

## Chapter 1

"I wish Nigel was here!"

Bruce, Laura Fowler's father, sounded weak, but Laura knew better. He lifted his left eyebrow and the corner of his mouth dropped. The right side of his face remained unaltered by this movement. Due to his pale complexion and the dark rings around his grey eyes, he looked somehow spooky. Like the young Gothic guys who roamed the Guildford graveyards.

And I wish Nigel would go jump in a lake, Laura thought.

She frowned and tried to stifle her sigh which escaped nonetheless. From her kneeling position she looked at the man in the wheelchair quickly, but he didn't react. Not only had his eyesight suffered from old age or from the stroke he had had but his hearing was bad too.

Bruce Fowler looked at his daughter with annoyance. He was almost bald. Only a few strands of hair of an indefinable colour covered his ears. The thin neck with several skin folds followed the motion of his head. Laura was not sure if his expression came from the stroke he had suffered several months ago or if it was just another way to express his discontent: with his situation – or with her. He reminded Laura of a turkey that had got lost on its way to the butcher.

Laura turned back to the spilt breakfast cereal beside the table and continued cleaning up. The biting smell of sour milk and urine made her gag.

They could not go on like this. The old man needed care. Special care, much more than she could offer alongside her work as a detective. Although just at the moment there was not much to do. As if the criminals had gone on spring holidays like all the others. As if they wanted to give her more time for her father. This was the only reason she had popped in this morning on her way to work.

The telephone in the hall started ringing and Laura jumped up. When she reached the phone, it stopped before she could pick up the receiver.

Somebody must have remembered that the old man was unable to answer the phone most of the time. She had been thinking of buying an answering machine for him, but it wouldn't make a difference. He would be incapable of operating it. He could not even cope with the microwave. So somebody had to come in every day to warm up his meals.

Laura watched her father taking out his set of teeth and, taking a walnut from the wooden bowl on the table, he put the nut between the teeth and started cracking it with both hands.

Laura went to him and tried to take the teeth from his hands, but he didn't let her. She looked at him and felt depressed.

Before he had become ill she used to prepare his meals at her home after work and put them into his deep freezer once a week, so he could put them into the microwave and warm them up himself. But lately he had lost even this ability.

And Laura was not sure if he took his medicine or put it into the flowerpots instead. The flowers looked much better than the old man.

The home help Laura had organised from his neighbourhood didn't work out too well. The lady was nice and careful, but like Laura's mother long ago and like Laura herself she couldn't cope with the old man's grumpy behaviour.

And, as Laura could see very clearly today, his situation called for much more than help with watering the flowers and helping with domestic chores, she had to admit. She looked at her father and bit her cheek. She would have to look for an old people's nursing home.

Her mobile phone rang. Laura looked at her wristwatch. Half past nine, it might be her colleague Bill Stern. She rooted around in her bag, got the phone out and looked at the display. "Unknown number", it said. Laura frowned and pressed the green button.

"Yes?"

"Hi Laura, it's me. Nigel."

Laura felt her stomach churn and swallowed without answering.

As if he had a built-in antenna, she thought. For his father or for special situations. He had always been sensitive, at least in this respect.

"How are you?"

Her younger brother's voice sounded ingratiating. Laura still kept silent.

"I'm on my way back to Guildford. Well, you could do me a favour ..."

Never ever, Laura thought, not as long as I can avoid it! She felt her back stiffen.

"Can I stay in your house for a while?"

"Absolutely not!", she replied louder than necessary.

And the very moment she said it she knew she should have been even firmer.

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