



CHARLOTTE MILLS



PAYBACK

PROLOGUE

RYAN TURNED THE WHEEL, TAKING the car from the well-worn service route through the woodland. The expensive suspension quickly sprang into action as the vehicle crawled through rougher terrain, cutting the headlights leaving only sidelights to light the way. The discreet markers left earlier soon came into view, revealing a snaking route through the trees, up the gentle slope, and towards the steep drop beyond. It wasn't meant to be like this. Two days of fear and panic, interspersed with the occasional rational thought, had led to this particular restored woodland. According to local websites, its exposed location kept residents away.

Work gloves went on over latex-covered hands. Tired eyes took a moment to adjust to the moonlight. The earthy scent and rustling sounds of the canopy overhead swaying in the gentle breeze drowned out all other noise. Sticks that had marked the car's route were removed. Loose soil and forest debris were easily kicked over the holes and tyre marks. The spade had been previously acquired from a stranger's unlocked shed, to be returned later to prevent any unnecessary attention.

Walking to the selected spot, away from some of the larger pine trees, Ryan began clearing an area of forest floor. Digging a hole occupied the mind, and focus and concentration were required in this darkness, lit only by an emergency head torch. A wandering mind could easily arrive at guilt.

The various layers of clothing were sweat-inducing, but removing any might lead to accidentally leaving evidence behind in the darkness.

Take nothing but memories, leave nothing but footprints. The long-forgotten quote suddenly came to mind. In this situation, however, Ryan wanted neither.

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When the hole had reached shoulder height, the spade came flying out. Ryan followed it, then took a deep breath to prepare for the next step. The breeze had dropped, creating a painful eerie silence.

It was a short walk to the car. A lift of the boot revealed a form wrapped in plastic. In one long heave, gravity brought it to the floor with a muffled thud. Dragging the carcass to the hole was demanding on already strained muscles. The smooth plastic was difficult to grip with gloves, though it did ease the friction with the ground as it edged closer to what would be its final resting place. Ryan took a moment to stand up straight, stretching out body kinks that had formed during the strenuous process.

Grasping one end of the plastic caused the contents to shift and roll, revealing a figure slumped onto the forest floor. Dead eyes stared up into the night sky, their expression one of nonchalance, an indication how this man had lived his selfish life. Gathering the plastic, Ryan's eye was drawn to the ring finger on the man's left hand as it sagged across his chest. Glinting in the moonlight, the distinguished design of the ring was a harsh reminder of the devastation he had caused years earlier.

Thank God the bastard owned a vehicle large enough to fit both a body and a folding bicycle. Although the lengthy ride home would not be fun, it was the safest option. A sturdy boot shove was not quite enough to persuade the body to turn over into its earthy compartment below, so Ryan crouched down, rearranging the limbs into the recovery position, a small smile emerging at the irony as the figure rolled and disappeared out of sight.

Darkness made it impossible to see the dishevelled body that now lay at the base of the cavity, but Ryan flicked on the head torch again, the need for confirmation taking over. The bastard's arms had flailed during the fall, his face now covered by a forearm. The degree of satisfaction that pervaded Ryan's mind was sadly short-lived.

The screeching of car tyres nearby provoked an uncontrollable wave of panic, of hands shaking, of mentally preparing for cold metal cuffs slipping on limp wrists. A silence followed. Ryan stayed frozen to the spot, expectant ears waiting for the rumble of footsteps and voices that never came. A muffled whistle sounded, and the sound of crunching gears mixed with the sharp noise of a gunned engine brought some relief as a car sped off into the distance.

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Ryan stumbled downhill towards the dry-stone wall edging the woodland, the desire to make sure the coast was clear taking over. From the protective darkness of the trees, it was possible to survey the road from the high banking. There was no sound or movement. A small sense of relief filtered through, until a dark shape on the road suddenly appeared in Ryan's cone of vision.

It had to be a deer. Moving to the wall to get a better look, Ryan instead found vague facial features waiting, visible in the moonlight but still not clear enough. The figure's position was right for neither an animal, nor a human out for an evening stroll. Scaling the wall and moving closer made it finally possible for Ryan to hear it: the infectious beat emanating from the prone human's earphones.

An unconscious woman dressed in running gear. Crouching, Ryan was unable to look at her face while removing a work glove to check for a pulse. Nothing. Bile threatened to emerge. Ryan stood bolt upright, head upturned to the sky in an attempt to prevent it, concentrating on a particular flickering star in the night sky until focus returned.

CHAPTER 1

ROUSED SLOWLY AWAKE FROM HER slumber, she barely recognised the noise that had woken her before she grabbed the offending article from the makeshift nightstand. It was still dark as she fumbled with the touchscreen.

“Hello,” she mumbled into the phone.

“DC Kate Wolfe?” The male voice on the other end had a caffeine-induced sharpness to it.

“Yes.” Her mind came into focus.

“DCI Taylor has requested you at a scene; the address is—”

“What? I don’t officially start till next week!”

“Don’t kill the messenger. It’s 14 Morley Lane, on the outskirts of Warner.”

The phone disconnected in her ear. Kicking off the duvet, she scrambled for the lamp switch, knocking the *Blackstone’s Police Manual* to the floor. She dug around in the box next to her for a pen and envelope to write the address she’d just been given. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, she tried to recall the information she’d compiled on her new boss.

Detective Chief Inspector Helen Taylor had worked in Manchester CID until seven years ago. She’d made a name for herself working several high-profile murder cases and one child abduction. Being a city girl herself, it made no sense to her why anyone would want to transfer to a back-of-beyond town like Warner. Not that it wasn’t picturesque in its own way, but it wasn’t the city life she was used to.

Close to the borders of Cheshire and Shropshire, Warner had a population of barely six-and-a-half-thousand people. It sat in the shadow of

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the Craven and Pendle Hills. The natural resources of the surrounding area had dictated the industries of the town, with mines providing materials for salt glazing in the potteries; a limestone quarry supplied local and national construction projects.

New developments had increased the size of the town in the 1960s to house the growing working population; new industrial estates were part of the new build, further expanding small business and commerce of the area.

Although the town still held a regular market day, some of the vibrancy had faded in recent years. Younger residents had moved away for study or work, reluctant to return. Dairy farming and cheese making continued to thrive in the area.

The address was easy to find—with a little help from the trusty satnav—although the flashing blue lights from the fire engines were a beacon in the darkness. While there had been no information on the call-out, it was pretty obvious from the presence of the firemen finishing the damping-down process that the call was a house fire.

