

# THE STRANGE DEATH OF FIONA GRIFFITHS

*A novel*

Harry Bingham

“They say there is nothing new under the sun . . . I have to say that in a lifetime of reading crime fiction I have never come across anyone quite like Fiona Griffiths . . . Read this book. Enjoy every syllable. Hold your breath, and tick off the weeks until the next one.” — *CrimeFictionLover.com*

## The Fiona Griffiths series: What the critics say

“Bingham’s superb second police procedural featuring Det. Constable Fiona Griffiths delivers an even more intense plot and richer character study than his first.” — PUBLISHERS WEEKLY  
(*starred review*)

“Intense . . . Bingham’s remote, unquenchable heroine makes her stand apart from every one of her procedural brothers and sisters.” — KIRKUS REVIEWS

“The most startling protagonist in modern crime fiction. . . Brutal, freakish and totally original.”  
— SUNDAY TIMES OF LONDON

“A dark delight.” — WASHINGTON POST

“This compelling crime novel . . . A new crime talent to treasure.” — DAILY MAIL

“What sets the book apart is the first-person narration of Fi, one of the most intriguing female characters in recent fiction . . . This book is so good it has you wondering who should play Fiona on the big screen.” — KIRKUS REVIEWS (*Starred review*)

“This is on one level an orthodox, if expertly-written, police procedural. But the character of Fiona lifts it to an altogether different, extraordinary level. She is childlike, brilliant, courageous and utterly loopy all at the same time – as well as devastatingly real and human and alone. She’ll haunt you long after you finish this book, and send you scurrying to find what else Bingham has written.” — YORK PRESS

“Think Stieg Larsson’s Lisbeth Salander . . . Denise Mina’s ‘Paddy’ Meehan [or] Lee Child’s Jack Reacher. . . . The writing is terrific.” — THE BOSTON GLOBE (*Chosen as a crime book of the year*)

“This gem of a crime story.” — NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

“A stunner with precision plotting, an unusual setting, and a deeply complex protagonist . . . Breathtaking.” — SEATTLE TIMES (*Chosen as a crime book of the year*)

“Riveting . . . has winner written all over it . . . An edgy, totally unsettling read.” — LIBRARY JOURNAL (*Starred review*)

## *The Strange Death of Fiona Griffiths*: What you say

“Fiona Griffiths may be the most fascinating protagonist in fiction . . . This is definitely one of my very favorite thriller series. I love this character and I hope I have the chance to read many more. Harry Bingham is a genius and one hell of a writer.” — *Audrey, Amazon.com, Top 500 Reviewer*

“The most gripping crime novel I have read, maybe ever . . . DON’T read *The Strange Death* if you have a weak heart, unless you are bent on suicide by thriller.” — *Peter J. Earle, Amazon.com*

“I love this series so much. This is the third book, and it’s just as strong as the first two. The story was much more intense, though . . . The writing is so vivid, you feel every moment . . . [Fiona is] one of the most fascinating and eccentric characters I’ve ever read. I’m already dying for the next book.” — *Dulcinea, Amazon.com*

“Impossibly gripping.” — *T.D. Dawson, Amazon.co.uk, Top 1000 Reviewer*

# The Strange Death of Fiona Griffiths

## 1.

### September 2011

I like the police force. I like its rules, its structures. I like the fact that, most of the time, we are on the side of ordinary people. Sorting out their road accidents and petty thefts. Preventing violence, keeping order. In the words of our bland but truthful corporate slogan, we're Keeping South Wales Safe. That's a task worth doing and one I enjoy. Only, *Gott im Himmel*, the job can be tedious.

Right now, I'm sitting in a cramped little office above the stockroom at a furniture superstore on the Newport Road. I'm here with a Detective Sergeant, Huw Bowen, recently transferred from Swansea. A finance guy from Swindon is shoving spreadsheets at me and looking at me with pained, watery eyes. We have been here forty minutes.

Bowen takes the topmost spreadsheet and runs a thick finger across it. It comprises a column of names, a row of months, a block of numbers.

'So these are the payments?' says Bowen.

'*Correct.*'

The finance guy from Swindon wears a plastic security pass clipped to his jacket pocket. Kevin Tildesley.

'So all these people have been paid all these amounts?'

'*Correct.*'

'Tax deducted, national insurance, everything?'

