

# A GAME OF LIES

**PROOF**



**Clare Mackintosh** is a police officer turned crime writer, and the multi-award-winning author of six *Sunday Times* bestselling novels. Translated into forty languages, her books have sold more than two million copies worldwide, and have spent a combined total of sixty-four weeks in the *Sunday Times* bestseller chart. Clare lives in North Wales with her husband and their three children.

For more information visit Clare's website [www.claremackintosh.com](http://www.claremackintosh.com) or find her at [www.facebook.com/ClareMackWrites](http://www.facebook.com/ClareMackWrites) or on Twitter @ClareMackint0sh

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**A GAME  
OF LIES**



SPHERE

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For Sarah Clayton, Lynda Tunncliffe and Huw McKee

MAP TO COME



## STATEMENT

*In light of today's tragic events, this evening's episode of Exposure will not be broadcast. All filming has now ceased, and the remaining contestants and crew are being supported. The matter is in the hands of the police, and we will be making no further comment at this time.*

*Young Productions*



# PART ONE



# ONE

## MONDAY | DC FFION MORGAN

The smell is sour and sweet at the same time, like fruit left to rot. Ffion breathes through her mouth but the stink's so bad, she can almost taste it.

'Was that you?' DC Alun Whitaker speaks without looking up from his paperwork. He's too vain to wear reading glasses, and deep grooves form at the corners of his eyes as he squints at the file.

'No, it bloody well wasn't.' Ffion shuts down the witness statement she's been reading and opens Rightmove. She needs the calming influence only five minutes of property porn can bring.

'Women aren't supposed to fart.' Alun looks across the bank of desks and raises his voice. 'I bet Georgina doesn't.'

Georgina shrugs back at him, pointing to the noise-cancelling headphones she wears over her dark, cropped hair. *Just a podcast*, she always says, if anyone asks. Ffion has long suspected that Georgina isn't listening to anything at all – the woman's quick enough to say *yes* to a *paned* when the kettle goes on – but is selective about what she wants to hear.

'I couldn't be with a woman who farts,' says Alun. As though he had a choice in the matter. Alun's last foray into the dating world had resulted in a bank transfer to an untraceable account

and a computer virus that emailed out the last ten photos from Alun's camera roll, three of which had made Ffion want to bleach her eyes.

'Farting's for blokes,' he adds. 'It's not ladylike.'

Ffion contemplates trying to squeeze one out, just to be contrary.

Alun spins his chair to face her. He has long, thin limbs, and when he rests his hands on his knees, as he's doing now, he puts Ffion in mind of some kind of insect. 'Do you know where the case summary is for the Proctor GBH? I can't find it on the central drive.'

'That's because it's on my laptop.'

'Your personal laptop?' Alun raises an eyebrow and folds his arms. Ffion tries to remember if it's crickets that rub their legs together, or grasshoppers. 'You're supposed to save them directly on to the shared drive.'

Ffion doesn't know what sound Alun's arms would make if he rubbed them together, but it would no doubt be fucking annoying. She frowns at her screen, as though she's trying to solve a complex formula, instead of expanding her Rightmove search by another ten miles. 'I'll save it on to the drive when it's finished.'

'Imagine if all my files were on my personal laptop. What would you do if I got hit by a bus?'

'Throw a party?' Ffion clicks on a two-bedroomed apartment, five miles from Cwm Coed. Her rented cottage is perfect – and a blessed relief after a year living at home with Mam and Seren – but now her landlord wants it back. *Sorry, Ffion, but I can get twice as much for it as a holiday let, and times are hard . . .*

No shit, Ffion thought, when she started looking for a new place, discovering that prices had practically doubled in the past year. Living outside the village would mean no more easy strolls back from the pub after a lock-in, or popping round to Ceri's for

a coffee. On the other hand, it would be nice to leave the house without having her every move reported back to Mam. *Your Ffion's looking tired . . . did I see her at the doctor last week? I did wonder if she was pregnant . . .*

This apartment looks perfect, though. Brand new, affordable—  
—and for over-sixties only.

'Fuck's sake.' Ffion clicks away from the bedroom balcony with views over the river. She wrinkles her nose as the noxious smell wafts her way with renewed vigour.

'And if *you're* hit by a bus, we won't know what's happening in the case.' Alun is refusing to let it go. 'We could lose crucial evidence.'

'When you make sergeant,' Ffion says, 'you can tell me what to do. Till then, back off. You're not my boss.'

'Quite right,' comes a cheerful voice from the door. 'I am.'

Detective Inspector Malik is resolutely jovial. Even when issuing a dressing-down – something of which Ffion has been on the receiving end a number of times – there's an avuncular tone to his voice, as though the subject of his lecture has been caught scrumping apples, instead of taking a riot van to collect a sofa from IKEA.

Malik takes a step forward, then sniffs the air. 'It smells like someone died in here.'

'It's Ffion,' Alun says.

'It's horrific. Open a window.' The DI is wearing his favourite waistcoat – a chessboard, complete with game in play. Ffion imagines there's a subliminal message in the checkmate or stalemate or whatever is happening by the top button.

Georgina's already jumped to her feet to do the DI's bidding. Ffion narrows her eyes. Heard that alright, didn't she? Georgina Kent is what bosses call *diligent* and Ffion calls a try-hard. First

to arrive, last to leave, and treats social invitations as though she's robotically programmed to decline. Neither Georgina nor Ffion wear much make-up, but Ffion imagines this is an intentional decision on Georgina's part, and not – as it is in Ffion's case – because she can't be arsed. Georgina has the sort of olive skin that tans in five minutes, whereas Ffion's skin is the colour of skimmed milk.

Malik holds up a printout. 'I need someone to check out some bones in Cwm Coed. Could be a moody one.'

'Sounds like someone I know.' Alun grins at Ffion. She's about to throw something at him when an audible fart erupts from her corner of the office.

Malik glares at her. 'Is that what I think it is?'