Morley Lane was a short row of detached, cottage-type houses. The opposite side of the road looked barren in the darkness. The houses either overlooked a fantastic view across the countryside or a piece of wasteland filled with fly-tipped waste; it was difficult to see in the darkness.

She parked up in the nearest available space, then pulled a pair of latex gloves from the overstuffed glovebox before getting out of her lukewarm car. The cold chill was an unwelcome shock to the system as she made her way to the police tape.

Her path was cut off by a burly uniformed officer.

“No entry, I’m afraid. Are you a resident?” His thick Welsh accent was lyrical as he spoke.

Holding up her warrant card, she said, “DC Kate Wolfe.” She watched him squint at her identification before pulling out a pen.

“Sorry. I didn’t recognise you. Are you new?”

“Yes, on secondment from London.” *And I can’t wait to leave this two-bit dump.*

“PC Davies.” He almost offered his hand, exposing his good manners. She glared at him; he offered her the clipboard instead.

“What can you tell me?” She started filling in her name on the scene report sheet.

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“The house has been empty for over a year. Neighbour called it in just after 2 a.m. That’s the fire investigations officer over there.”

He pointed towards a darkened figure half sitting in his car under the intermittent blue lights. It looked like he was writing on his lap. Pulling the notebook from her pocket, she used the clipboard for support as she made notes on the page where she had already scribbled the Morley Lane address.

The house was at the end of a row, so there were only neighbours on one side.

“Residents around?” she asked, spotting the illuminated windows at the front of the adjacent house as she handed back the clipboard.

“Gone back inside, I think,” the officer said in his sing-song voice. “No answer from the next one along. Neighbours think they might be away.”

“Name?” she asked, pointing to the illuminated house.

“Goode, Mr and Mrs Goode.”

Making a quick note before ducking under the tape, she headed for the dark figure that PC Davies had pointed out.

“Excuse me, are you in charge?” Holding her credentials in front of her like a shield to avoid a repeat of earlier, she offered them for inspection.

The fire officer looked up from his paperwork, giving her identification barely a side glance before starting his tirade. “No entry till the scene has been secured.” His voice was harsh; he was obviously as happy as she was at being called out at three o’clock in the morning. He stood up and turned to face her. The white embroidered name on his jacket was difficult to make out in the low light: *Graham Brown, Fire Investigations Officer*.

He took off his safety helmet and laid it on the passenger seat. “The body’s still inside, and will be, until we’re sure it’s safe.”

“Body?” she repeated, trying to reign in the shock. The voice on the phone hadn’t said anything about a body.

“Yes.” His voice still held the dismissive, almost exasperated tone.

He looked tired and dishevelled as the blue lights illuminated his thinning hairline. Knowing the house was meant to be empty, she racked her brain, trying to recall what she knew about fires and arsonists.

“Any trace of accelerants?”

Graham Brown looked up from his notes as if weighing up how much to tell her. Feeling the scrutiny of his stare as he looked her up and down, she felt like the last ice lolly in the desert. She was quickly forming an

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opinion of Fire Officer Brown. "You're Richards's replacement." It sounded like a statement rather than a question.

She nodded her confirmation as the cold wind blew up her collar. She didn't have time to shoot the breeze right now, or ever.

He ploughed on, ignoring her lack of interest as he leaned against the side of his car. "Where are you from?"

Releasing a long breath as she moved her feet to keep warm, she prepared herself for the expected response. "London."

Graham Brown didn't disappoint, offering a raised eyebrow nod, as if the *Big Smoke* was another country, which in many ways it was to this particular town. His mildly relaxed demeanour seemed to evaporate before her eyes as he went back to all business.

"Fire started in the front room but spread up the stairs and into the back of the house. Petrol was used to start it. There are quite a few broken and empty bottles around the place... Could have been used to transport the accelerant, but we need to do some tests. Could just be kids, or vandalism."

She made notes as he spoke. "The house wasn't occupied. Which room's the body in?"

"Back room downstairs. There's a lot of damage to the rest of the house. What furniture was there was pushed together to make more fuel. No back door; it probably went up pretty quickly."

Suspected arson. She knew little of arson crimes, but what she did know was that the scene was deteriorating all the time, evidence being compromised by endless firemen traipsing through the house. With each physical step, they were making it impossible to find out what had actually happened and to bring the case to justice.

"Okay." Looking around for the scenes of crime officers, she expected to see a van, at least. They probably had to travel from a larger station, being out in the sticks. "How long till we can get inside?" she asked. She planned a visit to the neighbours to get out of the cold in the meantime.

"When it's safe." His irritated tone had returned. Maybe he realised that her only interest was the information he had.

"How soon?" she pushed, unflustered by his brash tone. She wasn't here to make friends; she was here to do her job.

"When it's safe," he repeated before turning his back to her, signalling the end of their conversation.

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He focused on his paperwork once more. She figured Brown wasn't going to be any more forthcoming and headed off for the neighbour's house. Walking down the path to the front door, she saw the curtain twitch several times. She took a perverse pleasure in stabbing the doorbell, even though she could hear footsteps approaching on the other side. She pictured Brown's face beneath her finger.

As the door opened, she held up her warrant card. "Mrs Goode, I'm DC Kate Wolfe. Can I talk to you for a moment?"

The smell of stale sweat and cooking grease that invaded her nostrils was intense, making her use her forefinger and thumb to pinch them together.

The large, mature woman in the doorway was dressed in several layers, topped off with a bright-pink, fluffy dressing gown tied in the middle that emphasised her hourglass figure. Her once-matching slippers had now turned a shade of grey.

"Sure! Come on in." Standing back from the door, she continued, "Call me Gloria."

Caught between the icy cold and the warm house filled with stench, she wasn't quite sure how to proceed. "I don't want to impose."

"Don't be silly. You must be freezing."

Reluctantly, she stepped into the house. Her nostrils immediately responded with a series of leg-wobbling sneezes. "Jesus!"

"See? That cold air's bad for your chest. Got a cold coming, ain't you?" Gloria led the way into what looked like a sitting room at the front of the house.

Was she fucking serious? What about the air in here? She managed to keep a lid on it, her attention taken by a sausage dog heading towards her, his back end held in a harness with miniature bicycle wheels on either side of his body. He looked like a badly mended toy.

The dim light of the room made it look dingy. One wall was taken up by a long patterned sofa, facing the mock fireplace with a gas fire turned on low. An armchair nearby looked placed to suck up most of the heat. Shelving flanked either side of the fireplace each one filled with knick-knacks and books stacked horizontally.

"Tea?" Gloria offered.

