TALKING TO THE DEAD

Also by Harry Bingham

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TALKING TO THE DEAD

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To N., as always

‘Dance first. Think later. It’s the natural order.’
Samuel Beckett

1

Interview, October 2006

Beyond the window, I can see three kites hanging in the air over Bute Park. One blue, one yellow, one pink. Their shapes are precise, as though stencilled. From this distance, I can't see the lines that tether them, so when the kites move, it's as though they're doing so of their own accord. An all-encompassing sunlight has swallowed depth and shadow.

I observe all this as I wait for DCI Matthews to finish rearranging the documents on his desk. He shuffles the last file from the stack before him to a chair in front of the window. The office is still messy, but at least we can see each other now.

'There,' he says.

I smile.

He holds up a sheet of paper. The printed side is facing him, but against the light from the window I see the shape of my name at the top. I smile again, not because I feel like smiling but because I can't think of anything sensible to say. This is an interview. My interviewer has my CV. What does he want me to do? Applaud?

He puts the CV down on the desk in the only empty patch available. He starts to read it through line by line, marking off each section with his forefinger as he does so. Education. A levels. University. Interests. Referees.

His finger moves back to the centre of the page. University.

'Philosophy.'

I nod.

'Why are we here? What's it all about? That sort of thing?'

'Not exactly. More like, what exists? What doesn't exist? How do we know whether it exists or not? Things like that.'

'Useful for police work.'

'Not really. I don't think it's useful for anything much, except maybe teaching us to think.'

Matthews is a big man. Not gym-big, but Welsh-big, with the sort of comfortable muscularity that suggests a past involving farm work, rugby and beer. He has remarkably pale eyes and thick dark hair. Even his fingers have little dark hairs running all the way to the final joint. He is the opposite of me.

'Do you think you have a realistic idea of what police work involves?'

I shrug. I don't know. How are you meant to know if you haven't done it? I say the sort of thing that I think I'm meant to say. I'm interested in law enforcement. I appreciate the value of a disciplined, methodical approach. Blah, blah. Yadda, yadda. Good little girl in her dark grey interview outfit saying all the things she's meant to say.

'You don't think you might get bored?'

'Bored?' I laugh with relief. That's what he was probing at. 'Maybe. I hope so. I quite like a little boredom.' Then, worried he might feel I am being arrogant – prize-winning Cambridge philosopher sneers at stupid policeman – I backtrack. 'I mean, I like things orderly. *I*s dotted, *t*s crossed. If that involves some routine work, then fine. I like it.'

His finger is still on the CV, but it's tracked up an inch or so. A levels. He leaves his finger there, fixes those pale eyes on me and says, 'Do you have any questions for me?'

I know that's what he's meant to say at some stage, but we've got forty-five minutes allocated for this interview and we've only used ten at the outside, most of which I've spent

watching him shift stationery around his office. Because I'm taken by surprise – and because I'm still a bit rubbish at these things – I say the wrong thing.

'Questions? No.' There's a short gap in which he registers surprise and I feel like an idiot. 'I mean, I want the job. I don't have any questions about that.'

His turn to smile. A real one, not fake ones like mine.

'You do. You really do.' He makes that a statement not a question. For a DCI, he's not very good at asking questions. I nod anyway.

'And you'd probably quite like it if I didn't ask you about a two-year gap in your CV, around the time of your A levels.'

I nod again, more slowly. Yes, I would quite like it if you didn't ask about that.

'Human resources know what's going on there, do they?'

'Yes. I've already been into that with them. I was ill. Then I got better.'

'Who in human resources?'

'Katie. Katie Andrews.'

'And the illness?'

I shrug. 'I'm fine now.'

A non-answer. I hope he doesn't push further, and he doesn't. He checks with me who's interviewed me so far. The answer is, pretty much everyone. This session with Matthews is the final hurdle.

'OK. Your father knows you're applying for this job?'

'Yes.'

'He must be pleased.'

Another statement in place of a question. I don't answer it.

Matthews examines my face intently. Maybe that's his interview technique. Maybe he doesn't ask his suspects any questions, he just makes statements and scrutinises their faces in the wide open light from the big Cardiff sky.

'We're going to offer you a job, you know that?'

'You are?'

