

CHAPTER 1

LAURA SMILED GRIMLY AS SHE WATCHED the Bentley crawling up the rutted lane and around the bend by the oak tree. Eventually the chauffeur drew to a halt and hurried to open the door for her stepfather, who eased himself out and marched slowly towards her.

‘Laura, my dear. Such a long time.’ Julius flashed his impossibly perfect set of false teeth.

She steeled herself not to turn away as he bent forward to give her a dry kiss. ‘Hello,’ she said. ‘You’re looking very fit.’

Amazingly fit for a man of eighty-two. With his perma-tan monkey face and small-boned frame, he reminded her of one of those ancient American film stars you always thought were dead until they’re resurrected on Parkinson.

Despite his tweed jacket and cavalry-twill trousers, Julius appeared out of place in the English countryside. His clothes were too new and too bright, particularly the yellow plaid socks.

Julius nearly tripped on one of the numerous loose stones on the path but otherwise moved with surprising agility. She led him into the sitting room where, in an attempt to be more hospitable than she felt, she had set the tea tray.

Once seated in her best armchair, he looked around. ‘Nice vase of daffodils,’ was all he found to say. His pale eyes were sharp behind half-moon glasses.

He shuddered when she offered him milk in his tea. ‘Oh, no, my dear. Have to be careful with dairy produce at my age. I’ll just take a little slice of lemon. But if you were to hand me one of those scones, I dare say it wouldn’t do any harm, just this once. No, don’t bother offering anything to Paul. He prefers to stay with the car, such a careful boy.’ He went on to ask her questions

about the garden but didn't appear to be listening to the answers.

Eventually she screwed herself up to say, 'About my mother's will, did the solicitors tell you I'd been in touch with them?'

His nose quivered. 'Ah yes, the Trust. It is all very difficult, my dear. I have talked to Tony – my accountant, good chap, used to be with his father, now he's taken over. Anyway, he feels I should preserve the capital intact in order to ensure maximum income – and there's not a huge amount of capital, you know. I'm only just able to live within my means as it is. After all, it was your dear mother's wish that I should be provided for until I die. Of course, it'll all come to you eventually but, alas, not yet, my dear. When I say all, there's not that much, and there's the question of my possible future needs. Nursing homes are so expensive, and, as Tony says, one should think of every eventuality...'

She forced herself to stay calm. 'Of course, I know, but I really would be grateful to have a little bit of my inheritance – however small – now, in advance. You see, I want to stay here and I don't seem to have the qualifications for a decent job – and it's very hard to start at the bottom at my age – so I had the idea of converting the cottage into a Bed and Breakfast place, but of course it needs roof repairs and a new bathroom and proper central heating, and as for the kitchen...' His attention appeared to be fading so she said in a sudden rush 'If you, the Trust, could perhaps let me have about ten thousand, that would be more than enough to pay my debts and set me on my feet. Then the bank might lend me some, possibly.'

There was a long pause. Eventually he spoke, his tone dry and remote. 'Didn't, er – your husband leave you any money? Thought there was some in his family.'

'No, there wasn't.'

Another silence.

'I'm sorry I couldn't come to the funeral, my dear, but I was in Switzerland.' His nose quivered again. 'I hope you got the wreath I sent.'

'Yes, thank you.'

'How long ago was it that he...?'

'William died fourteen months ago.'

'But he'd been ill for some years.'

'Yes,' she said bleakly. Any moment Julius would say something about its being a happy release for William. Which was what most people said or tried to say, if they brought up the subject at all. That is, if they hadn't already crossed the road to avoid speaking to her about the whole embarrassing business of death. For her, the real William had died eight years ago when he had a massive stroke, leaving behind a shell of a man who spent his day in a wheelchair. She couldn't explain to anyone how much she missed him, even the shell of him.

'But you're still a relatively young woman,' Julius was saying. 'You can start your life again. Sell this cottage. It's in an appalling state of repair. Take far more than ten thousand to put it right. I have a much better idea. Come and live in London with me. I am sure your dear mother would have wanted us to be together.'

She stared at him open mouthed, trying to disguise her anger and revulsion.

'D'you see,' he continued, his eyes filling with tears, 'I'm not getting any younger and I find my daily is getting rather careless and over-familiar these days, and very shirty if I ask her to do any extra time. And, though Paul is a nice boy, he seems very reluctant to do anything except drive and look after the car, not

at all like the older type of servant who would do anything one asked. I'm sure you'd cope much better.'

