

CHARLOTTE MILLS



FAIR
GAME



CHAPTER 1

HE CREPT UP THE STAIRWELL, his trainers making only soft thuds on the concrete steps as he edged closer to the top. Sleep would have claimed Morris hours ago, but there was no reason to draw attention to himself. Besides, he knew little about the sleep patterns of the old woman in the next-door flat. He didn't like taking unnecessary risks.

He pulled the key he'd fabricated from his pocket, hoping the time spent earlier would pay off. The caretaker had been oblivious to his actions when he'd stopped by Morris's flat the other day. It was amazing what you could do with a lighter and a piece of sticky tape.

The sharp edges of the metal scraped against his skin: in his haste, he had bent the key out of shape.

"Shit!" He clapped his hand over his mouth.

He pressed the key against the wall to flatten it. Sweat clung to the inside of his latex gloves as he took hold of the padlock. Slipping the key into the slot, he held his breath and wiggled the thin metal. His jaw ached as he crushed his teeth together, fearing he would have to resort to plan B—the heavy bolt cutters in his rucksack. He rolled his shoulders as he tried again, jiggling the thin metal. He felt it twist to breaking point under his firm grip.

The padlock snapped open seconds later, preventing any further negative thoughts. He pulled off the lock, removing the key to flatten it again, this time against the door frame. He already had plans to remove the evidence as soon as it had taken effect. He opened the door. Darkness and warm air greeted him. The orange glow from the streetlights below provided some ambient light, but the surface of the roof was lost in the darkness. He

stepped out into the moist air and slipped the padlock between the door and the frame to prevent it from closing on him.

He scanned the roof for the ventilation point he needed and moved towards his target, then pulled the required tool from his rucksack. After removing the screws, some WD-40 along the joint seam eased the release as he pulled off the mounted ventilation turbine. The sharp, scratching squeal stopped him. He remained crouched on the roof, gazing across at the only possible onlookers. Why the fuck couldn't Morris have lived in the other block? He studied each of the third- and fourth-floor windows. Due to the design of the block, only people in two flats could see him. Each window appeared dark; some had blinds or curtains visible, but most of the top-floor windows were black holes against the timber panelling. He clenched his jaw, still angry that his preparation had taken longer than he'd planned. Experiments could be unpredictable; he knew that now. There hadn't been anyone living there two months ago. Now some stupid woman had moved in, creating more complications for him.

Satisfied there was no one watching, he added more release agent. The turbine came off with little resistance. He placed his torch in the ventilation shaft before turning it on. There was the length of wood he'd placed in the shaft earlier. He switched the torch off, placing it next to his rucksack, and slipped on the face mask he'd pulled from his pocket.

The chemical scent of the mask filled his lungs. He removed the large plastic box from his rucksack and placed it carefully on the roof. He'd spent weeks culturing this specimen in the incubator, so he couldn't afford at this stage to damage it. This had to be the only source they would find in the flat. It needed to look like an unfortunate accident, an element of chance that had created this invisible killer. Except he hadn't left it to chance at all; Morris was already showing signs of flu.

He'd been smart in his choice of bacteria. Legionella wasn't common, but it did happen. With the location he had chosen, it was unlikely that anyone else would be affected. To stand any chance of inheriting whatever fortune Morris had hidden away in that dump of a flat, he needed to be totally unconnected to any of this.

He retrieved the fast food container from his bag. The right environment was needed for it to flourish—or at least to look like it had. Lowering it

into position at the bottom of the ventilation shaft, he retrieved the wire and placed it into his bag.

After uncoiling the fishing wire he'd already tied to the metal, he popped the lid. In his experiments, the rusty surface had proven a good medium for the bacteria. He stretched his arms and teased the metal from its watery box. Standing, he carefully lowered the metal plate down the shaft. He fed the fishing line between his fingers, waiting until it settled on a solid surface before grabbing the torch to check its progress.

Content that it had reached its final resting place in the food container, he settled it flat. Morris would get weaker and weaker now, and soon he would struggle to breathe. Morris already had a slight fever, he'd seen it earlier when he dropped off some shopping.

Only a little longer would push him over the edge. Morris had to suffer, and he wanted to watch every minute of it. He'd quickly shelved his hit-and-run idea; Morris didn't deserve to go that swiftly. A warmth filled his chest as he pictured himself telling Morris exactly what he had done, just before the end. Morris needed to see the pain that he himself had felt for so many years.

He snipped the fishing wire and coiled it around his hand before pocketing it. He only needed to add the bacteria-laden water; then he could sit back and watch it unfold.