'Of course we are. Coppers aren't thick, but you've got more brains than anyone else in this building. You're fit. You don't have a record. You were ill for a time as a teenager, but you're fine now. You want to work for us. Why wouldn't we hire you?'

I could think of a couple of possible answers to that, but I don't volunteer them. I'm suddenly aware of being intensely relieved, which scares me a bit, because I wasn't aware of having been anxious. I'm standing up. Matthews has stood up too and comes towards me, shaking my hand and saying something. His big shoulders block my view of Bute Park and I lose sight of the kites. Matthews is talking about formalities and I'm blathering answers back at him, but my attention isn't with any of that stuff. I'm going to be a police-woman. And just five years ago, I was dead.

2

May 2010

It's true – I do like routine work – but you can have too much of a good thing.

A copper with the Met in London – twenty-two unblemished years on the force – was obliged to retire following an injury received in the line of duty. He took a job as bursar of a Roman Catholic boys' school in Monmouthshire. He started nicking bits of money. Didn't get caught. Nicked more. Didn't get caught. Went crazy: bought himself an upright piano, a golf-club membership, two holidays, a conservatory, a share in a racehorse.

The school authorities were dopey but not actually brain dead. They came to us with evidence of wrongdoing. We investigated and found a whole lot more evidence, then arrested the suspect, Brian Penry, and took him in for interview. Penry denied everything, then stopped talking and saw out the session staring at the wall and looking like crap. On the tape, you can just about hear his slightly asthmatic breathing, a thin nasal whine sounding like a note of complaint between our questions. We charged him on eleven counts of theft, but the correct number is probably somewhere closer to fifty.

He's still denying everything, which means that we have to prepare the case for court. Five minutes before the trial starts, Penry will change his plea, because he's completely stuffed and he knows it and it won't make much difference to his

sentence whether he pleads guilty now or on the day itself. In the meantime, I've got to go through every single detail of his bank records over the last six years, every single card payment, every single withdrawal from the school's bank account and identify each and every rogue transaction. I've got to do all that and document it so meticulously that a defence lawyer won't be able to pick trivial little holes in our case when it comes to court, which, as I say, it never will, because Penry is stuffed and he knows it.

My desk is covered with paper. I loathe all banks and card companies. I hate every digit between zero and nine. I despise every dopily run Catholic boys' school in South Wales. If Brian Penry were in front of me now, I would try to force-feed him my calculator, which is as large and chewable as a Bakelite phone.

'Having fun?'

I look up. David Brydon, a detective sergeant, sandy-haired, thirty-two, a moderate case of freckles and a disposition so friendly and open that I sometimes find myself saying something obnoxious because too much of a good thing can be disconcerting.

'Sod off.'

I don't count that. That's just my version of friendly.

'Still on Penry, is it?'

I look up properly. 'His correct title is Bastard, Thieving, Wish-He'd-Go-and-Drown-Himself Penry.'

Brydon nods sagely, as though I said something sensible. 'I thought you had sophisticated views on moral responsibility.' He holds up two mugs. Tea for him, peppermint for me. Sugar in his, none in mine.

I stand up. 'I do, just not when I have to do this.' I gesture at the desk, already hating it a bit less. We go over to a little seating area in the window. There are two chairs there and a sofa, the sort you get in offices and airport lounges and

nowhere else, with tubular chrome legs and stain-resistant grey upholstery. There's a lot of natural light here, though, and a view of the park. Plus I do actually like Brydon. My bad mood is increasingly just for show.

'He'll plead guilty.'

'I know he'll plead guilty.'

'Got to be done, though.'

'Ah, yes, forgot it was State the Obvious Day. Sorry.'

'Thought you might be interested in this.'

He passes me a clear plastic evidence bag that contains a Visa debit card. Lloyds Bank. Platinum account. Expiry date October last year. Name of Mr Brendan T. Rattigan. Card neither shinily new nor badly marked. It is a dead card, that's all.

I shake my head. 'Nope. Don't think so. Not interested at all.'

'Rattigan. Brendan Rattigan.'

The name means nothing to me. Either my face says it or I do. I sip the tea – still too hot – rub my eyes and smile an apology at Brydon for being a cow.

He wrinkles his face at me. 'Brendan Rattigan. Newport's finest. Scrap-metal man, moves into steel. Mini-mills, whatever they are. Then shipping. Worth some ridiculous amount of money. A hundred million pounds or something.'

