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Cardiff Prison. September 2010.

‘Welcome.’

Penry opens his hands in what’s meant to be a spreading gesture, only they never get more than about eight inches apart. It’s as though the ghosts of his handcuffs are still there.

‘Nice place,’ I tell him.

Formica tables with metal legs. Overhead fluorescent lighting. No daylight. Official notices on the wall and a couple of prison warders watching everything. Seven hundred and eighty-five other prisoners, ninety-four of them lifers. Nice.

‘Well, you know, I was going to repaint. Freshen things up a bit. But ...’ He shrugs. ‘You know how it is.’

‘Will you manage it?’

The time, not the paintwork. The court handed down a four year sentence, every minute of it deserved. I helped put Penry behind bars – Brian Penry, a bent ex-copper with a line in fraud and one or two worse things besides – and I shouldn’t like him, but I do.

‘Four years, serve two. Yeah, I’ll manage.’ His face goes through a few different expressions before settling on something blandly generic. ‘My first week here, a guy in the same wing as me kills himself. Piece of broken glass.’ He makes a gesture along the inside of both wrists. ‘They only noticed when there was blood leaking out from the door. Fucking ...’ He shakes his head instead of finishing, but I get the drift.

‘Bugger was only in for eighteen months and didn’t even seem depressed, apparently.’

I remember the story, but vaguely, the way you do when it concerns something on the inside. What I do remember well was the arrest. A young father. Worked for a precision engineering company. Nice lad, doing well. Done for trying to import cocaine from southern Spain in a shipment of steel tubing. Loses job, loses wife, loses kids, goes to jail. Life over.

‘You’ll be okay, Brian,’ I tell him.

‘Yeah. Yeah, once I get the place freshened up, eh?’

We talk for another thirty minutes and it feels like a century. When I leave the building, I find I’m almost running.

2

Cardiff. Late October 2010.

It's a Friday afternoon. October in Wales, but you wouldn't think so. High clouds scudding in from the west and plenty of sunshine. The last shreds of summer and never mind the falling leaves.

I'm in a patrol car with a PC Adrian Condon, on the way back from a wasted five hours going house-to-house in Rumney. We'd been trying to find anyone who could tell us about a street fight that injured one female bystander and two men, one of whom is in hospital with a fractured skull. We'd got nothing useful, but hadn't expected to. Our bosses hadn't expected us to. It was one of those box-ticking things. You do it because you have to.

We're in end-of-shift mode, talking shop, thinking about the weekend, when Condon's radio squawks. Incident called in in Cyncoed. Something to do with illegal rubbish found during a house clearance. Condon looks at me. We could duck this one or we could be good little soldiers. I shrug. I don't care. Illegal rubbish in Cyncoed, what I came into policing for.

Condon shrugs as well. He's already swinging the car around as I reach for the radio.

The dispatcher gives us an address on the Rhyd-y-penau Road, up by the reservoir. Not the sort of address that generally gives us trouble. It's a place of clipped privet, tidy front gardens and net curtains. Bungalows and china dogs.

We're there in ten minutes. A big blue van, doors banging open in the wind, marks the target. Condon whirls the car into the vacant scrap of driveway, parks under a bare-branched cherry tree.

We get out. Condon's in uniform and I'm not, and he's a man, which I'm not. So although I'm technically the senior officer, it's him the house clearance guys defer to as they pull off their gloves and shake hands with those big masculine grips.

I don't care, just stand back and watch the clouds scud. Illegal rubbish. How tough can the assignment be? I hear fragments only. Bungalow belonged to an old lady, died two months back, next of kin in Australia. Blah blah. The blue van is piled with old-lady furniture. Curved mahogany legs, green velour trim. Beige cushions with pale gold tassels. I can't see more because of the van door, still banging in the wind.

Condon moves off toward the garage with the clearance guys. I follow. The garage door is raised and there's a skip in front of it, half full. Old garden junk, gummed-up paintpots, bristleless brooms, a spidery fold-out deck chair. Inside, the garage is half cleared, half full.