'Yes. *Exactly.*'

The only window in the office looks out over the shop floor itself. We're up on the top story, so we're on a level with the fluorescent lighting and what seems like miles of silver ducting. The superstore version of heaven.

Bowen still hasn't got it. He's a nice guy, but he's as good with numbers as I am at singing opera.

I bite down onto my thumb, hard enough to give myself a little blue ledge of pain. I let my mind rest on that ledge, while the scenario in front of me plays itself out. I'm theoretically here to take notes, but my pad is mostly blank.

'And these are all employees? Contracts in place? Bank accounts in order? Anything else, I don't know ... pension plans and all that?'

'Yes. They are all contracted employees. We have their contracts. Their bank details. Their addresses. Everything. But two of the people – these two,' he says, circling two names on the spreadsheet, 'these two don't actually exist.'

Bowen stares at him.

His mouth says nothing. His eyes say, 'So *why*. The *fuck*. Were you *paying* them?'

Kevin starts to get into the detail. Again.

He tries to puff his chest out to take control of this interview, but he doesn't have much chest to puff. The room smells of body odor.

Anyway. We go round again. The Kevin and Huw show.

Payroll is handled centrally but data is entered locally. Head office routinely 'audits' local payroll data, but what Kevin means by that is simply that the entire company's data is fed into a computer program that looks for implausible or impossible results. The two phantom names – Adele Gibson and Hayley Morgan – didn't ring any alarm bells.

'So, for example,' Kevin tells us, 'if we find multiple payroll entries that share the same address or the same bank account, we'd be very suspicious. Ditto, if there are no deductions being made for tax or if overtime claims seem unnaturally high. So basically, we've *done* an audit-quality data check.'

His voice is high and pressured. I realize that he's worried about his own job. He's the Head Office guy who was meant to make sure this kind of thing didn't happen. And here it is: having happened. The fraud only came to light when the superstore got an enquiry from the bank of one of the recipients.

I ask how much money has been lost.

Kevin starts to answer. His voice catches. He drinks water from a bottle. Then, 'Thirty-eight thousand pounds. Over two financial years.'

Bowen and I look at each other. Steal £38,000 and you're looking at a two-year prison sentence, give or take. It's too big a fraud for us to ignore, but I can already see Bowen wondering how he can dodge this one. Give him a good bit of Grievous Bodily Harm or a nice little Assault With Intent, and Bowen is your man. Give him an investigation full of spreadsheets and people with plastic badges called Kevin from Swindon and Bowen, big man that he is, looks pale with fear. This shouldn't really even be our case. Huw and I are both attached to Major Crimes, and this case is strictly Fraud Squad. Only there's a sad lack of violent death in South Wales at the moment, while our colleagues in Fraud keep on getting sick or taking jobs in the private sector.

So we're here, with Kevin. A stack of manila folders sits on the desk in front of him. The personnel files for this branch. All of them. Current employees, past employees, temporary and part-time staff. Everyone.

Bowen looks at them. He looks at me.

Kevin looks at us both and says, 'These are copies. For you.'

# 2.

Bowen and I fight. I lose.

Neither of us wanted to take the case. Bowen, because he's terrified someone will ask him to add up. Me, because people always want to chuck the paperwork-heavy cases my way and I spend my life trying to avoid them.

I'd hoped that because Bowen was, in Cardiff terms, a newbie, I might just have the edge in this particular turf war. Shows how little I know. Bowen is older than me, senior to me, is a man, drinks beer and used to play rugby, and all those things count for more than anything I can muster. Bowen is assigned to a simple little manslaughter case – no investigative depth, the likely perpetrator already in custody, but still: a proper crime and a proper corpse – and I get to play with Kevin from Swindon.

When I complained, DI Owen Dunwoody, who gave me the assignment, told me to think of it as a good career-case. 'Not particularly fun, but very solvable. Good promotion fodder.'

When I complained again, Dunwoody said, 'We all have to do things we don't enjoy.'

When I complained again, Dunwoody said, 'Fiona, just do your bloody job.'

So here I am, up on Fair oak Road, doing my bloody job. A brisk day with a shiver of rain.

The place I need, a brick-built block of flats, lies opposite the cemetery. Would offer one of the best views in Cardiff except that the houses here choose to turn their backs on the dead, offering up garages and back gardens to the graveyard, instead of facing it front on.

I park off-street, in a resident's bay. A cluster of grey plastic bins watches disapprovingly.