CHAPTER 2

LEXI RYAN STRETCHED OUT ACROSS the bed, expecting to clash with part of Helen's body at some point, only to be thwarted. Had it all been a dream? She rested on her elbows as she quickly scanned the dimly lit room for anything that would point to Helen's presence. Once her gaze landed on a familiar black coat on the chair in the corner of her bedroom, relief flooded her. For so many nights, she'd dreamt of Helen in this bed. She couldn't face waking up to disappointment again.

It was hard to believe that almost two months had passed since they had met up again. Lately, she'd relapsed into acting like a teenager—living for the weekends when Helen visited. She smiled to herself as she thought about their first meeting all those months ago in Warner. Despite their rocky introduction, they seemed to bring out the best in one another, at least in Lexi's eyes. Impersonating a police officer may not have been the best idea, but her choices were limited at the time. In the end, she'd assisted in apprehending a serial arsonist and a hit-and-run murderer during her stint as DC Kate Wolfe, hadn't she? Although it still didn't make up for the fact that she had also taken a life during her time there.

Richard Jarvis had attempted to grab a knife as he'd barrelled towards her before falling and cracking his head on the floor, but the circumstances made little difference to her. Was he even a victim? Hadn't her sister been the real victim—not to mention all the other children he'd abused during his sick life?

No matter how much she sugar-coated it, the harsh truth was that if she hadn't been there, it would never have happened. Her desire to inflict revenge and face her sister's sexual abuser had been too strong. She could

have persecuted him for months before exposing him if she'd put her mind to it; instead she had gone for shock tactics.

In her panic, as he scrambled towards her, she'd missed the knife entirely. She could never have fought him off—he had been too well built. Her limbs twitched at the thought of having to fight for her life. It could have ended so differently. What if she'd been the one dead on the kitchen floor? Would he have called the police? Would he have got away with it? What about her mother? Who would have been left to look after her then?

Her decision to escape Warner with her freedom had been her only option. But leaving Helen behind was one of the most difficult things she'd ever done. Their last conversation, unsurprisingly, wasn't a great success. She had, after all, cheated her way into Helen's heart. Time was all she could offer. Let the dust settle between them. This gave Helen the upper hand. She could have arrested Lexi if she'd wanted. She had known exactly where Lexi would be in two months' time.

Lexi had almost talked herself out of going, convinced Helen wouldn't be there. The unease in the pit of her stomach when she saw Helen walking towards her on the pier had been like a murmuration of starlings moving around in her stomach. But confessing her feelings had been liberating, and two months of solitude had only clarified her desire for Helen. The fact that they were reciprocated was remarkable.

Helen was the most stunning person she had ever met, let alone dated. Smart, sexy, and with a sense of humour. Not to mention her insatiable sexual appetite, which was currently the reason for the ache in Lexi's body as she stretched again.

This time, Helen had arrived prepared to stay more permanently, especially if she accepted the offer on her house. Would Helen move closer, to Bristol even? Surely that would depend on what job she chose to do. Lexi didn't dare broach that subject yet. She was still processing the news that Helen had left the police force. It had seemed to be a job that fit her perfectly, at least at first. But the personal tragedy of her stepmother dying, not to mention the pressures of the job and the harrowing cases she had worked on in the past, had taken their toll.

After their first night together in that pokey little cottage in Warner, Lexi knew that she would either go to prison for the murder and unlawful disposal of Richard Jarvis or never see the inside of a cell. There was no

grey area with Helen. You were either under her protection or you were her target. Lexi was grateful to not be the latter. Detective Chief Inspector Helen Taylor was tenacious at her job. Ex-DCI Taylor now, of course. Was that something else Lexi had to take responsibility for?

She squinted at the clock in the near darkness. It was almost two a.m. What was Helen doing up? She swung her legs over the side of the bed. A chill from the open window made her pull on her dressing gown before she ambled through her flat. She trailed her fingertips along the wall as she peered into the dark sitting room. No Helen shape was visible. As she stood in the kitchen archway, a silhouetted figure outlined against the large window came into view. From Lexi's position, it was impossible to see which way Helen faced. The glow escaping from the streetlights below provided only a slight orange incandescence.

Leaning against the wall, the narrow room put her at barely an arm's length from Helen. She fumbled for the light switch. On closer scrutiny, she saw that Helen faced the window. She showed no reaction to Lexi's approach. Once again, Lexi was glad she had a top-floor flat. There was nothing else the same height for miles around, which to her meant little need for curtains and the freedom to walk around naked whenever she wanted. Unfortunately, the dark material surrounding Helen told her she had yet to embrace this concept.

