

Chapter One

Wiltshire, October

Just after midnight thunder boomed so loudly that Nell woke with a start. Lightning flashed and another clap of thunder seemed to shake the big old house.

She lay for a few moments listening to the storm then felt her husband jerk awake.

Angus didn't try to speak till another clap of thunder had rumbled away into the distance. 'Damn! The weather forecast didn't say it'd be such a heavy storm; they just predicted rain.'

She flung aside the covers and went to draw back a curtain and peer out across the formal gardens at the rear. 'It must have been raining for a while. There are puddles everywhere.'

As he joined her, a sudden squall pounded heavily against the windows, blurring the world outside. Once again conversation became difficult because of loud thunder.

'It couldn't have come at a worse time.' He thumped one clenched fist on the window sill.

She knew why. The roof at the north end of this big house had been leaking and he was jiggling his finances so that it could be fixed properly, not merely patched up. The last two owners, distant relatives of his, had done a lot of skimpy patching. You didn't always know where problems still lay until the weak spots began to fall apart.

Angus sighed and dragged on his tatty winter dressing gown, thrusting his feet into equally shabby trainers. 'I'd better go and check the attics. The leak bucket will probably need emptying. You might as well stay in bed.'

'No way! I'm awake now so I'm coming with you. You may need my help.'

They heard it before they got to the open space at the north end of the attic: water splashing almost continuously, a lot more of it than the occasional drip there had been formerly.

He switched on the single light bulb that dangled forlornly from the middle of the ceiling at that end. 'Oh, hell!'

As thunder rumbled, lightning lit up the attic like a scene from an old horror film, the flickering black and white causing eerie shadows to jump around the walls. The sound of the rain beating down on the roof tiles in another heavy downpour drowned out the splashing for a few moments, then the rain eased off and they could hear the water coming down inside the attic again.

The bucket normally coped adequately with the small leak but the fault must have worsened because water was now trickling steadily over the top edge and spreading out across the floorboards.

He looked up. 'I bet the wind has dislodged some tiles.'

She bent to study the wooden floor around the bucket. It was dark with moisture and more was overflowing every minute. 'I know where there's an old baby bath. I'll go and fetch it.'

'Thanks.'

When she got back, he'd moved the bucket and put an old tin tray in its place. The tray was already covered by a shallow film of water. She put the baby bath down and he tipped the water from the tray into it at the same time as he used his foot to edge the bath into place under the leak. 'I'll go and empty the bucket in the bathroom up here.'

When he got back, he looked glumly at the baby bath. 'You might as well go back to bed, love. I'll have to stay up to keep emptying the water. I won't be able to do anything about fixing the leak till it's light.'

'I'll never get back to sleep. The storm sounds to be right overhead. How about I bring you up a cup of cocoa?'

'I'd murder for a hot drink. And could you bring my old sweater up with you as well? It's going to be a long, cold night.'

'We'll keep each other company, then.'

'Whatever did I do to deserve a helpmeet like you?' he said softly.

‘Same goes for me. You make my ex seem like an alien from Planet Zog.’

It seemed ages till the storm passed and the rain eased. As soon as dawn lightened the sky, Angus went outside, squelching across the sodden lawn till he was far enough away from the house to peer up at the roof through his binoculars.

When he came back, he said, ‘A few tiles have been dislodged. They still look intact, though. I’ll go up and see if I can push them back into place. Then I really will have to do something about the roof.’

‘Can’t you get someone else to sort out the tiles? It’s three storeys above the ground.’

‘I rather like climbing. I’ve been up on that roof several times.’ He gave her one of his quick hugs. ‘Don’t worry. I won’t take any risks. I always wear a safety harness and line. I fitted the necessary anchor points years ago when I had to go up and repoint the ridge tiles.’

She nodded, but she stayed outside to keep an eye on him as he worked, and she didn’t stop worrying till he came down and put the ladder away.

‘Done. For the moment.’ He pretended to take a bow. ‘Oh ye of little faith.’

‘For a geek you’re surprisingly good at the practical stuff.’

‘Blame it on my dad’s training and all the holiday jobs I did as a student.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘I’d better get back to my computer.’

‘And I’ve got some grocery shopping to do. You will insist on eating every single day.’

For all their joking, she was concerned about their financial situation. They had to find some way of increasing their income. Since their marriage she had taken over the accounts and had been horrified at how expensive a two-hundred-year-old house was to maintain. It might be heritage-listed but it had been neglected for decades and restoring it properly wasn’t for the faint-hearted.