Flat 2E. Mrs. Adele Gibson.

Kevin isn't quite right to say that Adele Gibson doesn't exist. She does. She may or may not have helped sell cut-price faux-leather sofas in a superstore on the Newport Road, but she exists all right. Council tax. Electoral roll. Phone.

I ring her bell.

Nothing.

Ring it again. Keep the buzzer pressed down for twenty seconds, but nada, nothing.

I'm about to start trying other bells in the block, when a car enters the car park and stops. A blue Citroën Berlingo, with its nearside trim missing. A man gets out, opens the back and starts fussing with a ramp. An electric wheelchair hums out backwards. Cerebral palsy, I guess, seeing the woman in the chair. Fortyish. Clean hair.

The man closes the car. The pair approach the house.

‘Adele Gibson?’ I ask the woman. ‘I’m looking for a Mrs. Gibson.’

‘Not me,’ says the woman.

The man opens the front door, but doesn’t want to let me inside. ‘A security thing,’ he says.

I show him my warrant card. ‘A police thing,’ I say.

The woman who isn’t Adele Gibson enjoys her minder’s comeuppance.

The corridors inside are wide and there’s a lift, even though the block is only three stories high. Laminated fire notices in large text and bright colors.

‘This is sheltered housing, is it?’ I ask. ‘Are there staff on site?’

The man gives me the answers. Yes and no respectively. It’s a council-owned facility designed to be disability friendly, but intended for residents who can live semi-independently.

The woman hums off down the corridor, the man following on behind. A smell of curry.

Upstairs. Knock on the door at 2E. Nothing.

I call Jon Breakell in the office. He’s the other poor sod who’s been lumbered with this case. I ask him to contact social services, find out what the deal is with Adele Gibson. He says OK and asks if I’m coming back for lunch.

I’m not. The furniture company’s other phantom lives up in Blaengwynfi, in the country above Aberkenfig. Jon says he’ll call me when he gets something.

I’m in a bad mood as I start the drive, but the miles and the mountains start to soften my ill temper. There’s something about these mining towns – the cramped valleys and injured mountains – which feels truthful to me, more truthful than anything you can find in Cardiff.

Bracken on the hills. Water flashing white and silver in the streams.

Buzzards.

The cottage in Blaengwynfi stands above the main village, up on the hill. An asphalt road runs as far as a small line of four new brick houses, then gives up. A cattle grid marks the boundary to the open hill and an dirt driveway runs the remaining two hundred yards to the cottage. Crushed rock for the tire tracks, grass growing freely in between. Sheep wander across the road.

I drive up to the cottage.

It’s small. Probably just two bedrooms. Green painted front door. A modest effort at a garden. Low stone wall keeping the sheep off. No lights.

A red Toyota Corolla sits outside a wooden garage next to the house. Water barrel. Wood shed.



There's no bell so I knock at the door. Wait long enough that I'm within my rights to peer through all the windows, but I don't see anything much. Net curtains in what I think must be the kitchen. There's a smell, like that of a manure heap, only not as sweet, not as grassy.

Drive back to the little group of four houses lower down the hill. Knock on a couple of doors until I find a neighbor. Ask about Hayley Morgan. The woman I ask looks blank, until I point up at the cottage, then says what people say when they don't know the people they live next to. 'Oh, Mrs. Morgan, keeps herself to herself really. Doesn't cause any trouble.'

I can feel her curiosity tugging at me, like a kite on a string.

I don't give her what she wants. Knock on the two other doors. Get another don't-know-don't-care from a mother who has a ciggy in her mouth and a TV on loud in the front room.

I'm just heading back into the valley when my phone bleeps with a text. I was probably out of signal higher up. Jon Breakell. BIT WEIRD. CALL ME.

I call him.

'Oh hey, Fi. Look, I just got off the phone with social services. There's been some problem with Adele Gibson's bank account. Money's been going into it from the furniture place but it's gone straight out again. That's been going on for a while apparently, some sort of bank cock-up, but just recently, the last eight weeks, *all* the money has gone out. Social security money. Disability living allowance. Whatever. Anything that's been paid into the account has gone straight out again.'

'Gone where?'

'Don't know. The payments are made out to a T.M. Baron. I'm trying to trace him now.'

Jon starts telling me what he's doing with social services and how he's going to trace T.M. Baron, but I cut him off. 'Later.'