The thought of having to spend any more time than necessary in this house made her feel a little sick. "No. Thank you." Manners maintained,

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she fired her first question in the hope that she would be back out in the fresh air as soon as possible. "You made the emergency call?"

Gloria Goode looked to be in her late fifties. Her hair had a Molly Sugden bouffant look about it, although it was flattened on one side, giving her a bedhead.

Gloria shoved her hands in her dressing gown pockets. "My husband did. He was up, saw the smoke and flames, called 999."

"The house has been empty for some time. Have you seen anything suspicious in the area lately?" Glancing down, she saw the broken dog sniffing at her boots.

"No. Don't think so." Gloria followed the detective's gaze. "Buddy, leave her alone. She's not come to see you."

"What about your..." She sneezed again. "Excuse me. Sorry. Husband?"

Gloria grinned at the young woman in front of her. "He had to go back to bed. He's ill. He hasn't said anything to me."

Aware of the ungodly hour, she relented. "Okay. Thank you, Mrs Goode." Quickly scribbling her name and number on a blank sheet of notepaper before tearing it off and holding it out, she said, "We may have to talk to your husband at some point, but if you think of anything else, please give me a call."

Gloria pocketed the piece of paper without even looking at it.

"I'll let you get back to bed." She made her way to the front door, happy to escape the persistent smell assaulting her sinuses.

"Not much chance of that with all this going on," Gloria said, taking hold of the door as the detective passed through it.

"Good job you're not in a terrace," she said, looking on the bright side, then realising that it was exactly the situation she lived in.

"I guess," Gloria said.

She felt eyes on her as she walked down the path until she was back along the road. The front of the damaged house was dark in contrast to the neighbours'. The front door was intact, but the large window had broken at some point, and dark, sooty stains covered the edges of the jagged glass. The upper floor had fared worse. Windows were blackened, although they were not broken. But the roof had a gaping hole, and the black smoke was escaping, intermittently lit by the blue lights.

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As she approached the scene, she noticed a path to one side. It looked as if it led off into fields at the back of the row of houses. Turning on her phone torch, she could see a tall fence enclosing the garden. It seemed odd, considering there was little chance of being overlooked from nearby houses. This type of fence was expected in a cramped city, but surely out here you'd want to see the views of the countryside. Maybe the darkness hid an ugly view yet to be seen.

The large gate at the side of the building was wide open. From her position on the path, she could see the relatively small outside space at the back of the house, no doubt referred to as a "spacious, established garden" by an unscrupulous estate agent. Edging along the path, she could see a gaping black hole in the back of the building. The back door had been smashed in at some point. Graham Brown's words came back to her: the door was already open; vandalism was a possibility.

Flashlights began moving around inside as three firefighters made their way outside, carrying axes and large metal rods.

She took her phone out of her pocket and pretended to check on something as they made their way to the front of the house. Securing the scene was one of the most important aspects of police work; compromised evidence was no good to anyone. Taking her chance, she hurried through the gate, hesitating for a second as she approached the sooty doorway, almost overcome by the smoky, acrid smell that filled her lungs. She pulled the sleeve of her jacket to cover her nose and mouth before carefully making her way inside. The sound of dripping water in the dank room set her mind on edge; it felt like being underground.

She tapped the flashlight on her phone and began moving around what looked like a relatively small room. In one corner, she could see a doorway leading to the front of the house. She leant to one side and aimed her phone at the floor to prevent being seen. The flashing blue lights of a fire engine shone through a smoke-tinted broken window. The voices of the firefighters drifted through as the lights glared off the dripping walls.

Speed was of the essence if she didn't want to be seen; they could be back at any minute. Flicking on the camera option, she began videoing the scene around her. Once-decorated walls were now obscured with smoke damage. Partially visible, flowery wallpaper appeared along one wall as the flashlight danced along the surface. Panning around the room, she could see

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it was almost empty and moved to the internal wall separating the two main rooms downstairs. A number of boxes were stacked along the length. They looked damaged, but not extensively; partial words were still visible. It was the only place the body could be. She moved the light to the floor to avoid stepping on any debris or evidence; the last thing she needed was to trash the scene. Swallowing hard, she moved closer to the boxes, not knowing what she was going to find behind them. Dead bodies were something she'd seen before, but not charred remains. She prayed her stomach could take it.

Focusing on the screen, she hoped it would put some distance between her and whatever was there. Tilting the phone, the top of a dirty skirting board came into view, followed by a dark shape. It took a second for the image to come into focus. Sweeping the camera down helped put the form into context. Coal-covered legs filled the small screen. It wasn't clear how charred the legs were until patches of patterned material became visible below what looked like the knees. The legs were bent as if the figure were lying on its side. Further down, several layers of coloured thick socks were visible, as was a large boot on one foot; the other foot was covered by only a dark-green sock. She scanned around. The other boot wasn't in the immediate area.

Edging along the row of boxes, moving the camera along the body, she let the torso slip into view. It too was partially charred, the large dark coat still visible on one side, flapping open to the floor. One arm, the right, was trailing behind the torso; the other one looked like it was tucked under the body itself. The thick coat gave the figure a bulky look. She swallowed hard as she got close to the head and the shoulder came into view. She was expecting the worst but released a breath when she realised the hood was up, covering most of the head, saving her from that particular horror. What was visible was partially featureless as it faced the wall.

The images of smoke inhalation victims that she'd seen had not prepared her for this. They'd looked asleep for the most part.

She was just about to pan around the room once more to check the area around the body when she heard footsteps coming towards her.

"What the fuck! What are you doing in here? It hasn't been secured yet."

The gruff voice made her jump. Turning, she saw a large fireman with a metal prop in his gloved hand. It took her a moment to realise it was

Officer Brown from earlier. His coloured safety hat gave him away in the darkened room.

She resisted asking him what he was doing in there too, if it was that dangerous. "I'm documenting the scene in case it deteriorates. It's evidence!" Her frustration was apparent in her voice, even to her.

"I don't give a shit about that. Out now!" Brown replied with just as much vigour.

Glaring at him didn't seem to be getting her anywhere, though curiously, his eyes seemed to get further apart the angrier he got. "Just one minute," she spat in his direction.

"No! Now!"

He rushed across the room towards her, pushing her towards the door. He must have slipped as his full weight slammed against her, pushing her against the back wall of the room. For a moment, she thought the roof was caving in as debris began falling around them. The rod that he had been carrying smashed against her hip as he fell on top of her, sending a shockwave of pain along her hip bone. He seemed to be up on his feet in a split second as he pulled her out the back door with him.