I nod. I remember now, but it's not his wealth that I remember or care about. Brydon is still talking. There's something in his voice that I haven't yet identified.

'He died nine months back. Light-aircraft accident in the estuary.' He jerks his thumb in the general direction of Roath Dock in case I don't know where the Severn Estuary is. 'No cause established. Co-pilot's body recovered. Rattigan's body never was.'

'But here's his card.' I stretch out the clear plastic around the card, as though getting a clearer look at it will unlock its secrets.

'Here's his card all right.'

'Which hasn't spent nine months in salt water.'

'No.'

'And you found it where exactly?'

Brydon's face hangs for a moment. He's stuck between two alternatives. Part of him wants to enjoy his little triumph over me. The other part of him is sombre, a fifty-year-old head on younger shoulders, gazing inward at the dark.

The sombre part wins.

'Not me, thank God. Neath police station gets a call. Anonymous caller. Female. Probably not elderly, probably not a kid. She gives the address of a house here in Cardiff, Butetown, says we need to get over there. A couple of uniforms do that. Locked door. Curtains over the windows. Neighbours either out or unhelpful. Uniforms go round the back. Back garden is' – Brydon turns his hands palm upward and I know immediately what he means – 'rubble. Bin bags that the dogs have been at. Rubbish everywhere. Weeds. And shit. Human shit . . . The drains inside are blocked and you can imagine the rest. The uniforms had been hesitating about going inside, but not any more. They break down a door. The house is worse than the garden.'

Another short pause. No theatre this time. Just the awful feeling that decent human beings have when they encounter horror. I nod, to say that I know what he feels, which isn't true but is what he needs to hear.

'Two bodies. A woman, maybe twenties. Red-haired, dead. Evidence of class-A drug usage, but no cause of death established. Not yet. And a little girl. A cutie, apparently. Five, maybe six. Thin as a matchstick. And . . . Christ, Fi, somebody had dropped a fucking sink on her head. A big Belfast jobbie. The sink didn't break, it just crushed her. They hadn't even bothered to fucking move it afterwards.'

Brydon has emotion in his eyes, and his voice is crushed

too, lying under that heavy stoneware sink in a house that stinks of death, even from here.

I'm not that good at feelings. Not yet. Not the really ordinary human ones that arise from instinct like water bubbling up from a hillside spring, irrepressible and clear and as natural as singing. I can picture that house of death, because the last few years have taken me to some pretty bad places and I know what they look like, but I don't have Brydon's reaction. I envy it but can't share it. But Brydon is my friend and he's in front of me, wanting something. I reach for his forearm with my hand. He's not wearing a jacket and the exchange of warmth between his skin and mine is immediate. He breathes out through his mouth. Noiselessly. Releasing something. I let him do it, whatever it is.

After a moment, he throws grateful eyes at me, pulls away and drains his tea. His face is still sombre, but he's one of those elastic sorts who'll be fine. It might have been different if he'd been one of the ones finding the bodies.

Brydon indicates the Platinum account card. 'In amongst the crap, they find that.'

I can imagine it. Dirty plates. Furniture too large for the room. Brown velour and old food stains. Clothes. Broken toys. A TV. Drug stuff: tobacco, needles, lighters. Plastic bags filled with useless things: car mats, clothes hangers, CD cases, nappies. I've been to those places. The poorer the house, the more the stuff. And somewhere in among it, on a dresser under a pile of enforcement notices from utility companies, a single Platinum debit card. A single Platinum card and a little girl, a cutie, with her head smashed to nothing on the floor.

'I can imagine.'

'Yeah.' Brydon nods, bringing himself back. He's a DS. This is a job. We're not in that house, we're in an office with low-energy ceiling lights and ergonomic desk chairs and

high-output photocopiers and views out over Cathays Park. 'Major hoo-ha.'

'Yes.'

'Jackson is running the inquiry, but it's an all-hands-on-deck affair.'

'And he wants my hand on his deck.'

'He does indeed.'

'This card. Why it was there.'

'Yep. It's probably just some druggy card-theft type thing, but we need to follow the lead anyway. Any connections. I know it's a long shot.'