Ffion abdicates responsibility with a raised palm. 'This is what happens when you make me come in to the office every day.'

'You're telling me that stink is my fault?'

Ffion had been perfectly happy working out of her cubbyhole office in Cwm Coed, or writing statements in her car by the edge of the lake, reporting in as infrequently as she could get away with. Seventeen months ago, a murder investigation at luxury lakeside resort The Shore had turned the spotlight well and truly on to Cwm Coed – and on to Ffion. Her last appraisal – *not a team player; struggles with authority* – landed her with a fifty-minute commute to Bryndare and a scowl it would take more than Botox to shift.

'Ffion, I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but coming to work is literally what you get paid for.' Malik crosses the office. 'It certainly doesn't give you *carte blanche* to do *this*.' He jerks Ffion's chair, rolling it backwards to reveal a large, hairy heap beneath Ffion's desk.

To call Dave a dog would be simplistic. Cursed with the neuroses



of the Prozac generation, Dave jumps at loud noises, barks at prolonged silences, and is only truly happy when pressed against Ffion's legs or – ideally – on top of her. Given that Dave is the same height as a seated adult, this is particularly challenging at traffic lights, when he takes the brief pause as a sign that their journey is over and he can climb into Ffion's lap like a forty-kilo cat.

'How many times have I told you?'

Ffion wonders if Malik is addressing Dave, but then the DI turns to her, and she realises he's waiting for an answer. Dave's tail thumps slowly on the carpet.

'At least six,' Alun chips in. Arsehole.

'I can't leave him at home. He howls. The neighbours have complained.'

'So get a dog-walker. Leave him with your mum. Sign him up to the bloody circus. I don't care, Ffion – just stop bringing him to work!'

Dave unfolds himself from beneath the desk and Ffion makes a grab for his collar. 'What if he's my emotional support dog? Being with animals is proven to relieve stress.'

'The only thing being relieved around here is that dog's bowels. Take him home. Now.'

Reluctantly, Ffion gets to her feet. 'I might as well go and look at those bones, then. Since I'm going that way.'

'Oh, no.' Malik waggles a finger. 'I'm not having you swanning around at home with no one to keep an eye on you. Either Alun or Georgina can take it.' He turns to them. 'There's some kind of reality TV show being filmed on the mountain by Cwm Coed.'

'*Exposure.*' Ffion pulls on her coat. It's May, but this is North Wales, which means it's still practically winter.

'Never heard of it,' Georgina says. 'Sorry, sir.'

‘I wish I could say the same.’ Malik grimaces. ‘It sounds ghastly. Seven “ordinary men and women”, the trailer says, but what ordinary person wants to be filmed eating fish eyes and bulls’ test—’

‘I think you might be thinking of *I’m a Celebrity*, sir.’ Alun looks faintly queasy.

‘Anyway, the producer called in the bones this morning and—’

‘Did they find them at the *Exposure* camp, or at the farmhouse where the crew are staying?’ Ffion says. ‘The house is ours, but the camp is just across the border into Cheshire.’

‘I don’t know where—’ Malik stops. ‘How do you know so much about this?’

‘I know one of the contestants. Ceri Jones. She’s the postie in Cwm Coed.’ Ffion shuts down her computer. ‘See you tomorrow, then.’

‘Tomorrow? Ffion, it’s only three—’

‘No point in coming back only to go home again, is there? I’ll work remotely for the last couple of hours.’ Ffion smiles guilelessly. ‘Oh, and don’t rely on SatNav for the farm – it’ll dump you in a field. You want to take the single-track road past Felingwm Isaf and hang a right at the big oak tree.’

‘*Velin-goom Ee-sav*,’ Malik repeats slowly. On paper, the DI possessed the minimum level of Welsh required of him to transfer from Surrey police to North Wales. In practice, he’s still mastering pronunciation. He sighs, as though what he’s about to do pains him. He holds out the printout to Ffion, keeping a firm grip on it for a few seconds after she takes it. ‘Don’t piss about.’

‘Of course not, sir.’

‘And take someone with you.’

‘Honestly, boss, I work better on my—’

‘You work with someone else or you don’t go. Simple as that.’

Ffion looks first at Alun, then at Georgina, neither of whom look wildly enthusiastic about the prospect of teaming up with her. ‘Talk about a rock and a hard place,’ she mutters.

Alun chortles. ‘I’ve got a hard—’

‘Georgina,’ Ffion says firmly.

Malik fixes Alun with an unforgiving stare. ‘The 1980s called. They want their inappropriate banter back.’

‘Sorry, sir, won’t happen again.’ Alun’s cheeks blaze and Ffion suppresses a snort.

‘Are you ready?’ Georgina stands with her coat over one arm, as though Ffion’s the one keeping her waiting.

‘I was born ready.’ Ffion opens the door. ‘Come on, Dave.’

## TWO

### MONDAY | FFION

Ffion's Triumph Stag is parked in the section reserved for motor-bikes. She finishes the roll-up she smoked in six long drags as they crossed the rear yard, and holds out Dave's lead to Georgina.

Georgina eyes the dog with trepidation. 'Can't he go in the back?'  
'He gets car sick. He'll be alright with you.'

'It's not him I'm worried about.' Georgina gets gingerly into the passenger seat, holding the lead as though it might explode. Dave squeezes himself into the footwell, his head almost level with Georgina's. Ffion pulls back her hair into a ponytail. This morning, after another of Alun's 'hilarious' asides, she'd tightened it with such force that her hairband had snapped, leaving her hair a tangle of red frizz that could only politely be called curls.

Ffion tugs a spare band from the stash she keeps on the Triumph's gearstick. She bought the car with the money her dad left her, and she has since spent ten times that amount keeping the russet-brown rust bucket on the road.

'Is this car legal?' Georgina is eyeing the – ingenious, to Ffion's mind – piece of cardboard wedged into the passenger door to stop the window from dropping open.