Teak garden furniture. The sort that's good enough you store it indoors over winter and in bad weather. Take outside when it's warm.

And there's a chest freezer. Capacious. As big as two bathtubs. The sort of thing that nice little old ladies who live with their net curtains and china dogs up by the Llanishen Reservoir fill with stewed apple compotes in autumn and bits of lamb when it's on sale at the local butcher. Of course, there hasn't been any power here for a month or two, so the packaged lamb and stewed apples aren't as good as they were. A wheelie bin, stinking, holds the first layer of bags excavated from the freezer. A pile of plastic wrapped packages lies on the ground, the greyish-yellow colour of meat turned bad and condensation dripping from the inside of each bag.

That's not what catches the eye, though. What catches the eye lies in front of the lamb and the pork belly on the concrete floor. A polythene bag more than a metre long. More meat turning bad. The same yellowy grey. Same condensation, same smell. Only this meat looks a hell of a lot like a human leg. That, plus it's wearing a high-heeled shoe.

Condon sees it a moment before I do and, like a good copper, he knows he needs to puke outside. Keep the crime scene tidy. Me, I don't puke at corpses. As Condon is decorating the flower bed, I approach the bag, feeling the flesh through the thick polythene. It feels like old, cold steak. I squat down by the dead girl, keeping her company, letting the peace flow out of the bag and into me.

Condon and the clearance guys are silhouettes moving in the garage doorway. With my hand still on the girl's thigh, I call the office. Rhiannon Watkins, the only DI I know to be on duty. I give her the gist. Condon will probably be getting something going with the dispatcher too, but this will be a CID case from here on. A sweet little murder. I feel a deep sigh of relaxation pass through me. Of pleasure. I didn't have much planned for the weekend. And whatever there might have been, this will be better.

I give the thigh a last, long affectionate squeeze and stand up so I can see down into the depths of the freezer. I'm expecting more of the same. Arms, head, the other leg. Chunks of torso sawn up and stored. But there's nothing. Squidgy apple puree. Bags of beans, unusable now. A few Tupperware containers with handwritten labels and dates, no longer legible in the dark and wet. Nothing that looks like body parts. Nothing that looks like the rest of this stinky jigsaw.

In the doorway to the garage, the clearance men are beginning to realise that they're going to need to make different plans for the evening. We're going to need statements from them. We'll need their van, if it comes to that. It's part of the crime

scene now, a lorryload of evidence. In Cathays Park, the word will be spreading, shift patterns reallocated, people bundling into cars and blazing up here, lights flashing, sirens wailing.

I like all that, but I'm not ready for it yet. While Condon is still busy at the front, I walk through the garage door into the house itself. Get a feel of it before it's invaded. The clocks haven't gone back yet, so there's still plenty of light. The house is more or less empty. A shag pile carpet in yellow and brown, dents where the furniture once stood. In the living room, a mantelpiece not yet cleared of photos.

Not many photos, probably because there isn't much family. There's a wedding photo, of the widow presumably and her late husband. He's in an army uniform and the photo looks like it's Second World War vintage. That makes the widow late eighties or early nineties, even if she was young when she married. A pretty bride, half-smiling, unsure whether to look at the camera or her new husband.

There are other photos besides this one. The same pair, older. With a baby. With a young daughter. With the same daughter as a teenager, then as a young woman, then as a bride herself – now the Australian next of kin, I imagine. The last photo of the widow's husband shows him in his late forties, maybe fifties, with a cigarette in his hand. No evidence that he survived into his sixties even.

The shoe on the dead girl's leg was pink suede, platform sole, skinny wedge heels, round toe, and an ankle strap. I'm hardly the world's first authority on fashion, but the shoe looked to me neither brand-new nor ancient history. Christina Aguilera vintage, approximately.

I line up the photos with my thumbnail. Not much of a rogues' gallery: an elderly widow, a dead husband, an Australian daughter. All that, and a murder victim who consists of only a leg and a Christina Aguilera taste in shoes.

I'm smiling like an idiot. Weekends don't come any better.