He starts telling me things about the investigation. It's being called Operation Lohan. Daily briefing at eighty thirty sharp. Sharp means sharp. Everyone expected to show, that includes non-core team members like me. The press has a very brief statement, but all further details to be kept quiet for now. Brydon tells me all this and I only half hear him. It's called Lohan because there's an actress called Lindsay Lohan who's a redhead and has had drink and drugs issues. I only know this because Brydon tells me, and he only tells me because he knows I'd have no idea otherwise. Famous for my ignorance, me.

'You got all that?'

I nod. 'You OK?'

He nods. Attempts a grin. Not a brilliant attempt, but more than passable.

I take the card back to my desk, pulling the plastic bag tight round my finger and tracing the outline of the card with the thumb and forefinger of my free hand.

Somebody killed a young woman. Somebody dropped a heavy sink onto a little girl's head. And this card – belonging to a dead millionaire – was there as it happened.

Routine is fine. Secrets are better.

3

The briefing room next morning, where sharp means sharp.

One side of the incident room is taken up with noticeboards in pale buff, which are already starting to swarm with names, roles, assignments, questions and lists. The bureaucracy of murder. The star of the show is a set of photos. Crime-scene images, which are all about documentary accuracy, not careful lighting, but there's something about their bluntness that gives them an almost shocking truthfulness.

The woman lies on a mattress on the floor. She could be sleeping, or in some drug-induced coma. She doesn't look either happy or unhappy, peaceful or unpeaceful. She just looks like the dead look, or as anyone at all looks when they're sleeping.

The child is another matter. You can't see the top half of her head, because it isn't there. The kitchen sink stretches right across the photo, out of focus on its upper edge, because the photographer was focusing on the face, not the sink. Beneath it peep the child's nose, her mouth and chin. The force of the sink has ejected blood through her nose and sprayed it downwards, like some joke-shop trick gone wrong. Her mouth is stretched back. I imagine that the weight of the sink caused the skin or muscle to pull backwards. What I'm looking at is simple mechanics, not an expression of feeling. Yet humans are humans and what looks like a smile is interpreted as a smile, even if it's no such thing, and this girl with the top of

her head missing is smiling at me. Smiling out of death, at me.

'Poor little bleeder.'

The coffee-breathed speaker behind me is Jim Davis, a veteran copper, in uniform for most of his time on the force and now a sturdily reliable DS.

'Yes, poor little girl.'

The room is full now. Fourteen of us, including just three women. At this stage of an investigation, these briefings have an odd, jumpy energy. There's anger and grittiness on the one hand, a kind of remorseless male heartiness on the other. And everywhere, people wanting to *do* something.

Eight twenty-eight. DCI Dennis Jackson motors out of his office, jacket already off, sleeves already rolled up. A DI Hughes, Ken Hughes, whom I don't know very well, follows him, looking important.

Jackson gets up front. The room falls silent. I'm standing by the photo wall and feel the presence of that little girl on the side of my face as intensely as I would if it were a real person. More intensely, maybe.

The case is less than twenty-four hours old, but routine enquiries have already thrown up a good pile of facts and suppositions. Jackson goes through them all, speaking without notes. He is possessed by the same jumpy energy that fills the room, snapping off his phrases and throwing them out at us. Iron pellets of information.

No one on the electoral roll registered at that address.

Social Services appear to know the woman and child, however. Final identification is hoped for later in the day, but the woman is almost certain to turn out to be Janet Mancini. Her daughter is April.

Assuming those identifications are confirmed, then the backstory is this. Mancini was twenty-six at the time of her death. The child just six. Mancini's home background was lousy. Given up for adoption. Taken into care. A few foster

families, some of which worked better than others. Started at adult education college. Not bright, but trying to do her best.

Drugs. Pregnancy. The child moving in and out of care, according to whether Mancini or her demons were on top at the time. 'Social Services pretty sure that Mancini was chaotic but not a lunatic.' A grin that was more of a grimace. 'Not a sink-dropper anyway.'

The last contact with Social Services was six weeks back. Mancini had been apparently drug-free. Her flat – not the address where she'd been found, but one in one of the nicer bits of Llanrumney – was reasonably tidy and clean. The child was properly dressed and fed, and was attending school. 'So. Last contact, no problems.'

The next time Social Services come round to visit, Mancini is a no-show. Maybe at her mam's. Maybe somewhere else. Social Services are concerned but not hitting alarm buttons.