"Are you fucking stupid or something? I said it wasn't cleared yet." He almost screamed in her face.

"Hey, it wasn't me that smashed up the place," she replied with equal venom.

Two other fire officers arrived on the scene, no doubt drawn by the noise and angry voices. Outnumbered, she backed away, not wanting to escalate the situation any more. Walking away triggered a shooting pain in her hip as she moved. Negotiating her way through the firefighters and their equipment, she felt their attention on her. Looking down at her clothes, she quickly tried to brush away the evidence of being found in a fire-damaged house.

Realising she wouldn't be able to enter the scene anytime soon, she hobbled back to her car. She was going to get the bollocking of her life for damaging the scene, whether it was her fault or not. The DCI wouldn't care. *Great first day, I'll probably get kicked off the case, sent back to London. Maybe not so bad after all.* She could quite happily get in her car and leave this place far behind her.

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She arrived at her car, realising she didn't even know where the station was from here. As she let out a long breath and relaxed back against the headrest, a car passing by made her look up. Another patrol car. *Relief for Davies?* She watched as the officer got out of the car and chatted with Davies for a few minutes before handing him the keys to the patrol car.

Lowering her window, she waited for the police car to get closer before sticking her hand out to get the officer's attention, waiting until the patrol car stopped parallel with her own. "Are you going back to the station?"

He nodded with a smile.

Great. "I'll follow you."

* * *

Warner Police Station turned out to be a spacious, old-fashioned manor house set back from the main street as if it had once been surrounded by open land until the addition of modern roads had cut across the estate. Approaching the front of the building, she gingerly walked up stone steps through an ornate, carved archway. The inside was a little disappointing, crudely modernised to keep up with current policing requirements. Florescent strip lights replaced ornamental chandeliers, exposing every mismatched moulding or clumsily installed partition wall. After she had introduced herself to him, the desk sergeant furnished her with a swipe card that allowed her to access various parts of the building. She figured he was the one that had had the pleasure of calling her earlier, pulling her from her warm bed. Formalities over, he placed a call for someone to take her up to the offices.

PC Davies had apparently drawn the short straw once again, since he appeared through the security door. He rattled off a quick tour of the station before depositing her at a desk in a large open-plan office. She took in her surroundings: the office was empty of workers but full of desks, filing cabinets, and overstuffed folders. This would be her home-away-from-home, at least for the next six months. She saw a small office on one side of the room. She could just about read the name on the plaque: *DCI Helen Taylor*. With a bit of luck, she'd have a few hours to prepare for that confrontation.

Switching on the computer, she started work on her report.

CHAPTER 2

DCI HELEN TAYLOR ENTERED THE large room housing her small team of officers. A hushed silence greeted her; not surprising after this morning's events. She briskly pushed open her office door and, a few moments later, the sound of the metal blind clattering in complaint broke the awkward silence.

Throwing her coat on the nearest chair, Helen fished out her mobile which had been silently ringing for the last ten minutes. She scanned the caller ID—Graham Brown again—then rummaged through the stacks of files on her desk, looking for DC Kate Wolfe's personnel file. It had been Mike's last job to provide her with the details of his replacement. She continued to sift through files. What do they call it—baby brain or something equally derogatory—when pregnant women get forgetful? No doubt Mike would say he had it by proxy. She immediately felt guilty when the file appeared in front of her.

Figuring she'd made Brown wait long enough, she finally accepted the call.

"Taylor. What's up, Graham?" she asked as she scanned Wolfe's file.

"You need to pull your new *officer* in line!"

Helen immediately took umbrage with his attitude and emphasis on *officer*.

"You mean my *acting* DS?" she asked loudly as she looked out through the blind at the large office beyond hers. A head bobbed up at her words. A head that belonged to a figure she vaguely recognised from Kate Wolfe's file was hunched over Mike's desk. Helen slumped back into her chair, looking up at the grubby tiles that made up the suspended ceiling of her tiny office.

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“She’s fucking crazy; running into a fire-damaged building before it’s cleared...”

Graham’s voice was full of bluster; maybe she should have taken the call sooner. She took a deep breath. It was going to be a very long six months.

Mike Richards had probably been the best DS she had ever worked with, reliable, and trustworthy. It had taken years to mould him just to the right shape; now he was a new father taking six months leave. Why couldn’t she get another Mike instead of some crazy hothead?

“I don’t know what to tell you. She’s new...from London.” She hoped that might go some way to explaining her actions. She closed her eyes to block out his whining voice, waiting for him to take a breath so she could respond, “Well, they breed them thick-skinned down there. Must be all the knife crime. Save money on stab vests or something.”

From her seated position, she could only see the top half of DC Wolfe’s profile; the rest was hidden by a filing cabinet. There was still a smudge of soot on her forehead. Nobody had bothered to tell her. *She needs a nickname*. Helen thumbed through Kate Wolfe’s file again while she listened to Graham droning on in her ear. She’d already had a blow-by-blow account of the events at the scene via the desk sergeant on her way in.

She responded quickly to his silence, hoping he had finally run out of steam or maybe had a coronary, which he was surely heading for sooner or later.

“I know, I know. She’s a bit wild...I’ll reign her in, okay? Send me a copy of your report as soon as it’s ready. And say hello to your lovely wife for me.” Helen grinned at her own words, not waiting for a response as she ended the call. From her desk, she could see heads immediately bobbing down, pretending to be knee-deep in work. The veil of tiredness engulfed her again. The last few days had taken their toll on her energy levels. She struggled to understand how someone else’s sickness could make her so tired.

Pushing away from her desk, she got to her feet and walked into the main office. She stopped at Mike’s desk, resisting the urge to lean on it, to crowd her new officer. Instead she stood back, keeping her voice just loud enough for everyone to get the gist of her disappointment. “Well, *Virginia*, you’ve already made quite an impression with the Fire Department.”

She watched as the young woman looked around the room in confusion before looking up to meet her gaze.

“Sorry.”

The attractiveness of her new detective surprised Helen; the photograph on her file didn't do her justice. She felt the weight of Wolfe's stare as large brown eyes focused on her. They looked like perfectly formed chocolate drops, the same shade as her ponytailed hair. Her oval face looked flush with embarrassment, with more sooty smudges on her left cheek, like a child that had wiped at a snotty nose. The sight warmed her heart, and she resisted holding up a hand to clean off the dirty marks. Just.

“Don't worry, I've got your back. Brown's had a bug up his rear end since his wife left him three months ago.”