'It was serviced last month, as it happens,' Ffion says, omitting the fact that Trefor *Garej* told her it was a *bloody death trap* and

he was only letting her have it back because his cousin was married to Ffion's dad's nephew's wife, and she'd give him a row if he didn't.

The road that runs from Bryndare to the other side of Pen y Ddraig mountain is narrow and twisty, with a sheer drop on the passenger side. Georgina doesn't flinch. She's more preoccupied with keeping Dave – and his motion-sickness drool – confined to the footwell. Despite her best efforts, by the time they drop towards Cwm Coed the dog is on Georgina's lap, his head brushing Ffion's shoulder. Every few minutes a mournful whine cuts across the noise of the car's ancient engine and he paws at Ffion's lap, as though she might have forgotten he was there. Fat chance.

Ffion took on Dave in a rare moment of weakness, after attending an arson at a rescue shelter where Dave was several years into what was turning out to be a whole-life sentence. *He'll be put to sleep next week*, a shelter volunteer told Ffion. *It's so sad – he's got so much love to give*. They saw her coming, Huw said afterwards. *They make out all the dogs are on death row, you wally. Twenty quid says you end up giving it back to them*.

It isn't the twenty quid, Ffion thinks grimly, as she wipes drool from her shoulder, it's the principle. However much she regrets her impulsive decision to take Dave, losing a bet to her ex-husband is out of the question. Besides, beneath the bad breath and the flatulence Dave has some redeeming qualities, she's sure of it. She just hasn't found them yet.

The sky is a vibrant blue, but drifts of mist lie in the pockets of space beside the mountain. They blur the edges of the road, but Ffion knows the twists and turns as surely as she knows her own body. Far below them, Llyn Drych snakes along the valley. The lake is as narrow as a river in some parts, and Ffion spent her

childhood summers swimming from one side to the other. She would pause in the middle, treading water on the unseen border between England and Wales, feeling – for that instant – as though she belonged to neither place. The hamlet of Felingwm Isaf, which roughly translates into English as Lower Mill Valley, lies at the northern tip of Llyn Drych – or Mirror Lake, as the incomers call it. Ffion slows, looking for the turning that will take them up to Carreg Plas, the farmhouse currently being used by the *Exposure* crew. The single-track road climbs steeply and Ffion hopes they don't meet anyone; Trefor *Garej* had had a few choice words to say about her brakes.

'What's the score with this *Exposure*, then?' Georgina says.

Ffion navigates around a sheep which is reclining on the warm tarmac. 'Don't you watch telly? The ads have been on every five minutes.'

'I only use streaming channels really. There's never anything decent on terrestrial.'

Ffion begs to differ. At least, she would, if she could be bothered, which she can't. Terrestrial TV (or, as Ffion calls it, normal telly) is comfort TV. It makes Ffion think of bringing Mam a cuppa when *EastEnders* is starting; of teenage negotiations over watching *Hollyoaks* instead of S4C. It makes her think of highlighting the films in the *Radio Times*, the Christmas before Dad died; of Mam asking Ffion to play with baby Seren till *Teletubbies* came on. Plus normal telly has *Homes Under the Hammer*, Ffion's guilty pleasure.

Ffion glances at Georgina, who is attempting to rotate her face, owl-like, away from Dave's hairy snout. 'Like the boss said, it's a reality TV show. Seven contestants living on Pen y Ddraig mountain for a fortnight. The usual challenges, a public vote – you know the sort of thing.'



‘Not really.’

Ffion looks at her. ‘You’ve never watched *Big Brother*?’

‘No.’

‘*Love Island*?’

‘No.’

‘*Married at First Sight*?’

‘Tell me that’s not as horrific as it sounds.’

‘It’s worse.’ Ffion turns through an open gateway on to a gravel drive. ‘That’s what makes it so brilliant.’

She parks the Triumph in front of Carreg Plas, a solid, stone-built farmhouse to which someone has added a small wooden porch. Two bay trees in square pots stand sentry by the front door. As they wait for someone to answer the door, Georgina looks down at Dave.

‘Why don’t you just leave him in the car?’

‘Because he’ll eat it.’ Ffion bangs the knocker again, then gives up and walks around the side of the house. The garden gate is open, and they find themselves in a cobbled courtyard. If the view from the front of the house, looking down on to Llyn Drych, was spectacular, the back is nothing short of breathtaking. Dense woodland slopes up from the farmhouse, giving way to the rocky landscape of Pen y Ddraig, its summit swirled in mist.

On either side of the courtyard are two rows of red-brick outbuildings with slate roofs. The numbers one to eight are painted on to stable doors.

‘Horses?’ Georgina says.

‘I said, I’m not doing it!’ comes a woman’s voice from number eight.

‘Bloody argumentative horses.’ Ffion walks towards the open door, just as a dark-haired woman with a full face of make-up storms out and heads for the farmhouse.

‘Sorry about that. The talent can be a little temperamental.’ A man steps forward, hand outstretched. ‘Miles Young, Young Productions. Young by name, less so by nature nowadays.’ He gives a rueful grin, then laughs, pushing a hair through thick white-blond hair. He’s in his late forties, with pale blue eyes and eyelashes so fine they’re almost invisible. High cheekbones give him a pinched, rather anxious look, despite his broad smile.

‘The talent?’ Georgina shakes his hand. ‘Detective Constable Georgina Kent, Bryndare CID.’

‘My presenter, Roxy Wilde. Such charisma – the camera loves her.’ Miles offers his hand to Ffion. ‘And you are?’

‘DC Morgan. I understand you’ve found some bones?’ As Ffion says his favourite word, Dave sits bolt upright, his tail sweeping an arc on the cobbles.

‘I called hours ago. Where have—’ Miles stops himself, screwing up his face in self-admonishment. ‘Sorry, I don’t mean to sound . . . You must have a million more important things to do. It’s just that we’re on such a tight schedule. Most reality TV programmes show footage recorded the day before, or even earlier, but we’re breaking new ground. What you’ll see tonight will have been recorded today. Fortunately we’ve got a lot in the can already – the contestants stayed at the farmhouse last night, you see, so this delay isn’t as disastrous as—’

Ffion cuts in. ‘Could we see the bones, Mr Young?’