'The house where they're found is a squat, obviously. No record of Mancini having any previous connection with it. We've got a statement from the neighbour on one side. Nothing helpful.' Jackson stabbed at the noticeboards. 'It's all there and on Groove. If you haven't got up to speed already, then you should have.' Groove is our project-management and document-sharing system. It works well, but it wouldn't feel like an incident room unless there were noticeboards fluttering with paper.

Jackson then stands back to let Hughes rattle on through other known facts. The evidence from utility bills, police records, phone use. The things that a modern force can acquire almost instantly. He mentions Rattigan's debit card, without making a big thing of it. Then he finishes and Jackson takes over.

'Initial autopsy findings later today, maybe, but we won't have anything definitive for a while. I suggest, however, we proceed on the assumption that the girl was killed by a kitchen

sink.' His first attempt at humour, if you can call it that. 'The mother, OD, possibly. Asphyxiation? Heart attack? Don't yet know.

'Focus of the investigation at this stage is, continue to gather all possible information about the victims. Past. Background. Known associates. Query drug dealing. Query prostitution. House-to-house enquiries. I want to know about anyone who entered that house. I want to know about anyone Mancini met, saw, talked to, anything in those six weeks since Social Services last saw her. Key question: why did Mancini move to that squat? She was drug-free, looking after her kid, doing well. Why did she throw all that away? What made her move?

'Individual assignments here' – meaning the noticeboards – 'and Groove. Any questions, to me. If you can't get hold of me, then to Ken. If you uncover anything important or anything that might be important, let me know straight away, no excuses.'

He nods, checking he hasn't left anything out. He hasn't. Briefings like this, early on in any serious crime investigation, are partly theatre. Any group of coppers will always treat murder as the most serious thing they ever have to deal with, but team dynamics demand a ritual. The Haka of the All Blacks. Celtic woad. Battle music. Jackson puts his weary-but-determined look to one side and puts on his grim-and-resolute one instead.

'We don't yet know if Janet Mancini's death was murder, but we're treating it that way for now. But the girl. She was six years old. Six. Just started at school. Friends. At their Llanrumney flat, the one she left six weeks ago, there were paintings of hers hanging up on the fridge. Clean clothes hanging up in her bedroom. Then this.' He points to the photo of her on the noticeboard, but none of us look at it, because it's already inside our heads. Around the room, the men are clamping their jaws and looking tough. DC Rowland, Bev

Rowland, a good friend of mine, is crying openly.

'Six years old, then this. April Mancini. We're going to find the man who dropped that sink, and we're going to send him to jail for the rest of his life. That's our job. What we're here to do. Now let's get on with it.'

The meeting breaks up. Chatter. A charge for the coffee machine. Too much noise. I grab Bev.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes, I'm fine really. I knew today wasn't going to be a mascara-ey kind of day.'

I laugh. 'What have they got you doing?'

'Door to door mostly. The woman's touch. How about you?'

There's a funny kind of assumption in her answer and her question. The assumption is that I don't quite count as a woman, so I don't quite get the jobs that female DCs are usually assigned. I don't resent that assumption. Bev is the sort to cry when Jackson puts on his gravel-voiced tear-jerker finale. I'm not. Bev is the sort of comfortable soul that people will happily open up to over a cup of tea. I'm not. I mean, I can do the door-to-door stuff. I've done it before and asked the right questions and sometimes obtained valuable information. But Bev is a natural and we both know I'm not.

'I'm mostly on the Brian Penry case. Bank statements and all that. In my spare time, if I stay sane, I'm meant to track down that debit-card thing. Rattigan's card. Funny place for it to show up.'

'Stolen?'

I shake my head. I called the bank yesterday after talking with Brydon and – once I'd managed to clamber through all the bureaucracy to someone who actually had the information – got answers fairly easily. 'Nope. The card was reported lost. It was duly cancelled and a replacement issued. Life goes on. It could literally be just that. He dropped it. Mancini or

whoever picked it up. Kept it as a souvenir.'

'Brendan Rattigan's Platinum card? I would have done.'

'You wouldn't. You'd have handed it in.'

'Well, I know, but if I wasn't the handing-in type.'