"Here you are! You know, Thomas Edison's inventions did make it to these parts."

"No. Don't!" Helen said.

But it was too late. The blinding flash filled the room. Helen shaded her eyes.

"What? Why?"

She shut off the lights and stumbled over to where Helen stood. Her authoritative tone reminded Lexi of the position this woman once held.

Lexi squinted, and flashing blurry lights filled her vision. She had to wait a few seconds for her eyes to readjust to the darkness, but even with her shadowy vision, she could see that Helen had ducked.

* * *

Helen moved her hand from her eyes; she'd managed to shield them just in time. Once she stood again, her focus back on the roof adjacent to

the kitchen, she scanned the area for the figure she'd seen moving around. From the distance and movement, it was impossible to say whether it was a man or a woman. The flashlight they'd been using was still on the ground where they'd left it.

"I've been watching someone on the roof over there." There was no need to point; only the roof was visible from the window. The adjacent building was a storey lower, which made the roof almost level with Lexi's flat. Helen estimated the distance between the buildings to be around ten metres.

She moved closer to the window. Lexi bumped shoulders with her. Helen wasn't sure if it was the result of the darkness or Lexi's annoyance.

As she watched the dimly lit flat roof framed by the kitchen window, Helen struggled to make sense of the dark, blocky shapes. The glow from the street-level lighting made the roof darker. So far, on each of the occasions she had stayed at this flat, she'd paid no notice to her surroundings, her focus on Lexi and little else. But the screeching she'd heard earlier had grabbed her attention.

"If roof people are going to be a regular occurrence, I'll have to curb my nudity, or at least get some nets."

Lexi's fingers searched for hers. They slid home as she clutched at Helen's hand. *Nets, really?* She couldn't see that happening anytime soon.

"What's he doing? Funny time to be adjusting an aerial. Isn't that how that puppet guy Rod Hull died?"

A smile pulled at Helen's lips. She'd truly missed Lexi's wit. "I think it was the fall that killed him." She stood behind Lexi, wrapping an arm around her waist. "I'm impressed you even know who he is."

She slipped her hand under a loosely tied sash, disappointed that Lexi had bothered to dress, even though she had done the same. She deposited a kiss on Lexi's cheek, her eyes still fixed on the roof beyond. The flashlight stayed on the ground. Had they seen the flash from the kitchen light? Were they hiding, biding their time, waiting for them to go back to bed?

"I blame Emu. All those years with Rod's hand up his jaxi, the temptation to give him a nudge must have been too much for him," Lexi said.

Helen continued to scan the roof for any kind of movement. Nothing. "I think you might have scared him off."

“Good. I’m just getting used to this flat. I don’t need any bloody perverts hanging around.”

“Umm.” Helen gripped Lexi a little tighter. People didn’t creep around in the dark unless they had to, which meant the person was probably doing something they shouldn’t.

“You’re so suspicious of everyone. You probably think Jessica Fletcher is a serial killer.”

“You laugh, but she *is* the common denominator every time.” Helen was secretly impressed by Lexi’s premillennium references. She liked how Lexi knew that anything after that would be lost on her. It wasn’t so much the six-year age difference between them; it was more the fact that twenty years on the police force had restricted her familiarity with TV and popular culture unless it was crime related.

Lexi twisted in her arms to face her. “What are you doing up, anyway?”

Her face was in shadow, but Helen could hear the concern in Lexi’s voice. “Couldn’t sleep.” She yawned, making her out to be a total liar.

“Okay.” Lexi took her hand. “Back to bed.”

She led the way back to her bedroom. Once inside, Lexi released Helen’s hand and switched on a small lamp.

Helen scanned the view from the window. The absence of any rooftop beyond prevented her from snapping off the dim light.

“Are you regretting your decision to stay here?”

There were several feet between them, but with those words the distance didn’t feel just physical. “What? Why would you ask me that?” Helen saw the worry in Lexi’s eyes. She stepped closer and rested her hands on Lexi’s waist. “I’m here because I want to be. I want to be with you.”

The fine, wavy lines were still visible on Lexi’s forehead. “You’re not up worrying about it?”

Helen struggled to prevent a grin. “No. My sleep patterns are a bit screwed up. I’ve started taking afternoon naps—”

“Like an old lady.” A smile finally appeared on Lexi’s face, and her shoulders rose at least an inch.

“I don’t remember you complaining earlier.” Helen replied.

“Well, that was earlier. I’ve slept since then. I might need reminding.”

“I see.”