Helen moved closer. She rested a hand on Mike's desk, remembering she needed to establish some authority over this rogue officer.

“Everyone gets *one* free pass...” she said, and lowered her voice as she locked eyes with Kate. “Next time I'll cut you off at the knees. Clear?”

Kate's throat twitched as she swallowed hard, like she was trying to swallow unwanted chewing gum. “Yes, DCI Taylor. Sorry.”

Bollocking over for now, Helen made a start on the task at hand. “So, there was no ID found on the body, right?”

“That's right...”

Helen looked back at Kate, expecting an end to the sentence she'd started so confidently.

“Ma'am.”

Helen gave her a second look to make sure she wasn't taking the piss before continuing. “Well, let's see this film you risked your life to shoot at the scene, as it's a little more inaccessible right now.”

Helen watched with a little too much pleasure as Kate fumbled to plug her phone into the cable dangling from her computer. Her new detective obviously wasn't a stranger to technology as she quickly pulled up the video. Two uniformed officers made up a small group gathering behind her to view the footage.

The image was a little shaky as it panned around a dark, charred, and smoke-damaged room. The spotlight bounced off puddles of water gathered at the bottom of the wall. Remains of a once-domesticated environment

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were just visible beyond the smoke damage; remnants of partially charred furniture littered the floor on one side.

She tried not to grin as the sound of Kate swearing rumbled from the small speakers next to the computer. The image jolted as she had obviously stumbled over some debris while moving around the fire-ravaged room. The shaky image moved towards a smoky wall. In front was a series of what looked like tea chests creating a dwarf wall. The camera moved closer, peering inside an empty chest before peeking over the top. The figure on the floor was swathed in dark clothing as if hunkered down for a cold night. As the camera travelled down the lower half of the figure, a pair of legs blackened from the knee caps protruded to one side. The image came into focus; partial scraps of clothing became pin-sharp on the screen. The green- and red-checked material passed through the video, followed by one booted foot and then the other, with a thick green sock. *Pyjamas maybe*, Helen thought, although there was something familiar about it.

The image moved back down the body, darkening with every centimetre. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kate look away as a twisted, charred arm came into focus. Helen was glad to see she wasn't comfortable yet with the image of death right in front of her. In her time, she'd attended a number of fire deaths; thank God Smell-O-Vision never really took off.

"Wait, go back a bit," Helen said, moving closer. "There...pause it."

Helen reached out, almost touching the screen. She recognised the pattern. Only a week ago, she'd commented on his particular style to the wearer.

"It's Sandy." she said and rubbed at her face, genuinely saddened by Sandy's demise. She'd known him for years, pretty much since her arrival in the town. He'd become one of her faithful eyes and ears; he saw things others didn't.

"Is it...? Are you sure?" a uniformed officer asked.

Helen glared at him. "He had those trousers on the other day. I remember asking him about them. He nicked them out of the charity clothing bin by the supermarket, said he needed an extra layer."

"Who's Sandy?" Kate's voice piped up.

"He's a homeless guy, a vagrant from the area," Helen replied. She nodded back towards the screen. "Play the rest."

Almost immediately a loud voice boomed through the speakers as Fire Officer Brown entered the room, and the image blurred as Kate turned around with the camera to face him. Once again, Helen noticed Kate cringe at the muffled argument that ensued. Sniggers erupted behind her as the film came to an abrupt end.

Helen stood up straight, hands back on her hips. Turning, she glared at the two uniformed officers. “Right, you two, you find out everything you can about Sandy’s last known whereabouts, friends, et cetera.” She waited until they’d walked away before continuing. “Virginia, can I have a word?” she asked, nodding towards her office.

In her office, Helen retook her seat behind her desk and watched as Kate hesitated a moment before taking the seat opposite.

“Now then, Virginia—”

“Virginia?” Kate enquired.

Helen looked up from Kate’s open file, eyebrows raised at Kate’s tone. “Everyone has a nickname here. You’re a university graduate, I’m sure you can work it out. Mine is Guv. I’m sure there are a lot of alternative names out there, but I only respond to Guv.”

“Yes, Guv.”

Helen responded to the grin on Kate’s face with one of her own. She was relieved to see that she had a sense of humour underneath all that defiance.

“I can’t have you going rogue on me. I need to be able to rely on you.” It was time for the first layer of the shit sandwich she had to serve. “I’ve read your file.” She looked up, seeing Kate shuffle uncomfortably in her seat. “You obviously have a lot of promise according to your last DI. Had a hand in breaking several cases down there.”

Helen raised her voice to a level that the occupants of the outer office could hear.

“We work as a team here in Warner. I need you to be part of that team, Virginia, not upsetting everyone you come into contact with. I don’t want to have to send you back home with *another* blot on your record. Am I making myself clear, Detective?”

Kate nodded.

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Helen studied her new officer for a moment. She looked uncomfortable. She felt a tinge of satisfaction as she sucked in a breath, preparing for the final layer.

“As you’re probably aware, you’re replacing my current DS. So, after looking at your file, I think you have the experience to step up and temporarily become my new acting DS.” She saw the shock on Kate’s face and tried to backpedal a little. “It’s not official, obviously, but think of it as an opportunity to show the boys back down south. Okay?”

“Thank you, Guv. I’ll try not to let you down,”

The dimpled grin facing Helen made her momentarily reflect on the irony of what she’d just done—rewarded bad behaviour. She’d make a terrible dog owner. Shuffling through some files on her desk, she wondered if she’d just made an awful mistake, but shook it off.

“Now, back to the business in hand.”

After selecting the file she was looking for, she handed it over to Kate.

“We’ve had a series of arson attacks in the area over the last seven months or so.”

Kate flicked through the sparse file, scanning the reports and glancing at the glossy photos.

“As you can see, they have been pretty minor, starting with bins, until now.”

Kate met her eyes over the top of the file. “You think this latest fire is an escalation of that?”

Helen raised her eyebrows. “Maybe. It’s a pretty big jump, though.”

Kate nodded. “Most arsonists are generally male, thrill seekers enjoying the chaos that they have created, or small groups of vandals having fun. This doesn’t look like profit or terrorism, more like a serial offender; but this last one, it might not be connected. He was a tramp, right? Maybe he was just trying to keep warm, and it got out of hand.”

Helen had been impressed by her new detective’s knowledge until that last comment.

“Sandy wasn’t daft. He wouldn’t have started a fire with petrol. From your video, it looked like there were plenty of other things to burn to keep warm.”

Kate nodded again, closing the file. She carefully placed it back on Helen’s desk.