I laugh at her. Trying to use the inner workings of Bev Rowland's mind as a model for guessing at the inner workings of Janet Mancini's mind doesn't feel to me like an obvious recipe for success. Bev makes a face at me for laughing, but wants to rush off to the Ladies' so she can sort her face out before hitting the road. I tell her to have a good day, and she says, 'You too.'

As she leaves, I realise that what I said to her wasn't true. Janet Mancini *couldn't* have picked up Rattigan's debit card from the pavement. It wasn't possible. Mancini and Rattigan didn't walk the same streets, didn't go to the same pubs, didn't inhabit the same worlds. The places where Rattigan might have dropped his card were all places that would, explicitly or otherwise, have forbidden Mancini entry.

And as soon as this thought occurs to me, I understand its implication. The two of them knew each other. Not casually. Not by chance. But meaningfully, in some real way. If you asked me to take a bet on it right now, I'd bet that the millionaire killed the drug addict. Not directly, I assume – it's hard to kill someone when you're dead – but indirect killing is still killing.

'I'm going to get you, you fucker,' I say out loud. A secretary looks at me, startled, as she walks past. 'Not you,' I tell her. 'You're not the fucker.'

She gives me a little smile. The sort that you slip the schizo type muttering swearwords in the street, the sort you offer park-bench drunks quarrelling over cider. I don't mind. I'm used to that kind of smile by now. Water. Duck's back. Paddle on.

I head back upstairs.

My desk stares balefully at me, flaunting its cargo of numbers and sheets of paper. I go over to the kitchenette and make myself a peppermint tea. Me and one of the secretaries drink it, no one else. Back to my desk. Another sunny day. Big windows full of air and sunshine. I lower my face over my mug of tea and let my face warm up in the perfumed steam. A thousand boring things to do and one interesting one. I'm reaching for the phone, even as I pull my face away from its steam bath. It takes me a couple of calls to get Charlotte Rattigan's number – widows of the super-wealthy are ex-directory, inevitably – but I get it anyway and make the call.

A woman's voice answers, giving the name of the house, Cefn Mawr House. She sounds every inch the servant, the expensive sort, titanium-plated.

'Hello. My name's Detective Constable Griffiths, calling from the South Wales Police. May I speak with Mrs Rattigan, please?'

Mention of the police causes a moment's hesitation, as it almost always does. Then the training kicks in.

'Detective Constable Griffiths, did you say? May I ask what it's regarding?'

'It's a police matter. I'd prefer to speak to Mrs Rattigan directly.'

'She isn't available right now. Perhaps if I could let her know the issue . . . ?'

I don't really need to see Rattigan's widow in person. Talking to her on the phone would be just fine, but I don't respond well to titanium-plated obstructiveness. It makes me come over all police-forcish.

'That's quite all right. Will she be available for an interview later on today?'

'Look, if you could just let me know the matter at hand . . .'

'I'm calling in connection with a murder inquiry. A routine matter, but it needs to be dealt with. If it's not convenient for

me to come to the house, then perhaps we could arrange for Mrs Rattigan to come down to Cardiff and we can talk to her here.'

I enjoy these little power struggles, stupid as they are. I like them because I win. Within two minutes Titanium Voice has given me an eleven-thirty appointment and directions to the house. I put the phone down, laughing at myself. The return journey will take me an hour and a half, and what could have been a three-minute phone call will end up wasting half my morning.

I spend the next hour and a bit working through Penry's hateful bank statements, lose track of time a bit, then find myself bolting downstairs for my car. It's a white Peugeot Coupé Cabriolet. Two seats. Soft top. High-pressure turbo-charger that gets you from nought to sixty in a shade over eight seconds. Soft leather seats in pale fawn. Alloys. My dad gave me my first car when I got my job three years ago, then insisted on replacing it with the new model this year. It's a totally inappropriate car for a junior detective constable and I love it.

I throw my bag – notebook, pen, purse, phone, dark glasses, make-up, evidence bag – onto the passenger seat and nose out of the car park. Cardiff traffic. Classic FM inside the car, pneumatic drills ripping up the A4161 Newport Road. Carpet stores and discount bed places. Clearer on the A48, the music turned up for the motorway and its views out over Newport – just possibly the ugliest town in the world – before snaking up past Cwmbran towards Penperllini.

