a silent, corrosive fury – and Evie, who somehow managed to

be present even when she wasn't actually in the room with them, had seen to that.

'I thought' – the oak floorboards creaked as Guy advanced a couple of hesitant paces towards her – 'that you might like these.'

Diana gaped at him, unsure if she wanted to laugh or cry. 'I haven't got anywhere to put them,' she said, gently. 'They'll die.'

'I thought . . .' Guy stared at the flowers in his hand as if he wasn't sure how they'd got there, and continued, lamely, 'I just wanted . . .' He shook his head. 'I don't know.'

'I *am* leaving, Guy,' said Diana. 'It's finished. We both know that.'

'Yes . . .'

'I was too young.'

'Yes . . .'

'The war . . .'

'Yes . . .'

'I'm sorry.'

'I'm sorry, too.'

It's hopeless, she thought. There's too much to say, and, at the same time, there's nothing at all. Guy crossed the room towards her, coming so close that, fearing he was about to embrace her, she flinched slightly. The movement was small and involuntary, but Guy was aware of it, his fingers fluttering against her upper arms for a second before he turned away to deposit the flowers in the wastepaper basket by her feet. For a moment, they both stared down at the pretty, discarded blooms, trying to pretend that it hadn't

happened, and then Guy said, abruptly, 'I did love you, you know.'

'I loved you, too.' As she said it, Diana wondered if it had ever been true. When she looked back, she'd come to the conclusion that her marriage, at nineteen, six months an orphan and caught up, as she'd thought at the time, in a whirlwind of romance, had been entirely orchestrated by Evie.

'What will you do?' he asked.

'Oh, you know,' Diana tried to keep her tone light, 'there's lots of things I can do. I can type, and organise . . . I can even cook a little. I'm sure I can make myself useful to somebody.'

Guy nodded. 'You're different, now.'

Yes, thought Diana, I am: older, wiser, tougher and more practical. A small voice in the back of her mind warned her that the toughness and practicality remained to be tested – war-work was one thing, a peacetime job quite another.

'You are different too,' she said. 'It isn't surprising.'

'I suppose not.' Guy stared at her with a sort of miserable wonder. 'You're very beautiful, you know. I've always thought that.' He's trying to tell me I'll find another husband, Diana thought. Right at the moment she wasn't at all sure that she wanted one. 'I'm sorry I can't give you more money, but . . .' Mentally, Diana completed the sentence – *but Evie won't allow it*.

'It's all right, Guy,' she said. 'The first thing I'm going to do is go up to Gloucestershire and see what can be done with Hambeyn House, now that the army's finally decided to relinquish it.'

'These big places . . .' said Guy doubtfully. He didn't need to complete that sentence, either, as both of them knew that Diana's childhood home was unlikely to fetch more than the small amount that a builder would pay for the raw materials. 'Well . . .' He glanced around the room. 'I can see you've got things to do, so I'll make myself scarce.'

'It might be best,' said Diana, glancing at her wristwatch. 'The taxi's due in half an hour.'

Guy acknowledged this with a nod, but made no move to leave. After a few moments, looking more awkward than ever, he cleared his throat, said, 'Well. . .' again and held out his hand. Mechanically, she held out hers, and they shook for what felt like an age. Then the sheer absurdity of the gesture, coupled with the desire to make it clear that she was well aware of her mother-in-law's machinations, got the better of her, and looking Guy straight in the eye she said, 'I'm sure that you and Genevieve and Evie will be very happy.'

Blushing, he jerked his hand free of hers. 'Yes, well . . .' He swallowed. 'No hard feelings, I trust.'

'Not at all.'

Conscious that in this exchange at least she was the victor, Diana watched him squeak his way back across the room. He paused in the doorway and turned back, an almost beseeching expression on his face. 'You will say goodbye to Evie, won't you?' he asked.

Diana, who had asked herself several times in the past twenty-four hours if it were possible to slide away without saying anything to her mother-in-law, treated Guy to what she knew was her haughtiest expression. 'Of course.'

When he'd gone, closing the door behind him as gently and quietly as if someone had died, she thought, with a rush of confidence, I shall say goodbye to Evie, but I shall do it with my head held high. Suddenly, she found herself looking forward to the encounter, and with swift, sure movements, set about finishing her packing.