Miles glances back at his desk, which boasts two computers and a tangle of leads, then tears himself away. ‘Of course.’ He reaches for his jacket. In addition to the desk, the room has a double bed and a slim wardrobe. Ffion spots a tea tray, and the door to what she assumes is a bathroom. A large casement window at the back of the room looks on to the woods in the foothills of the mountain.



‘It’s a cracking spot, isn’t it?’ Miles locks the door behind them. ‘Our location scout did a good job. Camp’s about twenty minutes up the mountain.’

‘Who stays at the farm?’ Georgina asks.

‘I’m in the main house, along with Owen – that’s our cameraman – and Roxy, who you’ve encountered. Number eight’s my studio, and the rest of the stable rooms are for the contestants, for when they’re evicted.’ Miles takes them through a gate at the rear of the courtyard, which leads on to the mountain.

‘They come back here?’ Ffion says.

‘It’s a condition of their contract. Two nights back at the farm for interviews. Once that’s done and dusted, they get their participation fee.’

‘Which is how much?’ A gorse bush snags at Ffion’s legs.

‘Ten grand.’

Georgina whistles. ‘Nice.’

‘Not as nice as the hundred grand the winner – or winners – will get.’

‘Bl—imey.’ Ffion manages to divert the expletive. Malik says she needs to *temper her language*, whatever the fuck that means. People have complained, apparently.

‘I imagined there’d be more of you,’ Georgina says. ‘Big lighting rigs, catering wagons, a vast crew.’

‘I like to keep things tight when we’re filming,’ Miles says. ‘It’s been bedlam while we were building the camp, but now we’re rolling I’ve stripped it back to the bare minimum. We’ve got a runner who comes each day, a security guard, and for anything else I need I call the production office.’

‘What are the contestants doing now?’ Despite the impression she gave DI Malik, Ffion knows very little about *Exposure*, beyond the fact that a bunch of wannabe survivalists getting pissed off

with each other on a north Wales mountain has to be worth a watch.

‘Well, not a lot, thanks to these bones,’ Miles says drily. ‘One of them suggested they dig out the fire pit, and as soon as I saw what they’d uncovered – I was watching from the studio, of course – I sent our runner up to call a halt to proceedings.’

They keep walking for several more minutes, then, ahead of them, Ffion sees a high wire fence. ‘Is that it?’

‘Yes. It belongs to a neighbouring farm. Erected for pheasants, I believe, so it’s not the most rigorous of barriers, but it marks the boundary nicely.’ He raises his voice. ‘Everything alright, Dario?’

‘Right as rain, boss.’ Dario has the sort of square frame you don’t mess with, and a head like a polished egg. He wears a high-visibility jacket which extends almost to his knees, with SECURITY on his left breast in shiny blue letters. He eyes Dave with interest. ‘That one of them cadaver dogs, is it?’

Georgina makes a noise which Ffion might have taken for a laugh, were it not for the fact that Georgina Kent never, ever laughs.

‘Not exactly,’ Ffion says.

‘That Zee’s been back,’ Dario tells Miles.

‘You’d have thought she’d have got the message by now.’ Miles turns to Georgina and Ffion. ‘There’s this girl. Woman, I suppose. Her name’s Zee Hart, and she’s got some godawful YouTube channel called *Hart Breaks*. She applied to be on the show, then, when she was knocked back, she had the audacity to put herself forward as a presenter for a TV segment she wanted to call *Extra Exposure*. Wanted to interview contestants as they got knocked out, that sort of thing.’

‘She’s put up a tent,’ Dario says.

'A tent?' Miles's voice – already high-pitched – goes up an octave. 'That's not allowed, surely?'

'Where is it?' Ffion says.

'About twenty metres from the perimeter fence, on the other side of camp.' Dario points.

Ffion shrugs. 'Nothing to stop people wild camping on the mountain.'

'Monitor her,' Miles says. 'Let me know if she moves.'

'Will do, boss.'

'And no one's to go beyond this fence without my say-so, okay?'

'Got it.'

'The show airs at seven –' Miles clasps his hands together in prayer '– and then . . . well, don't be surprised if the tabloids swing by.'

He gives a knowing chuckle and Ffion blows out her cheeks. What would it be like to possess such extraordinary levels of self-confidence? Okay, so *Exposure* sounds like good telly, but it's just another reality show, when all's said and done. A tabloid hack would only trek out to Snowdonia if the cast were wall-to-wall celebrities.

Unless, of course, the bones turn out to be interesting . . .

They follow Miles through a metal gate, which Dario padlocks behind them with a *click*. Ffion feels instantly too hot, despite the wind which, up on the mountain, feels anything but summery. She couldn't do *Exposure*. Not in a million years. Quite apart from having to live with six strangers for a fortnight, she couldn't handle being locked inside what is effectively a cage. Like wild cats in a safari park, she thinks, and she imagines stalking the boundary, looking for an escape.

'How big is the enclosure?' Georgina asks, as they weave their way through narrow-trunked, densely planted trees. Ffion glances

at her, wondering if she's feeling as claustrophobic as Ffion, but her face is its usual impassive mask.

'About a kilometre square.' Dario gestures to the trees. 'It was all woodland, but Miles had a section cleared in the middle for the camp.'

Sure enough, a few minutes later the woodland opens out and they're standing in the clearing. The trees shield the fence from view, giving the impression of total isolation. They could be in the middle of dense forest, Ffion thinks. They could be in another country, another time.

Three large cream bell tents stand in a line at the back of the clearing. A short distance away is a wood-fired hot tub, logs neatly stacked against its side, and on the opposite side is what Ffion assumes – from the spade leaning against the door – to be a compost loo.