Drive back up the hill. Fast, springs protesting at the potholes.

I'm a city girl but I've spent enough time on my Aunt Gwyn's farm to know the smell of manure, and that wasn't manure. At the cottage I knock again for form's sake but I'm already looking for a rock. Try to slide one out from the garden wall. I don't manage but I do find one erupting, like an oversized molar, from the muddy verge beyond.

Wrench it out. Heave it through the living room window. Reach through the broken glass for the catch. Open the window, sweep the worst of the glass off the shelf and slide myself inside, taking a pair of latex gloves from the car before I do.

The smell is stronger here. Definite. It's like the smell you get from chicken left too long in the fridge. A smell that combines the damp meatiness of mushrooms, the gamey quality of hung fowl, the choking quality of ammonia. All that, only intensified. Compacted.

The living room has two armchairs – blue, velvet covered, old – and some thin cotton curtains. Some books. A TV. Fireplace.

The standby lamp on the TV is not illuminated. Gloves on, I flick a light switch. Nothing happens. An old-fashioned phone on a side table, but no dialing tone when I lift the receiver.

Go through to the kitchen, passing a tiny hall, flagstones on the floor, wooden stairs leading up. Mail, too much of it, by the door.

The whole house is cold.

Hayley Morgan lies in her kitchen.

She looks tiny, frail. Like a thing flung, not a person fallen.

She's dressed – grey skirt, blue top, cardigan, fur-lined boots – and wears some make-up. Mid-fifties, at a guess.

She's been dead a while: body flaccid, no lividity. But the smell is the strongest indicator. This kitchen feels no more than ten or twelve degrees now, and it's the middle of the day. Decomposition doesn't happen fast at these low temperatures, but it's already extensive. The smell isn't even just a smell. It has a more physical presence than that. A scent that climbs into your nostrils, occupies your sinuses. It's like a ball of cotton wool, dense and damp, that makes breathing difficult.

I push a window open, though crime-scene procedure would have me touch nothing.

Morgan is terribly thin. There's a sharpness about the way her bones poke from her skin that's somehow agonizing. Like an African famine repainted in Welsh colors.

Some sign of a head injury. Nothing much. I guess she fell, hurt herself, and never got up again.

I start to explore the kitchen.

Look inside the fridge, swing the cupboards open, look in every drawer. The kitchen sink doesn't have cupboards beneath it, just a red gingham curtain on a piece of clothes line.

Cutlery, crockery, pots and pans.

Cling film, sandwich bags, old boiler manuals, oven racks.

Kitchen cleaner, rat poison, dustpan and brush.

But no food. None. Not anywhere.

Not a spillage of breakfast cereal. No tin of fish, no box of cat food, no place where some dried fruit has spilled and never been cleared up. In the dustbin, I find a packet of sugar that has been torn open. Usually with sugar, when you shake an empty packet, it rustles with the glassy tinkle of sugar crystals caught in the folds at the bottom. When you think about it, in fact, it's rare

for any packaging to be completely empty. There's always a little ketchup left in the bottle, a little sauce left in the can.

Not here. The sugar packet looks as if it's been sucked or licked clean. The paper's smooth texture has become fibrous and uneven. Something similar is true of any other food waste I can find.

I shake the packet of rat poison.

It doesn't rattle. It's completely empty.

I leave the house, putting the front door on the latch, and drive down the hill until I get a signal. Call Dunwoody.

'Keeping out of trouble, are you?' he asks.

I don't know what the answer to that is. I'm standing by my car, just below the cattle grid, watching a buzzard test its weight on the winds blowing up from Aberkenfig. Its armaments seem tactless somehow. Excessive.

The bird hovers overhead as Dunwoody repeats his question.

I still don't know how to answer, so I just say 'Yes.'

# 3.

The next thirty minutes are spent with the logistics of death. Get a duty officer up from Neath, the divisional surgeon from Cardiff, a SOCO – scene of the crime officer – up from Swansea. It's Dunwoody's job to do those things really, but I find myself doing most of it. I keep him in the loop, more or less. He promises to come over 'soon as I can'. I ask him to get a full set of phone records from the phone provider. Also bank records. Also any medical and social services records. I'd do it myself except those things are easier to do from the office.

I also speak to Jon Breakell, who says 'T.M. Baron has been traced to an address in Leicester.