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“When you were in there, did you see any sign of a trolley, like a small supermarket trolley, probably full of bags and stuff?”

“Uh...no, I don't think so. Why?”

Helen pursed her lips in response. “He never went anywhere without it.” Rubbing her chin in thought, she knew there was something more going on here. “Maybe there's another scene out there we haven't found yet.”

“You think it's a body dump?” Kate asked.

“Maybe. Okay, send me that video, and then get it to Forensics. And print some images of the room and the body.” Helen made some notes as she spoke. Even with her vast experience of violent crime and death, she found it hard to use Sandy's name when talking about the blackened remains she had seen on the shaky video. He wasn't exactly a friend; more of an acquaintance—someone she would chat to a couple of times a week. He'd chosen an alternative lifestyle, but he'd been a good man. And nobody deserved that.

Focusing her attention back on Kate, she took in the large brown eyes surrounded by a slightly grubby face. “Do you want to go home and clean up before we head out?”

“No. Thanks, I'll be fine.”

Helen shrugged. She obviously needed to be a bit more direct with her new charge.

“Okay. You might want to, er...” she looked away, not wanting to see the embarrassment on Kate's face, “splash a bit of water on your face before we go.”

She saw the colour rise in Kate's cheeks without even looking directly at her. A reputation for insubordination, reckless at crime scenes, and so easy to embarrass: the next six months could be very interesting.

CHAPTER 3

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?”

“First to the house, then we need to look for some of Sandy’s friends.” Helen led the way to the car park.

“Friends?” she asked, almost shocked at the thought that a tramp would have a string of friends and family to call on, and who would need to be informed of his untimely death.

“Yes, Virginia, even people like Sandy had friends. We need to piece together the sequence of events that led to his death,” Helen said, quoting endless police manuals.

She flinched. Great. Now her boss thought she was a heartless bitch on top of being terrible at her job. “Sorry, Guv.” The points she’d scored earlier with her arsonist research wilted before her eyes.

The early morning had taken its toll on her patience. This is not how she wanted her first day to go. She wanted to blend into the background, ride out the next six months until she could return to her real life.

Helen stopped abruptly as they entered the car park, and she almost barrelled into her back. “You can drive, to make up for that last remark.”

Her gaydar was pinging uncontrollably as Helen stared at her. She had come to realise that it was far from the most reliable of her senses, after being pretty sure of the leanings of work colleagues in the past, only for them to talk of boyfriends later. But right now, if her gaydar were a Geiger counter, she’d need ear defenders. She’d always found older women attractive.

Not that Helen Taylor really fell into that category; she didn’t look much older than her own thirty-four years. Her dark hair was loose

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around her shoulders. Dressed in a white shirt tucked into dark-grey suit trousers—ordinary, but she wore them well. The white shirt brought out the marble effect of her skin, and if the black smudges under her eyes were any indication of her tiredness, then she'd definitely been burning the candle at both ends. Her long coat smothered her small frame, gently swaying with her movement. Maybe that explained why she'd been called out instead of her new DI.

Considering her rank, she'd expected the DCI to be much older. Maybe her intrinsic skill had helped her climb through the ranks. Hot and good at her job. *Great. Just great.*

Getting turned on within ten minutes of meeting a woman, well that was something that hadn't happened in quite some time.

* * *

Settling in Kate's car, Helen felt a twinge of amusement as Kate immediately turned on her satnav.

"You won't need that. I'll direct you," Helen said as she pulled a wad of paperwork from one of her numerous inside pockets. She knew she should have offered to drive, with Kate being new to the area, but something told her that Kate needed taking down a peg or two. Helen needed an acting DS that knew her place, not a cocky Londoner who dove headfirst into a scene.

"Right, Guv," Kate hesitantly agreed. "Which way are we going?"

Helen pretended to be engrossed in her paperwork, forcing Kate to get her attention by stepping sharply on the brakes as they stopped at the exit. She kept her voice even. "Take a left out of here, keep going till you reach some traffic lights."

"Okay."

She knew the route to Morley Lane was complicated and decided to have a little fun with it. The traffic lights were around a sharp bend and easily missed if you were not paying attention. She shuffled through her paperwork until a jolt made her look up. The lights were red. She was just about to make a joke about heavy shoes when she noticed they were in the wrong lane.

"We need to go right here," she offered before going back to her paperwork, covering her face with her hand. She could feel the grin on her face.

PAYBACK

“Shit!” Kate barked as she flicked on her indicator to get into the other lane, pissing off several drivers behind her simultaneously.

The road took them to the outskirts of town, and before she knew it, they were in the countryside, flanked by dry-stone walls with muddy fields beyond, on both sides. The rougher road made it more difficult for her to focus on the reports she was trying to read. She’d never been a particularly good traveller, endlessly travel-sick as a child. Now karma was paying her back for tormenting Kate.

She focused on a stand of trees on the horizon. Kate slowed the car down as they came up behind a tractor and trailer taking up three-quarters of the road. Helen smiled at Kate’s obvious frustration as she tailgated it instead of sensibly backing off like a normal person. The car was so close to the trailer, it forced Kate to swerve across to the other side of the road to see if the road beyond was free to overtake.

“Fuck!” Kate blurted out as an oncoming four-by-four quickly came into view. She turned the wheel quickly and slammed on the brakes.

Helen grabbed for the roof handle as the car swerved back behind the tractor.

“Jesus Christ, Virginia! Did you learn to drive with the Banana Splits?” She held in a laugh as Kate ducked when the driver of the four-by-four passed them and blasted the horn.

“Stupid bloody tractor taking over the whole fucking road!” Kate shouted.

“Get used to it, Virginia. You’re in the country now.” She looked across at Kate: her jaw was as tight as a drum; in fact, it twitched a couple of times. Maybe she’d pushed her too far—Kate’s white knuckles were gripping the steering wheel. To her relief, they relaxed a little as the tractor turned off into a field.

At first glance, the only indication that they had reached their destination was the presence of a fire engine still parked outside the house. Shoving her paperwork back in a pocket, Helen took off her seatbelt.

“Maybe I should wait here?” Kate offered.

“Why? Not planning on making another exhibition of yourself with Fireman Brown, are you?” Any more infractions of the rules would have serious repercussions for the new detective, especially considering the past

indiscretions in her file, but despite her best efforts, Helen could feel the slight grin threatening to overtake the frown she'd put there to worry Kate.

The officer on the scene grabbed his clipboard from the garden wall as they approached.

"Morning, Guv," he said before nodding in Kate's direction.

Taking the offered clipboard, Helen passed it expectantly to Kate while making small talk about the officer's family.