In the centre of the camp is a rudimentary kitchen, built in the same expertly rustic fashion as the loo, plus a vast table – seemingly hewn from a single piece of wood – and seven seats. Above the table, metal lanterns sway on a thick rope suspended between two poles. Aside from the rustle of leaves in the breeze, it's eerily quiet.

Ffion points to a small windowless structure clad in horizontal planks, the width of a phone box, but half the height. Steps have been cut into the ground, in order to access the door. 'What's that? Another loo?'

'The . . . er . . . diary room,' Miles says, but there are two spots of colour on his cheeks. Ffion wants to ask more, but Miles is directing their attention to the rest of the camp. 'Boys are on the left, girls on the right. The third bell tent is the chill-out zone. There are cameras in the tents and in this communal camp area, but not in the woods – any filming there will be with Owen and Roxy.' He points to the fire pit. 'Here are the bones.'

They walk towards the kitchen area, where another spade lies

abandoned next to a pile of dirt. A couple of metres away is a tall tree stump with a padlock bolted to the surface.

Ffion is about to ask what the lock is for when Dave yanks his lead so hard she almost falls over. ‘Oi!’ She yanks back, before remembering what the *Perfect Puppy* book says. ‘I mean, *off*.’ She can do without Dave running away with a murder victim’s metatarsal. She’s about to make a *how humerus* joke, but decides Georgina wouldn’t appreciate it.

The three of them look down at the shallow grave, in which lies an assortment of dirt-encrusted bones.

‘You’ve done the right thing by stopping filming,’ Georgina says.

‘The thing is, if we don’t get going again soon—’

‘We’ll need to get an anthropologist out from Bangor University. They’ll tell us whether the bones are animal or human. If they’re human, they’ll date them, then establish if the site’s of archaeological importance.’ Georgina takes out her phone. ‘We should notify Cheshire Constabulary – we’re on their side of the border.’

‘You won’t get any reception up here,’ Miles says. ‘It’s why we use radios.’

Ffion feels eyes on the nape of her neck. She turns to see a brown-skinned woman watching them from the entrance to the women’s bell tent. She’s young and slim, and she’s wearing what Ffion assumes is the camp uniform: khaki combat trousers and an orange fleece. Dark hair falls in two thick plaits over her shoulders.

‘What are you doing?’ Miles has followed Ffion’s gaze and is striding towards the bell tent. ‘I told you to stay inside!’ He practically shoves the woman back inside, and Ffion catches a glimpse of the name *Aliyah* on the reverse of the woman’s fleece, before Miles sweeps the canvas door across the entrance.

‘This is batshit,’ Ffion mutters, crouching to get a closer look at the bones.

‘Sorry about that.’ When Miles returns, he’s all smiles again. ‘*Exposure* is sponsored by a major gambling operator. It’s crucial the contestants aren’t influenced by the outside world, which means keeping them away from visitors – even upright citizens like yourselves!’ He laughs, then looks at the bones and sighs. ‘Do you have any idea how long this is going to take? We’re expecting record viewing figures – the hype’s been incredible. Thousands of people applied for *Exposure*. Some of the rejected ones tracked me down, begged me to reconsider – threatened me, in a few cases. This show is a big deal.’

Miles’s speech has little effect on Georgina. ‘These bones could belong to a murder victim, Mr Young. I’d say that’s a pretty big deal too, wouldn’t you?’

‘We air in three hours and we still have the contestants’ briefing to shoot, not to mention prepping the live segment—’

‘The bones aren’t human.’ Ffion looks up from the fire pit. ‘You can crack on.’

Miles exhales. ‘That’s excellent news, thank you, officer.’

‘Hang on a minute, we can’t just . . .’ Georgina glares at Ffion. ‘The Standard Operating Procedure clearly states—’

‘They’re animal bones.’ Ffion stands, wincing as her knee clicks. Is it normal for your body to start clicking in your early thirties? Lately, Ffion has caught herself making a tiny *aah* sound when she sits down. It’s a short step from there to having prunes every morning and watching ITV dramas with the subtitles on because *actors all mumble nowadays*.

‘I had no idea you’d done an anthropology degree.’ Georgina’s voice is laced with sarcasm.

‘I haven’t.’ Ffion reaches into the grave and fishes out a small



metal tag, trailing the remnants of what might once have been a collar. 'But I've yet to encounter a human corpse tagged with the number of a veterinary practice.'

That evening, after work, Ffion opens her fridge. She last looked inside approximately three and a half minutes ago, and there is no more in it now than there was then. Ffion picks up Dave's lead. 'Come on, mate, we'll eat *Chez Morgan* tonight.'

It's just before seven when she opens the back door of her childhood home. The kitchen is Elen Morgan's natural habitat, and Ffion's surprised to find it empty. Laundry hangs on the airer above the range, and Mam's notebook lies open on the table, neat ticks against the items on her to-do list. *Change towels in holiday let. Buy teabags. Return library books.*

'Mam?' Ffion opens the fridge and her stomach rumbles in anticipation of the cold meat pie she finds there. She rootles in the salad drawer for tomatoes and lettuce.

'In here,' comes the response from the lounge. 'Turn it up, Seren, I can't hear a thing.'

'It's the adverts, Mam. And I thought you didn't want to watch it, anyway?'

'Watch what?' Ffion carries her spoils through to the lounge. 'Alright, Caleb?'

Seren's boyfriend is sprawling on the floor. He's bulked out lately and his jawline has lost the softness of adolescence. Only the floppy fringe still marks him out as a teenager. He sits bolt upright. 'Yeah, good. You alright?' he adds, as an afterthought. Seren says Ffion makes Caleb feel uncomfortable, as though he has to watch his step.

'I will be, once I've eaten this,' Ffion says. 'Budge up.' She kicks Seren's feet off the sofa so she can sit down.

‘It’s a restaurant I’m running now, is it?’ Mam says. She’s wearing a red apron with the word YES in bold white letters – the logo for Yes Cymru, the movement for Welsh independence.

‘Three stars. Limited menu. Customer service needs work.’ Ffion takes a bite of meat pie and nods towards the telly. ‘Right. What are we watching?’



