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Love Story, with Murders

Written by Harry Bingham

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**LOVE STORY,
WITH
MURDERS**

HARRY BINGHAM



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1

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.

3

Mayhem rides up the hill and takes possession. The queen of the carnival is Rhiannon Watkins. Rhiannon bloody Watkins. Watkins the badge. Rhiannon Watkins, the youngest woman ever appointed DI in Cardiff and currently the longest-serving officer of that rank. One whose ability could have made her DCI, or even Chief Constable, yet whose capacity to make herself disliked could have made her the first murder victim with over a million plausible suspects. A group that would include every one of her CID colleagues.

Typically, Watkins is in the lead car. Typically, she's the first out. Typically, there's a black-jacketed army spreading out behind her. Taping off the crime scene. Starting to talk to neighbours. Getting the removals van moved to a police pound, to safeguard our chain of evidence. Starting to interview the removals men. Separately, so their statements can be compared. And all the time, phone and radio constantly on the go back to Cathays Park.

I'm fooling around on my phone, trying to keep my head down, but I can hear Watkins criticizing the Scene of Crime boys for their slowness. Probably for other things too, when she gets the chance. Lack of moral fibre. Inattention to detail. Off-centre trouser creases. Having once smiled.

Condon also gets lacerated for something. I don't know what, but he stalks past me looking ashen. Then my turn.

Watkins – severe black suit, white shirt, the uptight-lezza look – beckons me over.

‘You entered the house. Why?’

I give her my full-beam smile. One of the good things about my crazy brain: these stupid mind games don’t particularly faze me, so I quite like playing them.

‘We didn’t know if there was further evidence inside the property, and if so whether that evidence was appropriately secured. I made it my business to check.’

‘The interior of the house is a crime scene and –’

‘I touched nothing. I didn’t want to confuse the picture for the SOCOs. I assume you noticed the shoe?’

DI Watkins likes that. She likes it the way a snake would like it if a vole popped up to ask if anyone was hungry. Strike, swallow, digest.

She smiles at me, so I smile back. Sharing the joy.

‘Did I notice the shoe?’ This said slowly, lingeringly.

‘Yes, ma’am. The leg we found was wearing a shoe.’

‘Well, yes, I did take a look at the leg, and my twenty-eight years of experience in the CID helped me notice, even through the polythene, that –’

‘Sorry, ma’am. I wasn’t clear. That shoe is not a contemporary style.’ I show her my phone and the pictures I’ve just downloaded from the Internet. ‘I’ve only had a few moments, but I’d place the shoe as being approximately 2001, 2002. That suggests any crime could be as much as ten years old. I assume that you’ve got people back at Cathays searching for investigations where no body was ever fully recovered. You might wish to direct those team members to focus their efforts on the first few years of the last decade.’

I give her my loveliest smile. We’re standing in the property’s little forecourt and the last of the sun is going down in a boil of cloud to the northwest. Watkins wants to bite my head off, but she can’t. Worse still, she has to stand there and let

me watch as she calls Cathays to relay my information.

Behind us, I can see other cars start to darken the street. Flash photography. The print media are normally first to these things, but this story could be big enough to attract a film crew before long.

Watkins rings off. She's seen what I've seen. I don't know what her take on it is. No senior officer is indifferent to media attention. Some love it. Some loathe it. I don't know Watkins well enough to know which way she swings. But even though her attention is refocusing on the press guys, she hasn't forgotten that she needs to be horrible to me.

She tells me, icily, that that was useful information about the shoe and, since I was obviously alert to such things, would I kindly go to back to Cathays to join the research team there. I could present a summary of our conclusions to her in the morning.

She thinks she's been a pain in the arse, because I'll have to work half the night. I'm feeling happy, because I wanted to do that anyway, and go skipping off to find Condon so he can run me down into town.

I find him on the road outside. He's talking to one of the guys, who wants to know when he's going to get his van back. Condon is handling the situation the way we're trained to, but I can see that he's still vibrating internally from his encounter with the Ice Queen.

'Hey, Adrian.' I pat his upper arm in what's meant to be a supportive but professionally acceptable way. To the clearance guy, I say, 'You'll get your van back when DI Watkins says. And she's a bitch, so it could be a while. Sorry.'

The guy laughs at my frankness, and I continue into the laughter. 'When you found the leg, where was it stored, exactly? I mean, in the freezer, I know, but lying exactly where? At the front, back? Deep down? On top?'

When he understands my question, the clearance guy – who

has a name it turns out, Geoff – is helpful. The leg was lying along the back wall of the freezer, not quite at the bottom but almost.

‘And neatly?’ I ask. ‘Like it had been tidily packed away, not leaving any gaps? Or more like it had just been dropped in a hurry?’

‘Oh no, quite tidy, like. If you, if . . .’