Because of the traffic and the roadworks, and because I set off late in the first place, and because I got myself lost in the lanes beyond Penperllini, I'm about twenty-five minutes late when I do manage to find the entrance to Cefn Mawr House. Big stone pillars and fierce yew topiary. Posh and English-feeling. Out of place.

I make the turn and, shades on against the sunlight, I speed up the drive in a stupid attempt to minimise my lateness. A last twist in the way catches me out and I emerge into the large gravelled parking area in front of the house doing about thirty miles an hour, when under ten would have been more appropriate. I brake hard and go for a long, curving slide on the gravel until my speed falls away. I only just manage to stop the engine stalling. A wide spray of ochre dust hangs in the air to mark the manoeuvre. Silent applause. Fi Griffiths, rally driver.

I give myself a few seconds to get my head together. Breathing in, breathing out, concentrating on each breath. My heart's going too fast, but at least I can feel it. These things shouldn't worry me so much, but they do. There shouldn't be such a thing as poverty and starvation, but there is. I wait till I think it's OK, then give it another twenty seconds.

Out of the car. I slam the door closed, but don't blip it locked. On the front steps of the house, there's a woman – Miss Titanium, I presume – watching me. She doesn't look like she likes me.

'DC Griffiths?'

It's DC now, I notice. Miss Titanium doesn't strike me as altogether au fait with CID ranks, so I suspect her of doing some quick research on the Internet. In which case she knows how junior I am.

'Sorry I'm late. Traffic.' I don't know if she witnessed my rally-driving arrival, so I don't apologise for it and she doesn't mention it.

The house is a modest affair. Ten or twelve bedrooms. Immaculate grounds. A leylandii hedge screening what I presume is a tennis court. Further away, a couple of cottages and what I guess is a stable or gym complex. The river Usk flows picturesquely over rocks at the end of a long sweep of lawn. We're only a few miles away from Cwmbran and the old

coal mines that injure the hillsides above. Crumlin, Abercarn, Cwmcarn, Pontywaun. Standing here, with the river Usk parading its party tricks in the sunlight, you'd think you were a million miles away from all that. That's the point, I suppose. What the money is for.

Titanium takes me on through the front door. Inside, everything is as you'd expect. Interior-designed so completely that any trace of human personality vanished along with the Victorian subfloors. Our heels click across limestone in the hall, past vases of fresh flowers and photos of racehorses, through into the kitchen. A huge room, an add-on to the main body of the house. Handmade kitchen furniture in ivory. A range cooker in Wedgwood blue. More flowers. Venetian blinds, sofas and sunlight.

'Mrs Rattigan has been called away on something else, just temporarily. We were expecting you at eleven thirty.'

'Sorry, my fault. I'm happy to wait.'

I say this sincerely. Genuinely sorry. Genuinely happy to wait. Mature of me. Nice person. Trouble is that I'm only being nice because I scared myself a few moments back and can't take any hassle now. For the time being, just sitting in this kitchen listening to my heart beat is enough for me.

Titanium – who gave me her name, along with a limp but elegant hand, at the front of the house – is doing things with the kettle. I try to remember her name and nothing comes to me. I sit at the table and get out my notebook. For a moment I can't even remember why I'm here. Titanium puts coffee down in front of me, as though it's some art object the family has just invested in.

I can't think of anything to say, so say nothing. I blink instead.

'I'll go and see if Mrs Rattigan is ready for you.'

I nod. She goes. Clicks out of the kitchen, through the

hall, to somewhere else. I'm calming down now. I can hear a clock ticking somewhere. The range cooker emits a kind of gentle rushing sound from its flue, like a stream heard a long way away. A few minutes go by, lovely empty minutes, then a woman comes into the kitchen, Titanium in position on her wing.

I stand up.

'Mrs Rattigan, I'm sorry to have been late.'

'Oh, don't worry.'

The Internet has already told me that Mrs Charlotte Frances Rattigan is forty-four. She has two kids, both teenagers. She is a former model. Only the last part of that is obvious from her appearance. A pale grey shirt worn above pale linen trousers and sandals. Shoulder-length blonde hair. Nice skin, not much make-up. Tall, maybe five foot ten, and then an inch or so more from her heels.