Angus worked in IT and was capable of earning good money, but that wasn’t nearly enough for the urgent major repairs the house still needed. He’d had a small app he’d designed take off recently, which was bringing in some useful money, but not a fortune, since it had a limited target group. He’d warned her that his app would probably be superseded within a couple of years, so they couldn’t count on it long term. Faint

What could they count on to keep this beloved monster of a house well tended, she wondered? There had to be some way of it bringing in a regular, steady income.

Two mornings later Angus came down late for breakfast then sat lost in thought, forgetting the piece of half-eaten toast in his hand.

‘Not hungry today, darling?’ Nell asked.

He jumped in shock and stared at her blankly for a few seconds, then cocked his head to one side and grinned. ‘Sorry. I woke up thinking about our financial needs. You know that scrubby bit of land down at the rear of our grounds, the one with the dilapidated old buildings on it? I’m wondering if we can do something with that?’

That really caught her interest. ‘I keep meaning to stroll down and have a closer look at it, but I haven’t been in a hurry because you said it was in ruins.’

‘You promised you’d not go there without me,’ he reminded her sharply.

‘I was planning to ask you, only you’ve been a bit busy lately on that project.’

‘I finished it late last night, Nell, and good riddance. Whoever wrote the original program was an idiot and it was a tedious job unpicking it. Did I ever tell you that part of the grounds has actually got an official street name?’

‘No. You just waved a hand in its direction and said it was rather dilapidated so to stay well away. What’s its official name?’

‘Saffron Lane.’

‘That’s pretty.’

‘Yes. Unlike the street. I took a quick look at the outside when I first inherited Dennings, but I had enough on my plate making sure the main house was weatherproof to do anything about those cottages. I did check that they hadn’t been damaged after one particularly bad storm and thank goodness they were all right. Actually, they look very sturdily built. But don’t go into them on your own. I don’t want you getting hurt.’

He gave her a loving smile as he said that, seeming unaware of the toast still in his hand. Her heart gave its usual happy little skip as she smiled back. Her second husband was so cute when he grew forgetful!

Before she could remind him to finish his toast, he said suddenly, ‘I don’t think my predecessor went inside them, either.’

She gaped at him. ‘But they’ve been in your family for ever, and you’ve owned them for years!’

He shrugged. ‘Well, no one expected me to inherit, even though I came here several times as a child. And after Dennings became mine, Joanna and I had enough on our plates bringing up the kids and dealing with the interior of the big house.’

He looked sad as he added quietly, ‘We were discussing turning our attention to Saffron Lane when she was killed. I—didn’t feel ready to follow through on that afterwards.’

Nell reached out to give his hand a squeeze. It was lovely to hear how he spoke about his first wife, who’d been killed by a drunken driver. He had a huge capacity for love, her Angus did. She’d never expected to marry again after an abusive first husband, but she’d tumbled headlong into love with this man.

She watched with a fond smile as he continued to think aloud, still waving the piece of uneaten toast to emphasise what he was saying.

‘I don’t even know who used to live in Saffron Lane or why it was abandoned. I’m still going through the various records but I haven’t come across the ones dealing with it yet.’

‘What made you think of it now?’

‘I was wondering whether the buildings could be renovated and rented out. They aren’t Grade I listed like this house, so we could even knock them down if we wanted without seeking permission and jumping through heritage hoops.’

‘And put what in their place?’

‘I don’t know. Workshops to rent, perhaps, or offices. Commercial properties are in short supply in Abbots Barton.’

She frowned. ‘It’d cost a lot to erect new buildings. It’d be better if we could convert the present ones, surely? But I don’t think we have the money for that, either.’

He suddenly noticed the toast and put it in his mouth, but she doubted he’d tasted it, because he was still frowning in thought as he chomped.

She loved her new home and was planning to help him in every way she could, but he didn’t want her to put her Australian house sale money into it, because he wanted her to have a nest egg to fall back on if anything happened to him.

Nell agreed that was wise because if anything happened to Angus she’d have to leave. The previous owner, Miss Henrietta Denning, had been obsessed by making sure the old house was kept in the hands of the family who’d built it, and the trust she’d set up stipulated that Dennings had to be passed to the next ‘Denning by birth’ in line. After Angus, this would be his son Oliver, currently working his way round the world.

‘Um. I got an email yesterday. Another quarter’s money has come in, not a fortune, though quite a nice amount. We could spend it on renovating the houses in Saffron Lane, as a sort of investment to bring in money steadily. What do you think?’

‘I think maybe the roof of the big house has priority.’

‘I think we can make the roof last a bit longer.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Hmm.’

‘How much did the app bring in?’