# THREE

## MONDAY | ELEN MORGAN | EPISODE ONE

‘Er, *Exposure*?’ Seren says, as though Ffion is stupid.

Elen tuts. The problem with teenagers is they think they know everything. Ffion was the same at that age. Too big to send to the naughty step; too young to have had the corners bashed off them out in the real world.

‘How was your day?’ she asks Ffion. ‘Anything interesting?’

‘Not really.’

‘I had an Amazon parcel stolen off the doorstep today.’ Elen tries to get everything she needs from Cwm Coed’s high street, but she needed printer ink and it couldn’t wait till her next trip to town.

Seren shushes her. ‘It’s starting.’

On screen, violent colours clash into each other, exploding into graphics that make Elen’s head hurt. To think she’s missing *Heno* for this. A vivid blue circle stretches taut as an elastic band, only to *ping* back into what Elen now sees is a garish interpretation of the town’s lake. Above it, a lurid green triangle slams into place amid fireworks of purple and orange. In perfect synchronicity, a clashing, urgent soundtrack builds to a crescendo, as letters drop from the sky and crash on to the mountain.

E X P O S U R E

Seren squeals with excitement.

'Ffi?' Elen prompts.

Ffion tears herself away from the screen. 'What?'

'My parcel.'

'It's probably next door.'

'No, I checked.'

'Ah, well.'

'Oh, that's lovely, that is. My own daughter, a high-flying police officer—'

'I'm a constable, Mam.'

'—and she can't be bothered to investigate when her own mam's been the victim of a hate crime. *Ab, well*, said the police spokeswoman.'

'It's not a hate crime, Mam.'

'Well, *I* hate it.'

'That's not—'

'Remember all those thefts last year, and no one was ever caught? We've got a serial offender on our hands. Or a copycat.'

'Shh!' Seren turns up the volume.

Elen peers at the screen. 'I don't recognise any of them.'

'They're not celebrities, Mam, you're not supposed to recognise them.' Lately, Seren has taken to speaking to her as though Elen is demented, instead of simply menopausal. 'They're just normal people.'

'Except for Ceri,' Ffion says, through a mouthful of pie.

'Ceri's not normal? That's not a very kind thing to say, Ffion Morgan.'

'I mean you'll recognise her.'

'See that pile of logs by the hot tub?' Caleb leaps to his feet, pointing at the screen, which shows what awaits the contestants in camp. 'I stacked those!'

‘You did really good,’ Seren says loyally.

Ffion sets her plate on the floor for Dave to wash. ‘Why were you stacking logs in the *Exposure* camp?’

‘I’m working there,’ Caleb says, not taking his eyes off the screen, where the seven contestants are walking up Pen y Ddraig towards the camp.

‘You’re the *Exposure* runner?’

‘I did tell you,’ Elen says.

‘Mam, you told me Caleb was *running*.’

Elen flaps a hand at Ffion. Runner, running, what of it? On screen, the camera focuses on each contestant in turn, their name and occupation appearing in a banner beneath them.

‘*Pam Butler*,’ Seren reads. ‘Head teacher. She looks like my old PE teacher.’

Elen frowns at her. ‘Your PE teacher was a man.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Well, I think she looks very capable,’ Elen says, feeling the need to defend Pam, who really doesn’t look anything like a man, except that her hair is cut in a practical short back and sides. Like all the contestants, she wears khaki trousers with side pockets, and a bright orange fleece with her name printed on the back. Pam’s trousers have been rolled up at the ankles, Elen notes. They could at least have found a pair to fit her, poor thing.

‘What’s a “childcare practitioner” when it’s at home?’ Ffion says, as *Aliyah Brown* appears on their screen, flashing perfect teeth at the other contestants.

‘She works in a nursery,’ Caleb says.

‘Then why don’t they just say so?’ Ffion says. ‘I suppose they’d call me a “crime practitioner”, would they?’

Caleb gives a sly grin. ‘Actually, Miles called you a—’

‘*Jason Shenton*,’ Elen reads loudly. ‘*Firefighter*.’ Jason has a

beard – one of those small, neat ones that look as though they’ve been drawn on with pen and ink – and Elen wonders what the contestants are allowed in the way of toiletries. She wouldn’t call herself high-maintenance, but you don’t get skin like hers in your early sixties without a bit of retinol, and she wouldn’t want to be parted from it.

‘He’ll win,’ Seren says. ‘Look at the size of those biceps.’

Elen glances at Caleb, but he’s either secure enough not to mind his girlfriend leching over another man, or too engrossed in the show to notice. Elen suspects the latter – the lad was cock-a-hoop to land this running job, and fair play, he’s working hard at it. Seren’s hardly seen him this last month, which is no bad thing, what with A-levels this month.

The next two contestants are both men. *Henry Moore* is an accountant with the accent of someone who’s moved around a lot. He’s tall with dark hair, and although not Elen’s type – he’s twenty years too young, for a start – it’s clear he’ll be competition for Jason when it comes to the female vote.

‘Imagine being stuck in a camp with an accountant.’ Ffion yawns.

‘You can’t write off an entire profession,’ Elen says. ‘You’ll never find a husband with an attitude like that.’

‘Are you auditioning for *Pride and Prejudice*? I don’t want a husband. I had one of those and I got a refund.’

‘A boyfriend, then,’ Elen says, but Ffion doesn’t respond. Elen sighs. All any parent wants is for their children to be happy, isn’t it? And Ffion might think she’s happier on her own, but Elen’s not convinced.

‘I’d rather be stuck with an accountant than a vicar,’ Seren says, as *The Reverend Lucas Taylor* waves to the cameras. His pink cheeks give him a cherubic air, although Elen imagines he must be in his fifties.

'He's really nice, actually,' Caleb says. 'I made him a coffee yesterday, when he arrived. White, no sugar. He said it was perfect.'

'You do make good coffee,' Seren says.