Approaching the house, they were met by a fire officer. Blessedly, it wasn't Graham Brown, she didn't want to have another fracas in front of Kate. Spotting the two crime-scene tech vans parked along the road, she was grateful there was progress being made in the house.

Her softly-softly conversation with the fire officer informed her that they'd shored up the building, allowing the body to be removed early that morning. Crime-scene technicians were currently processing the scene. She even managed to get him to clarify that the accelerant was most likely petrol, based on the smell that had been present when they arrived on the scene.

She caught Kate's smile as they walked around the back of the house.

"What?" Helen retorted, realising that the smile was directed at her. "Good manners don't cost anything."

Looking beyond the enclosed garden, Kate frowned as she asked the obvious: "Why would they have such a high fence?"

"The last known official occupant had a large dog that was prone to escaping and causing havoc in the local area," Helen supplied as she walked along the path, looking up at the back façade of the house.

"How do you know that?"

"Because, Virginia, it's my job to know these things. And the dog toys were a bit of a giveaway," Helen said as they continued walking to the front of the house. "Did you notice any spray paint when you went inside earlier?"

"Spray paint?" Kate repeated.

"Yeah. You know, that stuff kids spray on walls and call art, like cats marking their territory and what not?"

"Right. Er, no, I don't think so. Why?"

“There were a couple of cans of spray paint thrown in the back garden. Could be kids taking advantage of an abandoned house—or maybe something else.”

“Spray cans.” Kate half turned. “I didn’t see them.”

“Let’s talk to the neighbours.” She walked along the road towards the next house. With no CCTV in the area, they were relying on eyewitnesses, but without a timeframe it was going to be difficult.

“Maybe I should wait outside,” Kate said, stopping by the path leading up to the Goode’s house.

Helen turned to look at Kate square on.

“Not made an impression on them too, have you?”

“Uh no, it’s...umm.” Kate seemed to fumble for the right words. “It’s the smell. I think I singed the inside of my nostrils last time I was in there.”

Helen looked away to suppress a laugh. “I’ve got something that might help with that.” She fished around in one of her inside pockets, producing a small tub of Vicks VapoRub. “Put some of this under your nose and you’ll be fine.”

“That’s a bit *Silence of the Lambs*, isn’t it?” Kate noted.

“My old boss in Manchester used it every time we went to the hospital. Hated the smell of the place.”

Kate dipped a finger in the pot, then dolloped a hefty lump under her nose.

Approaching the front door, Kate jabbed at the doorbell twice, before stepping back.

Anger issues? Then Kate was behind her, probably trying to avoid the full force of the smell when the door opened, she realised.

Helen looked up as the warm, stale air wafted over her. Gloria’s black leggings were stretched to their limit as they encased her ample legs in contrast to her baggy pink-teddy bear-covered T-shirt. “Hello, Gloria, can we come in for a chat?”

“Inspector Taylor, you come on in. Hello again,” she directed at Kate as she walked past her into the hallway.

“Chief Inspector Taylor,” Kate corrected in a harsh tone.

Helen mentally rolled her eyes. Was Kate really that petty or just a moron? *Why do the women I find even mildly attractive always have to be so fucking annoying the moment they start to speak?*

CHARLOTTE MILLS

“What?” Gloria asked, confusion etched in her round face.

“It’s Chief Inspector Taylor,” Kate repeated irritably.

For the first time in recent memory, Helen wanted to disappear into thin air.

“It’s fine, Gloria,” she said and turned to glare at Kate, who looked totally unfazed. Did she really want to upset a potential witness before she’d had the chance to question her?

“Right,” Gloria said, obviously still confused as to what was going on.

“Arthur not around?” Helen asked as she eyed the empty sitting room. She knew he never strayed far.

“He’s just out with Buddy. Be back any minute I ’spect. Terrible business,” Gloria said, nodding her head in the direction of next door as she entered the sitting room behind them both.

Helen nodded. “It certainly is. I just wanted to ask if you’ve seen anything odd recently.”

Gloria wrung her hands together. “Tea?” she offered, ignoring Helen’s question. “You’ll be wanting one with your cold, Officer,” she directed to Kate.

“Oh no. I’m fine, really.”

She caught Helen’s eye and raised an eyebrow from across the room.

The front door slammed, making everyone look in the direction of the hallway.

“That’ll be Arthur now. I’ll put the kettle on. He’ll want a tea.”

Arthur appeared in the doorway, his large frame almost filling the space. “Thought you’d turn up at some point.”

“Hello, Arthur. How are you doing?” Helen kept her tone light, in contrast to Arthur’s gruff manner.

Arthur struggled to move across the room with his walking stick. She hadn’t realised how immobile he’d become compared to his wife. The small armchair squealed under the strain as he slumped his full weight down into it. She looked up to see Gloria’s eyes watching her.

“He’s got problems with his legs, like Buddy,” Gloria offered by way of explanation.

The high-pitched squeaking of a rusty wheel broke the silence that followed as Buddy made his way across the room towards Arthur’s chair, at

PAYBACK

a snail's pace. A pang of guilt immediately hit Helen as Buddy's back legs tried a walk and the wheels turned.

"Hey, Buddy." Helen crouched to rub the dog's ears, and his tail made a feeble attempt at a wag.

"Heard kids round there over the last few months, when I've been out for a fag. She won't let me smoke in the house." Arthur gave his wife the eye over the top of his glasses.

Gloria let out a snort before ducking into the kitchen.

"Over the last few months?"

His reply was more of a grunt.

"Anything over the last few days?" She nodded at Kate to take notes. "Anything yesterday or last night?" Gloria was coming back with a tray of tea-filled mugs.

"Someone shouting in the afternoon," Gloria said immediately after putting the tray down on a rickety coffee table near the window.

"Man or woman?" Kate asked, frustration evident in her timbre.

"Man. Young, I think, by his voice," Gloria shuffled the mugs on the tray.

Helen shot Kate a warning look for her tone. "What time was this?" she asked, taking over the questioning with a little more tact.

Gloria pulled at her bottom lip as she thought. "Mid-afternoon, around three, maybe later."

Focusing her attention on the seated figure of Arthur, Helen addressed her next question to him. "Recognise any of the kids you've seen going in or out, lately?"

"Some from the estate down the road. Don't know the others."

Helen continued her focus on Arthur. "You called in the fire at 2:12. What alerted you to it?"

"Had to get up for a piss. Saw it through the bathroom window," Arthur grumbled his reply.

"Seen your neighbours recently?" Helen asked, pointing to the occupied house next door.

