

## Chapter 1

There was nothing particularly remarkable about the woman in front of her. Laura shook her head to get rid of the remains of the nightmare that had once again been haunting her when Bill had woken her up half an hour ago.

"Can we come back in?" a man's voice cut through her thoughts. Laura nodded and focused on the woman again. She was in her mid-thirties, her hair resembled a dull mousy-coloured helmet and reminded Laura of her aunt Thelma. The woman was wearing a pink T-shirt with a big white teddy-bear waving happily at Laura, blue leggings which covered her knees and un-branded trainers. At first sight this woman looked quite average. The only remarkable fact was that she was dead.

"Could you step aside when you have finished, Inspector? We still need to get on with gathering evidence and taking fingerprints – the whole procedure." Garry Peterson placed a plate with the number thirteen on the grey linoleum kitchen floor beside the woman's outstretched body and signalled Eve Gray to take a photo.

"Has the doctor already seen her?" Laura asked while she was watching the two scene of crime officers in their white overalls examining the fingernails of the woman. She still couldn't help being impressed by their work. Only two weeks ago they had found some DNA-material under the nails of a murdered eight-year old girl which had eventually led to her father's arrest. The CID would not have been able to prove this without the SOCOs.

"Nope," Peterson answered, "we have to finish our job first. Dr Hall is waiting in the living room. You can send him in in two minutes time if you like."

Laura took one last glance around the kitchen. Everything was spick and span, a fitted kitchen with a table and corner seat that provided seating for six people – just as you would expect to find in a middle-class home. The open shelves were filled with Plopperware, some of the boxes still wrapped in plastic bags. A plastic bottle was standing on the sink, a plate with number seven on at its side. The fridge door was decorated with some kid's paintings. A perfect home in perfect surroundings. The small market town of Wonersh was a nice place to bring up children and to lead a normal family life.

"Let me introduce Detective Chief Inspector Laura Fowler to you, Dr Hall. Ms Fowler, this is Dr Hall, the Graham family's GP." Laura could hardly resist shaking her head.

Bill Stern's habit of addressing her by her surname in front of strangers or superiors had irritated her time and time again. Although he held the same position as Laura and, at the age of thirty-two, was only three years younger than her, he sometimes behaved as if he was her apprentice.

"Pleased to meet you," Dr Hall nodded at her. His fluffy hair looked like a silver halo around the back of his head.

“Okay, Sir,” Laura looked into his friendly eyes. “You can examine your — ahem — former patient now.” She turned to Bill. “And while the Doc is doing his work, you could update me, please, Bill.”

“Of course,” Bill took a deep breath and skimmed through his notebook. When his mother called at the office she always asked for „Shorty Stern“, and his first words on the phone were „Oh, mum, please!“. Tonight, once again Laura was reminded of Tom, the cat from the Disney cartoon, who was always chasing Jerry the mouse. Bill’s reddish hair was sticking up like the tomcat’s black fur, which added almost three centimeters to his height.

“At 10.30 p.m. David Graham, the lady’s husband, called the CID Headquarters and said that he had found his wife Celia murdered when he had arrived home from a long weekend at the seaside with his kids. I was on call so I was pulled out of a bowling competition at Guildford,” Bill gave Laura a look as if she were responsible for his spoiled Sunday night out.

“At 11 p.m. I arrived at the Graham’s house and the husband let me in and led me into the kitchen where his wife was lying on the floor. Since he hadn’t called an ambulance I rang Dr Hall. He seems to have known the family for ages and I thought it might be productive talking to him.” Bill hesitated and looked at Laura.

“Good job, Bill. Did you find anything interesting? Any signs of forced entry or violence?”

“No, that’s the point. Nothing that relates to murder. Only the husband ...”

“Yes, that’s strange, isn’t it? Where is he?”

“In the bedroom, come on, I’ll introduce you to him.”

“Did the doctor have to sedate him?”

“No, he didn’t. He was fine.” Bill opened the door wide to let her pass through.

David Graham was a handsome man, dressed from head to toe in black, the gypsy version of George Clooney. Even sitting on the edge of the bed he seemed tall.

He jumped up when they entered and Laura couldn’t help smiling when she realised that he was a head taller than her and Bill. He had a slim figure. Once again she had guessed right. He seemed very composed and calm. After a short introduction Laura got down to business.

“Mr Graham, you found your wife lying on the kitchen floor. What made you call the police instead of looking for medical help of any kind? That seems to be an unusual reaction to me. Normally people call the ambulance, the fire brigade or the doctor, don’t they?”

“Well,” Graham buried his hands in his trouser pockets, “Celia was obviously dead, I realised that at once. I tried to help her, held her hand and touched her cheek. She was cold and her eyes were wide open. It was not a pretty sight, was it?” He paused and swallowed.

“Well, I didn’t have much time to think about what to do, my kids were with me. I had sent them to their room but they were shouting for me. As my wife had been very health-conscious I thought – well, this cannot happen to me or her, this cannot be true, something must have gone wrong – so I called the police.”

“Yes, Mr Graham, I understand. But you did not just dial 999, the emergency number, you called the homicide division. That’s strange, isn’t it?”

Laura watched his reaction. Either Graham was a brilliant actor or he was actually a bit naive. He didn’t appear to be too concerned when he answered.

“Well, just try to understand the stress I was under. I found my wife dead, my kids wanted to see her and to know what had happened, I wanted that too, but I had to protect my kids, so I didn’t really know what to do first. I called my sister and she came and took care of the kids. While I was waiting for her I tried to find something to distract the kids from the kitchen, so we went into the living room and I turned on the TV and put a DVD on, I can’t recall what it was.

I was so confused that I couldn’t remember the emergency number, I had to look up the police in the telephone directory.

I just dialed a number, I can’t remember if I realised that it was the homicide department, but I don’t think so.” He looked straight into Laura’s eyes until Bill cleared his throat.

Laura closed her notepad. “Okay, that’s it for the moment. I hope we’ll be able to leave you alone in about half an hour’s time, I just have to talk to the doctor.”

Dr Hall got up from his kneeling position and closed his bag. His grandfatherly face looked troubled. “I’m sorry, but I am sure you are expecting this, I cannot sign the death certificate without a post-mortem examination, because it would appear that this is not the case of a natural cause of death.” He sighed and looked down at the dead body.

Garry Peterson and Eve Gray were about to close the body bag, when the doctor bent down and gently wiped a strand of mousy hair from the woman’s forehead.

“You will need an autopsy,” he added and stretched his back.

Laura nodded. “I thought you would say that. Is there anything else you can say about the family?”

“Of course not, no,” Dr Hall answered, “you know, I am bound by professional discretion, don’t you, but I can assure you that Celia Graham was a perfectly sound and healthy young woman, brimming with life.”

Nevertheless, she is dead and there is the idea of murder, Laura thought on her way home. It was pitch-black and raining cats and dogs. When she crossed the bridge over the Wey she could not even see the romantic narrow boats on the river she liked so much.

Once an idea is evoked you cannot deny it. It is the same old story, just as in her own case. The very moment the words ‘drug addiction’ were out, she could no longer close her eyes, she had to face her own private nightmare.

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