Five minutes into the programme and Elen is already bored. She thinks of all the things she should be doing (laundry, an online shop, the accounts for the holiday let) and all the things she'd *rather* be doing (anything but this), and sighs loudly.

'Mam, no one's forcing you to watch it,' Seren says.

'Just showing my support for Caleb, *cariad*.'

Elen hadn't been sure about Caleb at first. He's English, for starters, and that isn't her being racist, just that a Welsh one would have been better. But for all his London street smarts, and the wisecracks Elen's not sure she always understands, Caleb Northcote is a good lad, and he and Seren have been inseparable for the past year.

'I can't wait to see your name in the credits, babe.' Seren leans over and kisses Caleb. A wave of emotion washes over Elen: like being homesick even though you're having a lovely time on holiday. Elen has watched Ffion grow up (although there are times when that progression is debatable), and now it's Seren's turn. Elen glances at Ffion and realises she is watching Seren too, and that her expression says everything Elen's feeling. The two girls are cut from the same cloth – right down to the untameable hair and the stubborn set of their mouths. *Resting bitch face*, Seren calls it. Elen refrains from commenting that it can be remarkably mobile, too, in her experience.

'So strange to see someone you know on the telly,' Ffion says, as *Ceri Jones* comes into shot. Elen half expects to see Ceri in her usual postal worker shorts, but she's wearing the camp uniform, the bright orange top making her pale skin look sallow.

'More strange to want to be on it,' replies Elen, who sees no

appeal in becoming a performing monkey in front of a public vote. She's surprised to see Ceri – who was bullied dreadfully when she was a teenager – putting herself through something like this, when she's usually so private. Elen has always found it ironic that they know so little about Ceri Jones, when the postwoman knows so much of everyone else's business.

The people of Cwm Coed had discovered Ceri was going to be on *Exposure* the same way the rest of the nation did: in a splashy online story about the 'hot' new reality TV show. The story was accompanied by a sidebar headed 'Five Facts about North Wales', three of which were factually incorrect. 'I gather you're going to be famous,' Elen had said the next morning, as she took her post.

Ceri had reddened. 'I wasn't allowed to say anything. Not till the announcement.'

'What made you apply?'

'Dunno, really. Bit of fun, isn't it?' Ceri had said, but the flush was darkening, and she hadn't hung around to ask after Seren, or for Elen to fish for what Ceri and Ffion had got up to when they went to Liverpool the other weekend.

'Don't you think it's a bit out of character for her?' Elen says now, as they watch Ceri join the other contestants. 'Doing this, I mean?'

'She thinks she can win.' Ffion shrugs. 'And if she does, she's quids in.'

Seren slides on to the floor to join Caleb, who has shuffled closer to the television. 'I thought she had a Sugar Momma?'

'Seren!' Elen chastises, even though Seren is almost eighteen and will soon be leaving home.

'They broke up.' Ffion nods towards the screen. 'Can we actually watch this now, please?'

'That's Ryan,' Caleb says, a split second before the man's name



and occupation appears at the bottom of the screen. *Ryan Francis, software engineer.*

‘He doesn’t look like he’ll present much competition.’ Ryan is walking with Ceri, picking his way gingerly across the rocky terrain. He has the look of a man who spends too much time indoors, Elen concludes. His features are rounded, and long lashes frame soft blue eyes. When he catches his foot in a rabbit hole and stumbles, Ceri snorts with laughter. The camera zooms in on Ryan, blinking away tears.

‘That’s not like Ceri,’ Ffion says.

But Ceri’s not usually playing for a hundred grand, thinks Elen, and money does strange things to people.

Ryan scrubs at his face.

‘Twitter’s going to destroy him.’ Seren speaks with the resigned insight of her generation. ‘I might have to give him a pity vote.’

‘For one pound twenty plus network rates? You can use your own phone if you do.’ Elen won’t be casting a vote, although, if she did, it would be for the head teacher, who is clearly a woman after Elen’s own heart. No sooner have the contestants arrived in camp than Pam Butler is swiftly organising their chores.

‘Henry and Jason, you get a fire going; Aliyah, sweetheart, are you okay to make the beds up with Lucas?’ She plants both hands on her ample hips and surveys their surroundings. ‘See that cupboard marked “food”, Ryan? Go and see what we might be able to rustle up for lunch.’

‘Notice she’s getting everyone else to do the work,’ Ffion says archly. ‘Typical teacher.’

A loud scream makes everyone jump – both on screen and in Elen’s lounge. Aliyah comes haring out of the women’s tent and throws herself at the nearest man: the accountant, Henry Moore.

‘There’s a massive spider!’ She shudders, brushing herself down

as though she were teeming with arachnids. ‘Get it out, please! I can’t sleep in that tent if there are going to be spiders there.’

Seren snorts. ‘She’s not going to last long.’

Henry puts an arm around Aliyah and gives her a squeeze. ‘I’ll sort it.’

The camera cuts to an interior shot, as Henry enters the women’s tent and looks around. Three neatly made beds are positioned in a fan shape, their pillows almost touching the canvas walls. A wooden locker sits at the foot of each bed, and in the centre of the tent is a pile of giant bean bags.

‘Shows like this would normally have dozens of editors,’ says Caleb, with the experience of a fortnight in the industry. ‘But the way Miles has done it is really clever. He and another editor spent weeks on the template for the show, so Miles can drop footage in as quickly as possible. Storyboarding, it’s called. Miles works insane hours. He goes for a run every morning, but otherwise he’s at his desk from like six a.m. till after the show goes out.’

On screen, Henry is shaking out bedding. He stoops and cups something in his hands.

‘People say Miles is a control freak, but I think he’s a genius. And he’s sound, too, you know? Like, giving me my first TV credit – that’s huge. It’s really going to open doors.’

Back in camp, Henry has disposed of the spider and received a hero’s hug from Aliyah.

‘I know it’s pathetic,’ she says. ‘But it’s the way their legs are all . . .’ She lets out a squeal at the thought of it.