Helen raised an eyebrow as she pulled at the sash of Lexi's dressing gown, slowly loosening the bow. When she glimpsed what lay inside, her body stirred once again, a gentle throb between her thighs. She slipped her hands inside the gown, and they roamed over Lexi's firm flesh, the fingers finding warm breasts, hardened nipples. A glance up revealed that Lexi's lips had parted. Trailing a hand up to Lexi's neck, Helen brought their lips together. She made the kiss deliberately slow, then edged her tongue along Lexi's lips before slowly pushing inside. She knew how to drive Lexi crazy.

Lexi grabbed at her T-shirt.

Helen pulled back. "I love you. You have to trust me."

"I do. It's just the ground has shifted a lot for you lately with your stepmother's death and with leaving your job." Lexi smoothed the front of her shirt. "I love you. I can help. I want to help."

"I know you do. It'll take me a little time to adjust, that's all."

That was certainly true; Helen hadn't been unemployed since leaving school. Even then, she had joined the police cadets while she was at college, biding her time till she reached her eighteenth birthday. For the first time in over twenty years, she had nothing pressing on her mind, no crime sprees to crack, and no plans in place for her future. Her stepmother had been the one constant in life beyond her job. It still surprised her that Julia had had the presence of mind to prepare for it. The property and money she'd kindly left her would see Helen through until she had something in place. Right now, she had no clue where that would take her.

Helen stepped closer. She trailed kisses down the side of Lexi's face, stopping near her ear long enough to whisper. "I only want to be right here with you."

Lexi's response was immediate: her hands latched onto Helen's hips and pulled her closer.

The dressing gown slipped easily from Lexi's shoulders as Helen backed her towards the bed. She locked eyes with her as Lexi settled back onto the sheets. Helen pulled off her own T-shirt and underwear and dropped them onto the floor. She loved seeing the desire in Lexi's eyes as she knelt on the bed and covered Lexi's body with her own. Lexi reached for her. Her kiss was insistent, one that battled her for authority, but Helen wasn't about to give up her position of power so easily.

She pulled away from Lexi's lips but pressed her hot centre against Lexi's hip, releasing a groan at the contact. Ignoring her own desires for now, Helen trailed kisses down Lexi's neck and caressed the soft skin with her fingers. Lexi's body arched into her.

Helen ran her tongue around the hardened nipple, sucking it into her mouth. As the bud brushed against her tongue, she knew exactly what she wanted to do. She caressed Lexi's body and moved further south, tracing the line of her ribs with soft kisses as her fingers circled protruding hip bones.

She settled between those thighs as Lexi brought her knees up along either side of Helen's head and raised her hips slightly. Using her fingers to part Lexi's smooth lips, Helen found the jewel beneath. She couldn't resist blowing a cooling breath over the hot surface.

At Lexi's sharp gasp, Helen looked up into those darkened brown eyes above parted lips before returning to her focus. She flattened her tongue and dragged it from Lexi's entrance to her clit, receiving a groan of approval that made her repeat the action several times before she closed her mouth around the hardening clit. She placed a firm hand on Lexi's stomach in an effort to rein in her lunging hips, then used her tongue to bombard the bundle of nerves.

Her own arousal surged as Lexi's groans and panting increased. The jolt in Lexi's stiffened body told her to increase the pressure. Only moments later, Lexi came hard against her mouth. Her legs collapsed against the bed.

Helen climbed up Lexi's panting body. Lexi's hand circled her neck, guiding their lips together for an urgent kiss, then held Helen in place while she devoured her mouth, as if removing every trace of the juices that coated her lips. Helen settled a leg on either side of Lexi's thigh. Her clit throbbed at the close contact. As she moved her hips against Lexi's body, the intense pleasure flowed through her like a warm shiver.

Lexi slipped a hand between them, and Helen raised herself. Lexi's fingers eased between her lips and pushed inside, filling her as they nudged her G-spot. Straddling Lexi's thigh. Helen focused on her movements as she rode Lexi's fingers, plunging them deep inside her with every drive. Heat radiated from her body as she edged closer and closer to release.

Lexi sat up and stretched her arm around Helen's waist, a support as Helen continued to thrust herself onto Lexi's fingers. Kisses peppered

Helen's chest before Lexi's warm lips latched onto her right nipple, tugging at the sensitive bud and sending Helen over the edge. The quake ripped through her body. Lexi softly kissed her cheek as Helen slowly regained control of her limbs.

"I love you," Helen whispered against Lexi's shoulder.