"Doreen? Not seen her all week. Away at her daughter's, I think," Gloria said from across the room.

"What's her full name?" Kate asked, her tone a little more relaxed.

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“Doreen Platt.” Gloria covered her mouth. “It’s not her, is it?” she blurted out between her fingers.

“He said it was a man, you silly cow!” Arthur grunted from his armchair.

He being a fireman, no doubt. Standing, Helen pulled a card from her pocket.

“Okay. Thank you both for your time, and if you think of anything else, give me a call.” She slipped her card between the still full mugs on the tray.

* * *

Helen blew out a long breath when they pulled into an empty space in the station car park.

“What’s next?” Kate asked.

Helen looked across at Kate’s profile in the dim light. It gave her an orange glow. They’d been scanning the streets for Sandy’s friends most of the afternoon with no luck so far.

“You go home. You were called out at silly o’clock. I’ll see you tomorrow bright and early. In the morning, get Uniform to check along Morley Road. See if anyone has security cameras that pick up passing pedestrians or traffic. I know it’s a long shot, but we don’t have anything else.”

Helen thought she’d spotted at least one house where the owners were security savvy.

“Okay, I’ll follow up with Mrs Platt, find out when she’s back too,” Kate offered.

Helen checked her phone before meeting Kate’s eyes in the darkness. “Okay, good.” She reached for the door release. Despite her obvious tiredness, Kate was far more pleasing to look at than Mike. “Get some sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Kate let out a long breath. “Night, Guv.”

Helen made her way through the station car park, clicking her key fob to unlock her car. She’d promised to visit Julia this evening. The twenty-minute drive passed quickly as she thought about the events of her day, and the death of Sandy. She wondered how many people in town would actually mourn or even notice his loss. It was going to be a difficult case—she could feel it—not to mention a new colleague to break in. That looked a challenge in itself, if her first day was anything to go by.

PAYBACK

The car park at The Oaks was quiet. From the glovebox, she grabbed the book Julia had requested and then headed inside. The nurse dutifully informed her that Julia had had a difficult day.

Undeterred, she persisted, informing her she would only stay a short time.

She followed the nurse down the corridor, the sound of a starched A-line uniform thwacking against her knees as the woman walked ahead of her.

Since when do they need a third party to smooth out my arrival? Is this what I have to look forward to?

Helen desperately wanted to keep the connection alive with Julia. Holding her fear in check each time she walked into her room was a big part of that.

The nurse tentatively knocked on Julia's door before entering. "Julia, you have a visitor."

There was a mumble from inside the room before the nurse returned.

"She's just waking up from a nap," the nurse announced before disappearing back along the hallway.

With a breath, Helen edged into the room, finding a sleeping figure sitting in an armchair. The relaxed face looked only vaguely familiar. Sharp eyes were hidden behind heavy lids. Her chest rose and fell with long, deep breaths. The spark of life was missing from the rumpled face.

Helen took a seat in the neighbouring armchair, placing the book on her knees. Her head rested back against the chair; the rigidity of the design made it hard for her to get comfortable. How Julia had managed to fall asleep she would never understand.

"Helen! How are you, my dear? Would you like some tea?"

She looked up, confused for a moment. "No. Thank you." Blinking, she realised she had no idea how much time had passed since her arrival.

Julia adjusted her position in the chair, grabbing her glasses off the small side table next to her.

"What's been happening today? The nurse said you'd had a bad day."

That seemed to have made Julia look away. Her gaze was now fixed on the view from her window. "They keep moving my things, giving me pills; it's not right, Helen."

Helen leant forward in her chair, taking the book in her hands. “They’re just trying to help you, and keep you well. I’ll talk to them about moving your things, though. That we can sort out.” She knew from experience that Julia’s grumbled reply meant that this particular topic of conversation was over. “I brought you that book you asked for.” She held out her offering.

“What’s that, dear? Oh, thank you.” Julia turned the book over in her hands, her eyes scanning the back blurb. She placed it on the side table, then turned to give Helen her full attention.

Helen smiled. There was something different in the shape of her face, or perhaps it was the way she held it. Familiar intense eyes gazed at her through metal-rimmed glasses; this was the Julia she knew. Spotting the photographs on the wall behind Julia, she got up to take a closer look. “New photos.”

“Oh. Yes.”

Scanning the framed images, her eyes landed on a young Julia with another woman, standing next to an old black Mini. “Is this you? Who’s that with you?” She turned to see Julia watching her.

“My sister Ellen with her pride and joy. She loved that car.”

The next one was a little more recognisable. “Is that me?”

“Don’t you remember? The birthday party we had for you, when we dressed you up as a pirate. You spent more time with me than the other kids. Every time they asked you to play with them, you said ‘No, thank you’ in that sing-song tone you had.”

Helen grinned as she thought of her eighth birthday. She had been so pleased with her handmade outfit, eyepatch and all. “You were always doing something more interesting.”

Julia chuckled to herself. “Wanted to be closer to the cake, more like.”

“That too.”

“And that curly moustache you wanted me to paint on your face.”

“I wanted to look like a mean pirate.”

“You looked so sweet with that plastic sword, even tried cutting the cake with it.”

Julia’s smile was wide, and the years fell away from her face. At times like this, she wondered what Julia was doing in this place. Then she recalled the angry confusion that took over her mind; she’d seen it with her own eyes.

PAYBACK

“You look tired,” Julia offered clasping her hand in her lap.

Helen turned back to the photographs. She didn’t want to have that conversation. “I should go, let you get some rest. I’ll come back in a couple of days.” Turning, she bent to place a kiss on Julia’s head before leaving.

Outside her house a little later, she slipped the keys from the ignition, resting her head back against the seat. Julia was right. She *was* tired. Glancing out the side window, the dark windows of her home held no comfort for her. She yearned for the days when Julia had lived with her, evenings spent cooking and chatting, days off spent setting up the garden just how Julia wanted it. Helen hadn’t had the heart to set foot out there since Julia had moved to The Oaks. She’d be furious if she saw how untidy it had become. By then, the slippage had set in.

At first she wasn’t sure if it was Julia’s illness or her fierce independence—a trait Helen had acquired along the way—that had been the bigger issue. The days soon became filled with chaos, but, still, something was better than nothing.

Helen swiped at tears as she looked back at the dark, empty house. This was not what she wanted out of life. She didn’t want to be one of those single, lonely coppers that fought retirement because their lives were barren away from the job. There had to be more for her than that.

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PAYBACK

BY CHARLOTTE MILLS

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