Henry laughs gently. ‘Everyone’s scared of something. Don’t sweat it.’

‘What are you scared of?’ Aliyah asks.

‘Me? Water.’ Henry looks embarrassed. ‘I almost drowned when I was a kid.’



‘Oh, my God.’ Aliyah puts a hand to her chest. She looks as though she’s about to ask more, but the pair of them are summoned by Jason, who has found a spade and decided they need to dig out the fire pit for a better result.

‘They found bones. Right there,’ Caleb says, and it’s clear he’s been bursting to share this news.

‘Bones?’ Elen looks at Ffion. ‘Do you know about this? It could be a crime scene.’

‘Thanks for the advice, Mam.’

They’re interrupted by a glamorous brunette striding on to screen. At first glance she’s in the same combat trousers as the contestants, but Elen notes that the tailoring is better, and that the utilitarian buttons have been switched for glittering silver ones. In place of the orange fleece is a black gilet, unzipped to reveal a hint of cleavage.

‘Welcome –’ the presenter gives a dramatic pause ‘– to Dragon Mountain!’

The contestants’ cheers are drowned out by the chorus of *It’s Pen y Ddraig!* from Elen’s lounge, almost certainly echoed in every house in Cwm Coed, Elen thinks. Dragon Mountain indeed. *Bobl bach!*

‘They were going to use the Welsh name,’ Caleb says. ‘But Roxy couldn’t say it properly.’

‘If people can’t say it, they shouldn’t be on it,’ Elen says tartly.

‘Ladies and gentlemen.’ Roxy Wilde has a twinkle in her eye. ‘You think you’re here for a survival show, don’t you?’ There are shouts of *Yes!* from some of the contestants. Pam and Ryan exchange uneasy glances. Roxy delivers her punchline with panache. ‘You’re wrong.’

‘What does she mean?’ Elen waits for Caleb to explain, but the lad looks as confused as the rest of them.

‘All of you have a secret,’ Roxy says. ‘Something you’ve worked hard to conceal from your friends and family.’ The camera closes in as she smiles wickedly at the seven contestants. ‘You’re not only competing for cash. You’re competing to keep your secret. You’re competing to avoid *Exposure*.’

‘Holy fuck,’ Ffion says.

Seren gives a short, shocked laugh. She turns to Caleb. ‘You kept that quiet.’

‘I – I wasn’t allowed to say anything,’ Caleb says, but Elen sees he’s flustered. He turns away from them, clearly upset that the ‘creative genius’ he so reveres hasn’t let him in on the show’s own big secret.

‘Your objective,’ Roxy is saying, ‘is to finish the fourteen days with your secret intact. Whoever’s still standing after the final episode receives an incredible hundred thousand pounds each!’

‘They can’t do this, Ffion *bach*, surely?’

‘I think they are doing it, Mam.’

Roxy has produced a metal box which she’s padlocking on to a wooden plinth close to where Jason and Henry were digging the fire pit. She turns and addresses the camera. ‘This box contains all the contestants’ secrets, and *you* can vote for the contestant you want to expose.’

‘Oh, my God, let’s vote to expose Lucas!’ Seren says. ‘I bet he’s a pervert – vicars always are, aren’t they?’

Elen feels nauseous. Who came up with such a twisted idea? How did it ever get approved? She wants to leave the room, but she’s unable to move, gripped by the awfulness of what she’s watching.

‘Voting will be open continuously, and at any point when we decide to, we’ll send the viewers’ least favourite contestant to the confession pod.’ Roxy grins. ‘And let’s just say we have a few

tricks up our sleeves to encourage those revelations . . .' There follows an abrupt, dizzying montage of a tiny windowless space containing nothing but a throne-like chair fixed to the ground. In the first shot, water pours into the room; in the second, rats swarm over the seat. There are spiders next, then snakes, then cockroaches. A sudden flurry of wings, then the crimson splash of blood. The next shot shows the pod from the outside, and Elen sees that the structure is narrow as a coffin and submerged into the ground. She shudders at the thought of being trapped inside it.

Roxy Wilde is rattling through the rules. Contestants can try to win a day's immunity by exposing someone else, but if the accuser's guess is wrong, it's they who will enter the confession pod to face three minutes of their own personal hell.

'This is brutal,' Seren breathes, and yet, on screen, the contestants are giving whoops of excitement.

'Bring it on!' cries Jason.

'I am *so* up for this!' Aliyah says.

Roxy turns to the camera. 'What do our contestants have to hide? Join us tomorrow evening to find out!'

As the credits roll, Elen, Seren and Ffion look at each other in stunned silence.

Ffion whistles. 'Poor Ceri. Do you think she had any idea?'

'I doubt it,' Elen says. 'I get the impression no one knew. Is that right, Caleb?'

But Caleb is intent on the screen, looking for the credit that will kickstart his career in television. He blinks rapidly as the music finishes, then turns to Seren in confusion. 'It wasn't there. My name wasn't there.'

Seren's mouth drops open. 'The bastard.'

Elen doesn't admonish her. She looks at Ffion, and she knows

they're both thinking the same thing. They're thinking about how they'd feel if their own secrets were exposed; they're imagining how those men and women on Pen y Ddraig feel at the prospect of public humiliation.

'He promised me.' Caleb is almost in tears. 'He said there wasn't a budget to put me on the payroll, but I'd be in the credits as production assistant.'

'Absolute c—'

'*Diolch yn fawr*, Seren Morgan, that's quite enough.' Elen crosses the room and snaps off the TV. 'Well, no one will be tuning in to watch *that* drivel tomorrow, if they've got a shred of decency about them—'

Ffion gives a bark of laughter. 'But they haven't, Mam. Reality TV is the modern-day equivalent of taking your knitting to an execution. Half the UK will be watching this tomorrow, desperate to see someone's life torn apart.' She shakes herself, as though the thought makes her feel dirty. 'I'll tell you one thing: finding a pile of old bones is going to be the least of their troubles.'