CHAPTER 3

“GOD, WHERE DID THE LAST couple of days go?” Lexi rubbed her face, not yet ready for the day ahead. She rolled over, burying herself against Helen’s back, the warmth of her body making it even more difficult to even consider getting up.

“Maybe you should phone in sick.”

“What?” Lexi looked up, breathing in the floral scent from Helen’s hair. “Who are you, and where is the real Helen Taylor? Have the pod people taken you?”

Helen faced her, smiling. She was obviously enjoying her newfound freedom, to the point of purposely wrong-footing Lexi on a number of occasions over the last couple of days. She very much doubted Helen had taken a day off sick in her life, let alone faked it. When they’d first met, Helen worked around sixty hours a week. She imagined that schedule was slowing down compared to when she was an overworked police officer in Manchester. Right now she was stationary, in more ways than one. This time she decided to ignore it.

Helen’s smile faded. “I have to go back to Warner at some point over the weekend.”

“You do? Why?” She moved her hand across Helen’s body, holding her firmly. She had been looking forward to spending the weekend together.

“The people who are buying my house are cash buyers. They’re pushing for a quick sale, so I need to go and clear out the furniture I want to keep.”

Panic rose in her throat. “You’re coming back, though, right?”

A frown appeared on Helen’s face. “Of course. Don’t you want me to?”

She held Helen's gaze. "You'd bloody better." Her hand gripped Helen's torso a little tighter before she gently grazed her lips over the bare shoulder in front of her.

"Should only be for a couple of days. I need to sort out a few things, pick up some more clothes."

It sounded permanent, giving Lexi more confidence. "Maybe I could come with you, help out."

Helen glanced at her for a moment, a serious expression on her sleepy face. "Is that wise? What if someone sees you?"

Lexi turned to lie on her back. She knew Helen was right, but she didn't have to like it. Impersonating a police officer in a small town, then leaving the officer's dead body to be found in a house fire pretty much burnt her bridges on returning to Warner anytime soon. "What are you going to do today?"

"I don't know. Do you need me to do anything?"

"Nope." This change to instant domesticity had been a little weird at first, but she was certainly growing accustomed to the benefits. She turned on her side again. Stretching out an arm, she wrapped it around Helen's waist, pulling their bodies closer. "I do have Netflix." She grinned at Helen. "Do you know what that is?"

She managed to scramble to her feet to escape the slap that was coming her way. Escaping the bedroom, she quickly headed for the kitchen, offering to make some tea as she left the room.

Lexi stood in the kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil. She'd probably viewed this man-made landscape countless times since moving in two months ago. Having not seen anyone on the adjacent roof in all that time, she struggled to understand why someone would be clambering around in the middle of the night now. She wandered into the sitting room. Opening a cupboard, she dug around for something that might occupy Helen for at least some of the day.

The kettle clicked off, focusing her attention on her own day. Even though she'd only worked at the internet firm Shield Securities for a few months, it was the perfect job for a geeky hacker. From mostly "grey hat" to "white hat" in one job change—not bad. No doubt she'd spend most of the rest of the day running more checks on the new encryption software

they were working on. As she returned to the kitchen, she checked the clock on the wall. She only had twenty minutes before she had to leave for work.

Tea made, Lexi walked back to the bedroom. She deposited a kiss on Helen's lips before she took her tea into the bathroom. Once she was showered and refreshed, Lexi moved back to the bedroom to dress, ready to leave. "There's a couple of good documentaries on Netflix, *Making a Murderer* and there's a drama about the Unabomber. I'm sure you'll find something to watch."

"If only I knew how to use a remote control; it's been so long."

As Helen lay in her bed, an eyebrow raised in challenge. She rose to it. "Don't tell me—you used to change channels by clapping your hands when you were a child." She recalled her uncle David's old-fashioned TV with the unceremoniously named "clacker" remote control. "My uncle had one that used sound waves to change the channel, the remote looked a bit like a dog thingy they use for clicker training. I used to constantly annoy my sister by clapping to turn off her favourite programmes whenever we went to his house."

"Is this kind of ageist attack going to be a regular occurrence, do you think?"

It was only a six-year age gap, but Lexi couldn't help exaggerating. From what she knew of Helen so far, there were few floors to pick up on. She had to start somewhere. "Probably. And it's not so much ageist as Ludditeist." Lexi caught Helen's grin as she stepped closer and took a seat on the side of the bed next to her reclining figure. She leant forward, placing a soft kiss on Helen's lips, then pulled back, she turned her body to pull open the bedside drawer. Her hand rummaged for the item she sought in the small space. "Here's your key for the flat. I've written the door code down for you too in case you want to go out. Help yourself to anything you want. I should be back around six."