Geoff is turning green, not that I can really tell in the ebbing daylight and the first sodium glow of the streetlamps. There are, strictly speaking, two reservoirs at Llanishen. The smaller, upper reservoir still has water in it, but the other one – the one people still mean when they talk about *the* reservoir – was drained earlier this year. Drained, fenced off, studded with black and yellow security notices. Some company wants to redevelop the site as upmarket housing, which I wouldn’t mind except that Llanishen used to shelter grass snakes and toads and slowworms and waxcap fungi, and I like all those things more than tarmac and luxury homes.

Skins like silver pebbles and a soft slither into the dark.

I tell Geoff not to worry, that he’s been helpful. Take his phone number just in case, then cadge a lift from Condon, telling him I’ll just be a moment.

I run back up to the house. My version of running, I mean, which doesn’t always involve actual running. Back to the garage. A SOCO photographer is there, wearing one of those white polypropylene suits with elasticated hood and cuffs, setting up lighting.

I ask him to give me some dates from the packages still in the bottom of the freezer. He’s not sure whether to be helpful, because somewhere along the way he’s eaten a training manual which is telling him to do things in a different order. I ask him if he wants me to pass his professional reservations along to DI Watkins and he decides to get helpful, bending down into the freezer with a torch.

As he does so, I inspect the packages lying loose on the floor. Not all of them are dated, but some are. There's a whole pile of thin little freezer bags of apple compote, dating from 2005. Some butcher's packages dated 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009. One package of I'm not sure what is dated 1984, but in such wavering handwriting that I'm inclined to suspect the old lady's mind had wandered.

The SOCO pulls out of the freezer. He has a mask on, which I don't, but even so it must have stunk in there.

'Can't see 'em all, and I won't move anything till we're done with the imaging. But what I can see – oldest is '96, newest maybe 2002. Possibly 2003, because the ink has run and ...' He shrugs. 'We'll know once we can start moving them and get a proper look.'

I take some pictures of the dead girl's shoe with my phone, and the SOCO promises to email some better-quality shots through to me when he's got to that stage.

I give him the thumbs-up and head back to Condon, ready for my ride.

4

Home.

I asked Condon to bring me here, not Cathays. If it's going to be a long weekend, I might as well get ready. Swap skirt for jeans, shoes for my most comfortable pair of boots. Jumper. Put a toothbrush and toothpaste into my bag, along with a change of knickers and tights. I think about eating, but I'm not hungry, so I don't. Think about taking a shower, but can't be bothered.

I don't put any lights on. Just let the house grow dark around me, seeing what I need to from the streetlamps outside.

Somebody cut a young woman into pieces and put her left leg into a suburban freezer in Cyncoed.

Up by the reservoir, it's as dark as it is here. The voles and the snakes and the toads and the bats are either going to bed or coming out to hunt. And we're coming out to hunt too. Me, Watkins the Badge, and the might of South Wales's finest.

For me, these things aren't only about finding the killers, but about giving peace to the dead. It's not primarily a question of justice. The dead don't care about that. The murder investigation, arrest, and conviction are just part of the funeral rite, the final acts of completion. Gifts I bring the dead in exchange for the peace they bring me.

The peace of the dead, which passeth all understanding.

I'm moving slowly now. No reason. Just waiting for my

energies to gather. When they do, I find a cereal bar in my dark and silent kitchen and start chomping it on the way to my car.

I should drive straight to Cathays. I *do* drive straight to Cathays, only when I get there, I find myself driving straight on through, over the river to Pontcanna.

Big Victorian houses. Over-ornamented. High-ceilinged and respectable. I stop at a house in Plasturton Gardens. Home of Piers Ivor Harris, MP. One of his homes, I should say. He also has a house in Chelsea in London and a place in France.

I'm in luck. His car is here, a silver Jag. His wife's car too, a cream and black Mini. Lights on inside the house, curtains drawn.

I wander up and down the road, noting down number-plates. Most of them I recognise – this isn't exactly the first time I've done this, to put it mildly – but some of which are new. Of the new ones, none look immediately interesting. The cars either not posh enough or not parked close enough to the house to suggest that they're connected with the Harrises. I note the registrations anyway.

Then back to my car. Then up to Whitchurch. Same thing again. The object of my interest: Galton Evans, an agricultural insurance guy, who made a packet of money ten years ago when he sold his business to a private equity buyer, then decided to devote the rest of his life to becoming a major-league arsehole.

That's my theory anyway. Maybe Evans is a nice guy. I wouldn't know. I've never met him.

I don't think I've got anything useful from the trip, but that's why you have to do these things as often as you can. Fishing takes patience. One of my fortes.

I wonder about hitting some of my other targets, but my mood has changed and Cathays is calling me now. I send a

text to DS David Brydon, David ‘Buzz’ Brydon, my official-as-anything boyfriend, to let him know where I am and what I’m up to. Truth is, he’ll already have heard about the case and will know that I’ve probably been sucked into it, but I’m working hard to be Girlfriend of the Year and good girlfriends text their boyfriends to tell them about changes of plan, so that’s what I do too. It’s how we behave on Planet Normal.

I zoom back into Cathays, ready for a long night hunting corpses.