She is pretty, of course, but it's not the prettiness that strikes me. There's something ethereal about her. As though it's not just the house missing its Victorian subfloors. I'm immediately interested. I ask Titanium if she would mind giving us a few moments of privacy and, on a look from the boss, she leaves us.

I fix Mrs Rattigan with my firm, DC-ish, professional-quality smile.

'Thank you so much for agreeing to see me, madam. I've just got a few questions. A routine matter, but an important one.'

'That's all right. I understand.'

'I'm afraid that I shall have to ask you some questions about your late husband. I do apologise in advance for any distress that may cause. It's all perfectly routine and—'

She interrupts. 'That's all right. I understand.'

Her voice is soft, a peach without a stone. I hesitate. Nothing whatsoever in this situation calls for me to come over all

hard-edged, but I can't quite resist and I can feel my voice harden.

'Did your husband know a woman called Janet Mancini?'

'My husband . . . ?' She tapers off and shrugs.

'Is that a no or an I don't know?'

Another shrug. 'I mean, not that I know of. Mancini? Janet Mancini?'

'Do either of these addresses mean anything to you?'

I show her my notebook. The first address is where Mancini was found. The second is where she had been living previously.

'No, sorry.'

'This second address here is in Butetown. Were you ever aware of your husband having any business in that area? Visiting people?'

A headshake.

Quantum physics tells you that the act of observation alters reality. The same is true of police interviews. Mrs Rattigan knows that I'm a detective constable assigned to a murder inquiry. There's some absence in her answers that teases me, but that could just be an effect of my job function and my assignment. Titanium's cafetiere of coffee is steaming beside us. Mrs Rattigan hasn't offered it, so I do.

'Would you like coffee? Shall I pour?'

'Oh, yes, please. Sorry.'

I pour out one coffee, not two.

'Won't you have any?' That's the first positive action of any sort she's taken since I've met her, and it hardly rates high on the positivity scale.

'I don't drink caffeine.'

She pulls her cup towards her but doesn't drink from it. 'Good for you. I know I shouldn't.'

'I have a few further questions to ask, madam. Please understand that we want the truth. If your husband did things in

the past that he might not want us to have known about, well, that's all in the past now. It's no longer our concern.'

She nods. Light hazel eyes. Fair eyebrows. I realise that I was wrong about the house. I'm sure it has been interior-designed to within an inch of its life, but the designers caught something real about the person commissioning the work. Pale linen, light hazel, a stoneless peach. That was this house and its owner.

'Did your husband ever take drugs?'

The question jolts her. She shakes her head, looking down and to the left. Her coffee cup is in her right hand. If she's right-handed, then the down-and-to-the-left look suggests some element of construction in her answer.

'Cocaine, maybe? A few lines with business associates?'

She looks at me with relief. 'You know, sometimes. I didn't . . . What he got up to when he was away . . .'

I reassure her. 'No, no, I'm sure you didn't. But loads of business types do, of course. You didn't want it in the house, though, I can see that.'

'You know, there are the children.'

That sounds to me like the comment she made to him when he was still around. Oh, don't do that. It's not me. It's the children. I'm only thinking of you.

I get out the debit card and show it to her.

'This is your husband's, I presume?'

She looks at it, then at me. She doesn't get quite as decisive as a nod, but she gets halfway there.

'The card was reported lost. Do you recall when or where he lost it?'

'No, sorry.'

'Did he ever mention losing it?'

'I don't think so. I mean . . .' She shrugs. When millionaires lose cards, they have people who sort it out. That's what the shrug means, or what it means to me anyway.

‘The card was found at a crime scene in Butetown. Does that make sense to you?’

‘No. No, I’m sorry.’

‘You’re not aware how this card could have come into the possession of Janet Mancini?’

‘Sorry. I’m really not.’

‘Does the name April Mancini mean anything to you?’

‘No.’

‘You are aware that Butetown is a poor part of town? Quite run-down. Rough. Can you think of any reason why your husband might have had business there?’

‘No.’

I’ve come to the end of all the questions I could possibly ask, all the ones I’d have got through on a phone call. I’m repeating myself, even. Yet there’s that absence in the air, teasing me with its scent. It’s not that Mrs Rattigan is lying to me. I know she isn’t. But there’s something there.

I go for it.

‘Just a few more questions,’ I say.

‘Certainly.’

‘Your sex life with your husband. Was it completely normal?’