"Don't work too hard." Helen said with a little too much glee in her voice.

Lexi spun around when she got to the doorway, filled with jealousy that Helen had another lazy day ahead of her. "I've left you something on the kitchen table you might find interesting if you get super bored."

* * *

Lexi strolled into the open-plan office, coffee in hand. She could hear two of her colleagues griping about Gordon Lingard. To be fair, he was the perfect target—an IT manager without a great deal of expertise in IT. He was merely a people manager, a shepherd of the office environment, nothing more. And the boss was always a perfect target.

“I’m telling you, it’s classic Putt’s Law: he knows nothing about what we actually do every day.” Roman continued to mumble as he took his seat in front of his computer.

Lingard bashing had become a regular talking point in the office.

“More like the *Dilbert* principle if you ask me,” Lewis offered from across the room.

“What’s that?” Lexi asked as she neared her desk. Had they really taken the time to create yet another label for their inadequate boss? They had way too much time on their hands.

Lewis perched on the edge of his desk, facing Lexi. “It’s where the least competent people are promoted to middle management in a company in order to limit the damage they’re capable of doing.”

“Okay.” Lexi shrugged, hoping for more information.

“In Lingard’s case, it’s more like who you know, not what you know. He used to be one of us out here in the pit.” Lewis raised his arm as if surveying the land of the office. “But where one of us would be dropped like a hen in a fox house if we fucked up, he was promoted further up the chain in less than a year of being here.”

“How do you know all this?” Lexi sat forward in her chair.

“A friend of mine used to work here before me said Lingard didn’t have a clue, and that his uncle on the management board got him the job. But he fucked up one too many times. They had to find him a new job where he could do less damage. They cleared out every one of the coders and programmers like us, and started with a clean slate.”

“Dropped out of college, didn’t even finish his degree,” John chipped in.

“No shit!” Lexi flopped back into her seat. At least that explained why they disliked him so much.

“At least you graduated, Ryan,” John offered.

“And you have some experience, even a little brush with the boys in blue.” Roman turned towards them.

To an outsider, they probably sounded like they hated each other, but Lexi had acclimated to their harsh conversations. They were only minor blowouts. No grudges were ever held for long. “You checked me out?” she asked, purposely sounding incredulous. The jab about the police was unwelcome, regardless of her juvenile status at the time of her arrest. She’d made sure that would never happen again. Still, she was annoyed. She thought she’d fitted in pretty well considering what she was running from in Warner. Her team obviously didn’t take any chances on new colleagues anymore.

“Like you haven’t done the same to us.”

Shit. Lexi pursed her lips. “Maybe a little,” she lied. She knew pretty much every detail of their lives. It had been too tempting to pass up when she’d first started there. “Do you really leave that webcam on every day to watch your dog?”

Lewis’s face reddened with embarrassment as Roman sniggered at her words, which only seemed to annoy Lewis more.

“He gets depressed. I need to keep an eye on him. At least I don’t set booby traps to spy on my own mother,” he fired back, his eyes locked on Roman’s head.

The guilt Lexi felt soon dissipated. “What?” She laughed; this was getting juicy now.

“He has a motion-sensitive camera that clicks on when someone goes in his room,” John clarified.

“Thank you, Jean-Claude.”

Lexi grinned. The moment she’d first seen John’s unfortunate actual Christian name on her screen, she’d figured his parents were big fans of the action movie star.

“Yeah, well, at least I don’t still live with my mother,” John replied, sounding defensive.

“Why wouldn’t I? She cooks, cleans, washes my clothes. You’re the crazy ones.” Roman blindly waved his hand around the office.

He really was a sexist pig in so many ways. The office fell into silence as everyone settled in at their workstations. Lexi was grateful the spat had ended; they had to work together after all. Not that any of them appeared to carry any resentment. They seemed to have the collective conscience of

psychopaths. Apart from Lewis. The way he cared for his dog's mental state was kind of sweet.

"Where were you last week, anyway?" John changed the subject.

"I worked from home on Friday." Largely due to Helen's surprise visit on Thursday night. Not that she actually did any work. It was a good job Lingard was a shit boss. "I was helping a friend. They're moving in for a while." *At least I hope she is.*

"Man or woman?" Roman didn't even look up from his screen.

"What?" The question confused her.

"Man or woman, your friend who's moved in?"

"Woman."

"Ryan, Ryan, Ryan. When will you see that men are the future?"