'And you're going to tell me that Dunwoody has got some uniforms kicking down the doors.'

'Not exactly, but this kind of changes things, I guess.'

'Just a bit.'

I hang up.

I'm parked just below the cattle grid, but within sight of the open moorland. From where I am, I can count six sheep, but there will be dozens more, roaming the hill, cropping the grass, disturbing the grouse and the pipits, the skylarks and the plovers. There are enough sheep on this hill to feed a family for years. Hayley Morgan died as next season's roast dinner grazed the verge beyond her kitchen window.

There's only one road up to the cottage and when a clean blue Passat noses its way up the road, I travel with it. The Passat discharges one SOCO, Gavin Jones, and a plump Detective Sergeant, who turns out to be Bob Shelton, the duty officer from Neath. Jones has a porn star moustache, sprinkled with grey.

I say, 'You're it? This is the team?'

Jones the SOCO, who clearly knows his colleague socially not just professionally, says, 'Yes, love, this isn't *CSI*.'

I'm thrilled to be called 'love' by anyone with a porn star moustache, but can't help pointing out that the woman inside died via a combination of starvation and poisoning. That we believe her to have been the unwitting accomplice of a complex fraud. And that, actually, crime scene investigation is precisely what this is.

The two men roll their eyes at each other over my head. I'm too prettily feminine to be offended. Just say, 'She's in the kitchen. You can view her from that window.'

Jones looks through the window. Clocks the sight, the smell. And, when it comes to the point, seems reasonably professional. Suits up properly. Gloves and mask. Steps into the house. Doesn't go in far, just enough to view the corpse.

I ask him if he has a spare suit in his car. He does. It's ridiculously large – a man's size, XL – but I put it on anyway. By the time I'm ready to re-enter the house, the fat DS is sitting on the garden wall about to light up.

I say, 'If you're going to have a cigarette, you are not having it there. You haven't secured the back of the house. You haven't checked the garage and parking area. Given that any third party would have arrived by car, those areas form part of the crime scene. DI Dunwoody is on his way over here now and he will expect me to report to him when he gets here.'

I tie off my charm-package with a neat little smile and head on into the house. Jones hasn't moved far. The little front hall commands the living room on the left, the kitchen on the right. He's checking both rooms with a high power ALS lamp, swapping filters to check for biological traces.

'No blood that I can see. Plenty of fingerprints, of course. No drugs showing up. Let's try bright white.'

He removes the filter and swipes the torch around the floors. The cottage isn't the cleanest, and the living room has an open fire which looks like it provided the only heating for that part of the house. Under the torch's glare, every footprint shows up precisely in the dust. The scatter of glass crystals gleams like diamonds.

'That's you?' says Jones, pointing at the footprints which lead from the living room window to the kitchen.

'Yes.'

There are other prints, but small ones, belonging either to a woman or a child. Hayley Morgan, whom we haven't yet approached, was no bigger than me. Jones assesses the dead woman's feet from a distance and looks at the pattern of marks on the living room floor.

'I don't see anything,' he says, meaning male footprints.

'Me neither.'

We both assume any fraudster is a man, though we have no particular reason to think so.

In the corner by the TV, there's a bundle of papers, down with the firelighters and matches. Most of the paper looks like it's there to start a fire with, but there are a couple of soft cardboard document wallets.

'I'd like those, when you can.'

Jones nods and asks me to pass him his camera. He photographs the scene, wide-angle and close up. Photographs the floor. Moves over to the document wallets. Checks them, close up, for biological traces, and nods to indicate that they're clear, as far as he can see.

He gives them to me.

As all that is happening, I'm looking into the kitchen. The smell is still intense, though there's air moving through the house now and I'm standing in the hall by an open door. The more light and air there is in this house, the smaller Morgan seems. A minor detail. A styling accessory.

I take the document wallets, but say, 'What's that?'

The kitchen has a rough, textured plaster. On the wall above an electric night storage heater, someone has scratched away at the plaster, wearing a hole right through to the old-fashioned breeze blocks beneath. There are grooves left in the soft plaster. Jones focuses his torch beam on the area. It's hard to be sure, but the grooves look like tooth marks.

Jones doesn't say anything direct, just, 'We'll know when we examine her mouth.'

'Yes.'

'Those things.' He nods at the exposed block wall. 'They're made of compacted coal ash. Waste materials from a blast furnace. God knows what kind of chemicals in there.'