'No, no, thank you,' she managed to say.

'But, judging by this very nice tea you have provided – the scones tasted home-made – you'd be an excellent housekeeper, my dear. And you do have nursing experience, not that I need nursing now, but you see if you came to look after me, it would mean I'd have to spend less on domestic help and it would save us both money, money that'll all be yours eventually, as I said.'

'Julius, I don't think we would get on,' she said through clenched teeth.

'But why not? I'm an easy-going man, easy to live with, and I have very simple tastes in food, hardly eat a thing. You needn't think you'd have to spend all your time in the kitchen. One really doesn't mind eating Marks & Spencer now and then. And the flat is quite near Harrods so shopping isn't difficult.' He paused and his eyes glinted. 'Ah, perhaps the proprieties worry you. I assure you, my dear, I am eighty years old, past all that long ago.'

Her patience ran out. 'It is not a question of propriety. It just wouldn't work. Quite apart from anything else, I don't like London. This is my home and I don't want to leave it. It's important to me, you see.'

'Perhaps you need time to think about it, but I am very much afraid that my hospitality is the only thing I can offer.' His eyes glinted again. 'Ah, silly of me. There must be a boyfriend around. A bit soon, perhaps, but no one would blame you, an attractive widow like you, sick husband all those years.'

Laura glared at him. 'There is no boyfriend, not that it's any business of yours. Now if you will excuse me, I have things to do. Like ringing up the solicitors.'

He hauled himself upright. 'Won't do you any good, my dear. Your mother's will was quite clear. I know it's hard for you to accept, but she felt you needed to be protected and that I was the person to do it. That husband of yours, he wasn't very good with money, was he? Threw it down the drain. That ridiculous business with the hotel in Greece.'

She could never argue calmly and rationally. Her voice grew higher and higher. 'For God's sake, that was years and years ago and it wasn't our fault... As for you protecting *me*, I've never heard... I mean, you're not protecting me at all. It's you who's protecting yourself. I'm sure my mother never meant it this way, for you to live in the lap of luxury while I...' She rose to her feet, scraping back the chair. 'Julius, I think you had better go.'

'I was going to take my leave anyway,' he said stiffly. 'My hosts will be expecting me. I'm staying with Rex. They say he'll be the Lord Lieutenant of Hampshire next year, d'you know.'

With a great deal of huffing and puffing, he left.

Enraged, Laura stared after him. When she had calmed down she reminded herself yet again that the world was full of people who had no money at all and no rich stepfather, wicked or otherwise. And, whether he liked it or not, Julius would be obliged to leave her something for her old age, unless he'd spent it all.

Meanwhile, as she had completely and utterly screwed up any chance of extracting any of her money from him, she would damn well manage on her own.

The Manager of the local National Westminster Bank had always admired Laura Brooke. A pretty woman, in a nice natural country way, he thought. She'd been to see him in the past now and then. Money problems, what with that poor invalid hubby of hers. Not that she was a moaner – coped pretty well, far too

young for that lonely life, really. His wife's sister lived in the same village so he knew a bit about her. Looked younger than she was, Mrs Brooke, he thought, peering down at her file to note that she was in her mid-forties. Not too skinny, nice feminine figure. Her brown wavy hair was thick and untidy – the way she pushed it impatiently back from her face was rather appealing.

Clearing his throat, he said, 'I have studied your proposition for a prospective Bed & Breakfast business carefully, but, despite the fact you have catering experience, I don't think it's viable.'

'Oh, why not?'

He frowned, trying to ignore the distress in those blue eyes. 'You're not likely to attract the passing trade out there in St Mary Wield, are you? Even locals get lost finding your village. It's just too remote, Mrs Brooke, too remote by far. You might find a few guests willing to venture out into the depths of the country in July and August, but you can't accommodate enough people to bring in a decent income. And it's not as if there's any local sights or anything for the kiddies to do once they get there. In winter, well, you wouldn't get anyone at all in winter, you know. If the Bank were to advance this sum you require, I don't think you would be able to repay it. Unless you re-mortgage. If you offer the house as security, then we may well be able to help you.'

'No, no, I don't want to do that. Not the house.' She shook her head emphatically. 'But some B&B guests might like being remote and they could always go and visit Chawton. People are getting keener and keener on Jane Austen. I've heard there are busloads of American tourists.'