Lexi smiled to herself. Roman had a super-sized superiority complex too. *Men might be in your future but not mine.* "When will you understand, Roman? A woman brought you into the world, and this one can just as easily take you out."

"Burnt," Lewis called from across the room.

Lexi settled at her desk. She tapped at the keyboard, bringing up the Bitblocker programme she'd been working on before taking time off. She felt bad if she had been the instigator of that little blowout. She couldn't be sure. She picked up her bag, rummaging around till her fingers found what she was looking for, then stood, quietly making her way across the room. "Hey." She hovered next to Lewis's desk, waiting for him to look up. "Sorry about your dog." She placed a Ruffle bar on his desk, subtly pushing it towards him like it was contraband.

Lewis smiled at her. "Don't worry about it. I used to be able to bring him to work with me, but Lingard won't let me anymore. So I like to keep an eye on him when he's on his own."

Lexi had always wanted a dog as a child. She wondered what Helen would think about that little addition to their home. *Whoa, one thing at a time. She's only just got here. Give her a chance to settle in.*

She scolded herself all the way back to her desk.

* * *

Curiosity eventually got the better of Helen, and she dragged herself from the comfort of Lexi's bed. She was unable to be quite as free and easy

as Lexi and dressed in a T-shirt and shorts she found in a drawer opposite the bed.

She wandered into the kitchen to make a cup of tea, leaning back against the worktop she saw the binoculars Lexi had left for her on the kitchen table. Why hadn't she produced these earlier? Helen plucked them from the table as she stepped towards the window, training them on the adjacent roof. She searched the area where she thought the torch had been—nothing. Whoever had been out there had had ample time to tidy up. Helen thought back to what she'd seen two nights ago, tried to picture exactly where the figure had been moving around. In the daylight, it seemed so different. There were several ventilation turbines and large grey boxes. She supposed they could be air conditioning and electrical units for the building. The only way onto the roof seemed to be via a door on the right-hand side. The large, blocky shape must have been a stairwell next to the lift shaft. With only a low ridge around the outside, it would be easy to fall.

She could take a look around the roof of the building she was in. They looked to be the same design, only one floor different. Maybe then she could figure out what the man was doing up there in the first place.

Jesus, she wasn't a copper anymore. Whatever the man did in his own time wasn't any of her business, was it?

Placing the binoculars back on the table, Helen tried distracting herself by making a sandwich. She moved to the sitting room to make herself at home in front of Lexi's large wall-mounted TV. After several failed attempts, she eventually got Netflix up and running. Settling for Lexi's first recommendation, she sat back and relaxed.

The jangle of keys woke Helen from her hazy nap. She wiped at her mouth in case she'd been drooling again. She adjusted her slumped position on the sofa to sit up a little straighter, moving the blanket to cover her lower half. She crossed her legs at the ankle as they stretched out onto the coffee table in front of her. The TV was still on. She couldn't be sure how much she'd missed of the latest episode of this particularly frustrating programme; she was in a Netflix fog.

Footsteps quickly followed as Lexi strolled into the room. "Hey. How was your day?"

"How have you not smashed up your TV watching this?" Helen immediately replied as the arrogant police officer reappeared on the screen.

“What?” Lexi removed her messenger bag. She craned her neck towards the flat-screen TV fixed to the wall opposite the sofa. “What are you watching?”

“*Making a Murderer*,” Helen said with annoyance, considering Lexi had suggested it before leaving for work this morning.

“Oh. Yeah. Maybe not one for you, considering your background.”

Lexi removed her jacket and threw it over the armchair. She pulled off her work ID, dropping it on top of her jacket.

“How was *your* day?” she offered as she caught sight of the ID hanging from the black lanyard. “You shouldn’t really wear that outside of work. Everyone can see who you are.”

“Huh.” Lexi’s face scrunched up and looked confused until she seemed to have spotted the object of Helen’s distaste. “Yes, Guv,” she said with a grin and made her way closer. She knelt on the sofa next to Helen. Their bodies brushed together. Helen raised an eyebrow, following Lexi’s every move.

Reaching for Helen, she placed a soft kiss on her lips. “So, any more roof action to report?”

“Nope. Nothing. And thank you for the binoculars. Good day?” she asked again. She still hadn’t received an answer.

Lexi settled next to her. “Not bad. So, what exactly have you got on under that blanket?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out.”

“Really?” Lexi quickly snaked a hand underneath the blanket, her hand finding Helen’s thigh and quickly moving higher, skirting the hem of her shorts as she leaned closer. Her lips created a warm sensation in Helen’s stomach as they trailed up her neck, slowly making their way towards hers. Helen parted her lips almost immediately, welcoming the intimacy as fingertips moved up the inside of her thigh. The mild rumble emanating from Helen’s stomach halted Lexi’s fingers at the crease at the top of her thigh.