'Yes.'

He shines the lamp on Morgan's face. Her personality somehow shrinks away under the illumination. Simplifying, reducing. There is dust on her face. The dust might be a combination of plaster and coal ash or it might not. He moves his lamp away and there is something reverential in the way he does it.

I have my documents. He has his camera.

'I'll get on then,' he says.

I don't know how to answer that either, so I just say 'Yes.'

# 4.

Later that evening. We're in an evil little pub near Blaengwynfi. A red carpet, darkly patterned to compete with the beer stains and the ground-in food. Stone benches beneath the windows and a smell of damp. There are four drinkers here apart from us, all men. They attack their pints the way infantrymen march: slowly, knowing that the road ahead is long.

I'm here with Dunwoody, Jon Breakell and Buzz. Buzz – Detective Sergeant David Brydon, as far as my colleagues are concerned – isn't on the inquiry team, but when he was done for the day he cadged a lift out here with a scientific officer from Cathays. He'll drive back into town with me later.

Brydon and I are a fairly public couple now, treated by a unit as our colleagues. We're careful to be properly professional while at the office, but out here, at the end of the day, in a time which might be an after-hours social or might, if Dunwoody is feeling generous, count as formal overtime, those rules are more relaxed. Buzz and I sit side by side on one of the stone benches. He had his arm around me earlier, as a way of showing that he was relaxed. He's removed it now, but I can still feel its phantom weight across my shoulders, the warmth of him down my side.

The table is littered. Bank statements. Phone bills. Water bills. Electricity. Correspondence. Everyone leaves the paperwork to me. Fi Griffiths, the paperwork kid. I don't mind, except when Dunwoody puts his beer down on one of the phone bills, creating a ring mark.

'That's Exhibit A under your beer glass,' I say.

He moves the paper, not the beer.

With Hayley Morgan, it's the same deal as it was with Adele Gibson. For eighteen months she received money from the superstore, but that money vanished again, almost immediately, to an account operated by T.M. Baron. For most of that period, the rest of Morgan's finances were untouched. She had a tiny income, tiny expenses, but she got by. Lived as she chose. Then twelve weeks ago, her account was drained. Every penny that came in was instantly taken. At the end of every day, her account registered a balance of £0.00.

Before long, her phone was cut off. Then her electricity.

I think of Morgan licking the sugar out of an empty packet, in a house gone dark. Think of her looking at the packet of rat poison and thinking, 'How much longer?' Wondering how long it was before she put her head to the wall for the first time wanting to see if plaster dust and breeze block could fill her belly.

‘I don’t understand it, really, not in these small places,’ says Dunwoody. ‘Why wouldn’t she just walk down the hill and ask for food? Or call the police and report a fraud? Or anything?’

Buzz says, ‘Yes, but loads of people die where you could ask the same thing. Last winter, how many thousand pensioners was it died from the cold? All they had to do was phone the gas company or speak to a neighbor, but instead they let themselves freeze. Every year, thousands of people.’

‘That’s true, but still. Why let yourself starve?’

There are a few answers to that, or none. We now know – from medical records and the documents I recovered from the cottage – that Morgan suffered a minor stroke some eight months back. She was assessed as having minor cognitive impairment, but perhaps those assessments were wrong. They sometimes are. She’d had mental-health problems too – depression, mostly – and those things might have returned. And her nearest neighbors weren’t of her kind or class. And, with the death of coal-mining in these areas, none of these communities are what they used to be. And perhaps Morgan had some strange old-fashioned pride around begging. Or thought she’d sort things out with the bank. Or suffered some further stroke. Or had some petty feud with the people in the shop or the health center. Or some combination of all these things and more.

We never finally know the truth, never learn the full map of any crime. Motivations and choices recede endlessly from view.

I don’t say this though. Just read the paperwork as the others chat. Dunwoody looks at his empty beer glass and says, ‘I’d swear I got the first round in.’

Buzz gets up to get more drinks. Breakell can’t drink – he’s driving – and I don’t.

I hold up one of the documents. A letter from social services. ‘She used to get fortnightly care visits. Someone cancelled them.’

‘Who? Morgan?’

‘Well, according to this, yes,’ I say, ‘but this letter is dated June of this year.’

Dunwoody shrugs. His face is pink and the beer has already risen to his eyes. He has a close-trimmed beard, which his mother probably thinks is strawberry-blond. To everyone else, it’s ginger.