'Chawton is just too far. If you were nearer to it, or a bit closer to Winchester... As I said, you won't get the numbers you

need to provide a regular return, and all that financial outlet won't have been worth while.'

Mrs Brooke began to argue her case quite sensibly but he could see she wasn't used to this sort of thing. Her voice went all high and strained.

Finally, with a fatherly smile, he sat back. 'In my opinion, your best course of action would be to sell your house to raise some capital, then buy a cheap flat somewhere. Then you could seek another form of employment, perhaps residential. For instance, I know there are many Retirement Homes that would value your considerable experience of caring for the sick.'

This prudent suggestion didn't seem to go down very well.

'But that's the very last thing I want to do.' She sounded really upset. 'Must go. Thank you anyway,' she gulped and rushed out.

The manager sadly closed the file.

Laura was glad of an excuse to take the day off from her latest miserable and badly paid temporary job – waitress in the Cosy Copper Kettle – to take a trip to London. She was determined to make one last desperate appeal to the solicitors before putting her house on the market. But the journey proved to be a waste of time and the train fare. High up in their plush modern City block, they were charmingly and politely dismissive. They could definitely not advance her any money without the approval of the chief trustee, Julius.

Dazed and disillusioned, she was walking slowly across Waterloo Station when she heard someone shrieking her name. Laura turned. Oh no, it couldn't be. Yes, it was. It was Bridget.

'Laura, what a piece of luck,' yelled Bridget, pushing past a group of startled-looking men with briefcases, 'Recognised you a mile away. Always look exactly the same as you did at school.'

Hardly a compliment, thought Laura who had been plain as a schoolgirl. Bridget, though, had been a teenage beauty in a solid athletic Amazonian sort of way. She had kept her looks and today she was wearing a wonderful suit, soft red with gold buttons and a short skirt. Too short for her goal-post legs, in Laura's view.

'Frightfully sorry to hear about your husband,' said Bridget without lowering her voice. 'Still, chap like that. Not much future. Only heard when we got back from Melbourne last month. You should have written. Now, when are you coming to dinner?' she asked all in the same breath. Her years in Australia had not in any way toned down the exaggerated plummy of her diction.

'Well, I...'

'Got a wonderful idea. Come tonight. Now, this evening. George is away on business. Take pot luck with me, so we can have a proper chat.'

'That's really kind, but it's a quarter to five, and I have to get back, really. Before the rush hour.'

'Get back for what? You can do what you want now you're a widow.'

The thought that she was now totally independent for the first time in her life always unsettled Laura. She felt she should be used to the loneliness but she wasn't, not yet.

'Do you good. Be impulsive. Do come,' Bridget was saying and half an hour later Laura found herself in East Sheen outside the front door of an Edwardian semi-detached house.

'Here we are,' said Bridget. 'Had to buy in a hurry, as soon as we got back from Australia. Couldn't stay long in a hotel with our three monsters. The boys are having tea with a friend, thank God. I'll shove 'em straight into bed as soon as they get back.'

Bridget, who had tried to quiz her in a most intimate manner on the train, much to the interest of the other passengers, now pressed her into accepting an early glass of wine and a seat by the fire. The interrogation began in earnest. 'So what are you going to do?'

Laura explained about the failed Bed & Breakfast plan.

'Hm,' said Bridget. 'Why not try hotel management? You used to own a hotel in Greece didn't you. Before William's stroke.'

'Yes, but I don't have any references. And my CV is very bare. Dropping out of university to get married and owning a hotel that went bust isn't very impressive, even if it wasn't our fault. No one wants take me on as any kind of manager. I've been for about five disastrous interviews already. They took one look at me and my wrinkles and said no thanks, no recent experience. And I really can't face starting as a chambermaid or something at my age. Anyway, I want to stay in my own home.'

'Wrinkles? Nonsense, Laura, can't see a single bloody one,' boomed Bridget. 'God, look at me after the Oz sun... But tell me about this place of yours – sounds more of a millstone round your neck rather than an asset. Why're you so attached to it?'

Laura took another sip of wine and stared into the flames. It would sound trite to say that Pond Cottage was like an old friend. 'We were happy there... in the early days,' she said finally. 'And it's Alice's home. She was born there.'

'But I thought you had a shotgun marriage and ran away to Greece. That's what I heard. I was pretty offended not to be asked to the wedding by the way.'