“Hungry?” Lexi offered with a grin.

“Starving.” She’d barely bothered with her lunch; lounging around gave her little appetite. But now that she was awake, she was ravenous.

“I picked up a pizza on my way home.”

“Sounds good.”

Lexi climbed off the sofa. She faced Helen as she pulled her to her feet. Helen followed close behind as Lexi led the way through the flat.

“It’s not homemade, I’m afraid. But what it lacks in quality, it makes up for in quantity.” Lexi pulled the large sloppy joe from a shopping bag on the kitchen table.

Helen swallowed down her guilt for not pushing harder to cook for them tonight. Her vague offer when she’d texted Lexi earlier had been met with a *Got it covered no problem* reply. “I think you might need a bigger oven,” she said eyeing the pizza’s enormous size.

“We just need to be a bit creative, that’s all.”

Her stomach grumbled again as she watched Lexi fold up the edges a little so it would fit into the oven. Glancing at the instructions, she saw the cooking time. “Fourteen minutes on gas mark seven.”

“Fuck! Fourteen minutes, I’m so hungry.” Lexi grabbed up the egg timer, wrenching the top section to the required time before thumping it back on the worktop. “Wine?”

Instead of answering, Helen posed a suggestion of her own. “I’m sure I can think of something to occupy your mind for the next fourteen minutes.”

Lexi grinned. “Trust me, my mind is already filled with the things I’m going to do to you as soon as my basic needs are met.”

“I see.” Helen stepped closer. She pressed Lexi against the cabinets and work surface, her hands circling her hips as she nuzzled up against her neck. The familiar flowery scent, mixed with sun-warmed skin, filled her lungs as a gentle heat began between her thighs. Lexi’s hand cupped the side of her face, she drew back to look into Lexi’s darkened brown eyes for a moment before leaning forward to capture her lips. Helen let her hand fall between them as her fingers traced the seam of Lexi’s trousers below the zipper. When Lexi’s lips parted, she continued to draw lazy circles on the front of her clothing. Helen knew exactly how to distract her.

“Okay. Okay. Ground rules.” Lexi held her at arm’s length. “No touching below the waist until we’ve eaten.”

“What?” Helen missed the contact, forcing reluctant concession. “I’d forgotten how militant you can be about food.” But Lexi continued to hold her at bay. “Okay.” Helen finally relented with a grin. But she wasn’t about to let Lexi off the hook quite so easily.

Helen kept her hands firmly around Lexi's waist this time as she pressed Lexi back against the worktop again. She slipped a knee between her thighs and struggled to keep the grin from her lips as Lexi pulled back and looked at her again with an accusing air.

"What? You said 'no hands.'"

* * *

With her appetite sated for the time being, Helen placed her empty plate on the coffee table in front of them.

"There's more if you're still hungry." Lexi placed her plate alongside Helen's. Pushing them both further back, she then stretched out her legs, propping her sock-covered feet onto the edge of the table.

"Not for me, thanks." She pulled Lexi's hand into her lap, stroking the back of it with her thumb. It was all the encouragement Lexi needed as she turned on her side, snuggling up to Helen.

"You're quiet. What's on your mind?" Lexi asked.

Hub. Had she been that obvious? Before she could put her words in order, Lexi beat her to it.

"The roof guy?"

"Well, we don't know whether it was a man or woman, do we?" *Yet.* "Whoever was out there has removed all traces of whatever they were doing."

"Which was what?" Lexi asked without changing position.

"I'm not sure yet."

"*Yet.* You know you're retired—right?"

"I do." Helen pulled away enough to look Lexi in the eye. "It's just—there was definitely something going on out there." It was too suspicious. If it was so innocent, why were they doing whatever they were doing in the dead of night?

Lexi regarded her, a slight amused-looking grin tugging at her lips. "What?"

"Still always on duty," Lexi said with a chuckle.

Ignoring the remark, she asked her question. "Do you know how to get onto your roof?"

"Why?" Lexi frowned at her.

"I want to take a look around, see if I can figure out what they were doing out there."

“There’s a caretaker guy you could ask, I met him when I first moved in. I’ve got his number somewhere.”

“Thanks.” That would be a last resort; for all she knew it was him out there that night. Helen pulled Lexi closer as her gaze travelled back to the TV screen.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

FAIR GAME

BY CHARLOTTE MILLS