‘Maybe Hayley Morgan wrote that letter, cancelling those visits, or maybe she didn’t. Her account was emptied about four days after this letter was sent. Stayed empty, every day after that.’

Buzz comes back with the beers. Dunwoody takes his, but his eyes are on me.

I say, ‘Hayley Morgan died because she was starving. And she was starving because she was robbed. If someone deliberately prevented care visits, in an effort to perpetuate their fraud, you



could argue that that individual recklessly endangered Hayley Morgan's life. That's not payroll fraud. That's manslaughter.'

Dunwoody takes the letter from me, but the letter is not the point. You need three ingredients to make up a constructive manslaughter. First, an unlawful act. Second, an act likely to cause harm to the person affected. Third, death, though neither foreseen nor intended, results. As far as I can see it, we have a big *yes* on points one and three and a slightly more doubtful *yes* to point two. The case law is mostly built on the assumption that the harm-causing act is directly physical in nature. Punching someone in the face in one notable case, or pulling a replica gun on someone with a weak heart in another.

Stealing money and cancelling visits from social workers. Could those things add up to manslaughter? I think they could.

I think they *did*.

'I don't know,' says Dunwoody, 'I'm not sure.' But he hasn't touched his beer and his eyes have lost some of their pinkishness. There's anxiety there too, a rapid lateral movement of the pupils.

Which is good. If Hayley Morgan's death was no more than a nasty accident, Dunwoody has already investigated as rigorously as anyone would expect. If we're looking at a crime which stands only one rung down from murder, he's been sloppy. Slow to get to the scene. Insufficient in his demand for resources. Lazy in supervision.

He pulls out his phone. No signal.

'Sod it.'

He walks out into the car park. Buzz looks at me. This isn't his case. He's part amused by the scene he's just witnessed, part keen to have the last part explained.

'If I were him, I'd be calling my colleagues in Leicester. He should have been on their case from the start.'

Buzz rubs my back and I half close my eyes as I give myself over to the rub. Jon Breakell, feeling like a spare part probably, goes to have a pee.

'We should go on holiday,' Buzz says. 'You and me. Somewhere nice.'

'That would be nice.'

'Get some sun.'

I nod.

'You've got leave, have you?'

I stare at him. I almost never take leave. I do it only when I have to, and then never know what to do with it. That's changed a bit since I've been going out with Buzz. He books holidays,

makes all the arrangements, tells me what to pay him for my share. I've no idea how many days' holiday I have owing. He knows that, I'm sure.

Buzz lets me hang a moment, then grins. 'You've got twenty-three days, including fifteen carried over from last year, and you need to use those or you'll lose 'em.'

'Oh.'

'I thought maybe Greece? Or Turkey? Somewhere still hot enough for beaches and swimming.'

I nod. 'That sounds ...' I'm not sure what I'm meant to say next, so just nod some more, then tuck my head against his shoulder as Jon Breakell returns.

'I'll make the arrangements.'

A little wriggle of emotion escapes from somewhere behind my sternum. An elusive quicksilver flash that I can't identify and that's out of sight before I can pin it out for examination.

I say, 'Don't forget my course.'

I've got a training course coming up. A four-week residential thing in London. Buzz says, 'I won't. We'll go after that.'

His voice twists a bit as he speaks. He doesn't like me going on the course, but doesn't want to rehash that argument now.

Under the table, I knead his thigh.

Then the front door bangs open and Dunwoody enters. A blue twilight briefly framed behind him. Brown hills and white moths, papery in the lamplight.

'Leicestershire police have visited the address.' His voice is throaty. 'A family of eight. A Mr. and Mrs. Desai, his mother and five children. The husband is a hospital porter. Wife is a stay-at-home mum. Oldest child just turned fourteen. No computer present on the property. Two phones, both seized.'

He stops. His face is still in motion, though. He's feeling something, though I'm not sure what or how to describe it. The pressure of great things, perhaps. The responsibility and the fear.

I stretch my legs out. Pushing my toes out and down, feeling the burn in my calves and thighs. Feeling present. Happy.

'Payroll fraud,' I say. 'It's a beautiful thing.'

Enjoy this excerpt? Then get the real deal! *The Strange Death of Fiona Griffiths* is available from [Amazon](#) and other fine stores.