Laura smiled. 'Sorry. It was very quiet, not shotgun though,' Thanks to the miscarriage, she thought. Aloud she said, 'But we did run away to Greece. At one point William tried working in London for a while – that's when Alice was born. But he didn't

like it. London, I mean. So we went back to Greece. But all the time we were abroad I knew the cottage was there, like a security blanket.'

'So how old is Alice now? What's she doing?'

Laura was sometimes tempted to be economical with the truth when people asked her this question, because everyone else's daughter seemed to be reading Economics at Durham, if not Law at Cambridge. Or they'd just set up their own IT company and were making millions.

To Bridget she confessed that eighteen-year-old Alice was a nanny on a cattle ranch in Argentina and seemed determined to stay there. It had been a Gap-year job which, unfortunately, had turned into a permanent one.

'In the middle of the pampas or whatever? Isn't that a bit dull for a young girl?'

'Not if you're sleeping with your middle-aged rancher boss, it seems,' said Laura dryly.

Bridget laughed. 'So Alice has a man. What about you?'

'No.'

'Not at all? No one on the horizon?'

'No. Really, I had a happy marriage so I count myself lucky.'

'But unless you're a complete saint you can't have been all that happy after William's stroke, all day every day with an invalid.'

'Oh, I'm not a saint, just the opposite, but I got used to it... like plenty of other women in the same position. Got to accept the cards that are dealt. There isn't time to be unhappy when you're a full-time nurse. Anyway, it was much worse for him than it was for me, of course.' This speech was Laura's stock answer and the easiest thing to say. In fact, she'd often been miserable, resentful, desperate even, but she preferred not to dwell on her own inadequacies. Few people could understand

the relentless burden, the frustrations, the sheer drudgery and the only too rare rewards of looking after the person who used to be William. Far better not to discuss her feelings, far better to suppress them.

'Was he, uh, completely paralysed?'

'Not completely.'

'But... no sex?'

'No.'

'So did you have a lover?'

'No time for that sort of thing,' said Laura primly. Nor any real temptation, she thought. Apart from Jack, of course, but he was out of reach. Maybe if he'd been less honourable...

Bridget stared at her incredulously. 'You haven't had sex for eight or nine years?' People often hinted around this matter but only a few asked a direct question on the subject. Laura had correctly predicted that Bridget would be one of them.

Bridget put down her glass with a bang. 'Unbelievable! High time you had a bit of fun. You're still jolly attractive in a country-bumpkin way. All you need is a decent haircut and a few new clothes and you'd knock 'em flat, well, flat-ish. I'll have to hunt around for a suitable chap. Let me think...'

She was not the first woman to make this kind of remark and occasionally one of Laura's friends would invite her to a ghastly party where she would be paired off with a dull elderly bachelor or wolfish divorcé. But she always refused any subsequent dates. She'd never found any of them in the least attractive. 'You don't have to fall madly in love to go out to dinner with a bloke, just dinner, for God's sake,' said one friend crossly. 'Anyway, you can't afford to be fussy, you know. Eligible chaps of your age are in pretty short supply.' To pacify such friends Laura usually said maybe she wasn't ready for a new relationship.

She explained some of this to Bridget.

'Got to start somewhere, can't stay in the nunnery for ever,' said Bridget, taking off her headband and tossing her hair. 'I'll have to find a tame man for you to practise on, while you're waiting for Prince Charming, that is.'

'Bridget, what I need is a decent job. What I *don't* need is the responsibility of a man in my life. Even my own daughter thinks I should live a little, spread my wings.'

Bridget snorted. 'Well, she's right there. So why are you so determined to bury yourself in the country? Crazy. You've got to wake up, rejoin the modern world. You're just putting your head in the sand, or the compost heap rather.'

Laura smiled sadly, 'Actually, after today I think I'll have to face it, I'm going to have to sell up. So if you know anyone who wants a so-called secluded rural retreat...'

'How many bedrooms?'

'Three. Or two and a half, to be honest.'

'I shall come and visit you, a tour of inspection.'

Then later, towards the end of the evening, a smug-looking Bridget said, 'An exceedingly brilliant plan has just occurred to me. Sometimes I'm quite surprised by my own genius. Can't say a word yet, but I may be able to solve all your problems in one fell swoop... D'you like Paris? And, if you play your cards right, there could be a man too.'

Yet another well-meaning busybody trying to arrange my life, thought Laura wearily.