When he told her she was pleasantly surprised. ‘I think you could be right. But let’s go and explore Saffron Lane now. We can’t make a final decision until we know exactly what we’ve got there.’

‘I want to get someone in to make sure the buildings are safe first.’

‘Oh, pooh to that! We’re not stupid enough to go inside a building if there are holes in the floor and the walls are crumbling, but we can at least stand in doorways and look inside rooms. Actually, it’s a wonder someone hasn’t broken in, if they’ve been empty for half a century.’

‘An old tramp did try to break into the end house two or three years ago, but he didn’t even get any of the front doors open. He ran away down the street at the back screaming that the place was haunted. The police thought he was drunk and picked him up. When he told them what he’d been doing, they didn’t bother to prosecute, he was still so freaked out. They just gave him a warning and sent him on his way. I didn’t contradict his tale of the ghosts. Rumours like that are much cheaper than putting in a security system.’

She wasn’t giving in. ‘I’m not afraid of your family ghosts and I’m dying to look at Saffron Lane. Let’s do it.’

She’d dreamt about his family ghosts even before she’d come to England, only she hadn’t known who they were then. She’d heard their voices again soon after her arrival. They’d seemed friendly to her, not threatening. She’d never been certain before this happened whether there were any such things as ghosts, but everything the women’s voices had predicted had come true. They’d told her exactly when she’d sell her Australian house and that she’d find love here in England.

He put his arm round her shoulders. ‘OK. You’re on. I must admit I’d like to see inside the buildings now that I’ve got a bit of spare time, but we won’t take any risks. We ought to wear our scruffiest clothes and safety helmets.’

‘Most of your clothes are scruffy. You’re as much in need of renovation as your house.’

He chuckled. ‘My computer doesn’t care what I wear and you fell in love with me in spite of my sartorial faults.’

‘I didn’t realise then that you were *allergic* to buying new clothes.’

‘Shopping is a total bore.’

‘Well, we’re going out to buy you some new clothes tomorrow, so get used to it. I’m not having my new English relatives seeing me walk around with a scarecrow.’

‘You’re such a nag.’ He plonked a big, sloppy kiss on her cheek.

For a moment she had difficulty breathing, then she realised from his poorly concealed smirk that he was distracting her, changing the subject. He always did when clothes were mentioned. She gave him a mock slap. ‘Yes, and I intend to spend the next few decades nagging you. Get used to that as well, and gird up your loins, because you’re definitely going to face the horrors of shopping for new clothes tomorrow.’

She looked round and smiled involuntarily. ‘But today the storm has passed and we’ll go exploring, eh? I fell in love with your house as well as you, Angus. Dennings is beautiful and living here is exciting, so very different from being an office manager in Australia, not to mention my difficulties as a divorced woman raising three lively sons on a pittance.’

‘One of them has just produced a son himself, Grandma Nell.’

‘I still can’t believe I’m a grandma.’

‘You’re a step-grandma as well. I think it’s great being a grandfather. I just wish Ashleigh lived closer, but her husband’s farm is non-negotiable as a place to live. Now, hurry up and change into some old clothes. I’m starting to feel excited about what we might find in Saffron Lane.’

They strolled through the rear gardens hand in hand and down towards the left corner of the property. The buildings were behind some huge old trees and overgrown bushes, so hardly anything showed from

the rear drive except an entrance that really did look like a lane, only just wide enough for two cars to pass.

She paused to stare round. 'It's as if this corner of the grounds has been asleep and is waiting to be woken up again.'

'Well, don't move forward till I've cleared a path. I'll get the gardener to clear the connection between Saffron Lane and the street. It won't take him long with our small tractor. Good thing it's not a made-up road with asphalt, just a dirt track. The weeds grow quickly but are easy to clear and then the road can be levelled.'

Angus stopped to pick up a stick-sized piece of dead branch and whacked a few of the nettles out of their way on the path, trampling on them for good measure. 'I don't want you to get stung. Nettles are always happy to prove that a human being can itch and hurt at the same time.'

Nell followed him along the narrow path he'd cleared but they stopped again on the other side of the shrubbery to study the houses. 'It's hardly a street; it's only six houses long and one-sided.'

'Well, they gave it a name and the council approved it, so someone must have felt it mattered.'

She was still staring. 'They're not what I call cottages. They might not be big but they're detached houses, and three of them have dormer windows in the attics. The two houses at the end standing at right angles to the others are bigger with Number 6 the biggest of all. They're a charming group of buildings, aren't they? Let's go inside.'

He grabbed her hand. 'Put your safety helmet on first. We'll go slowly. No rushing into the buildings.'

'I'll be careful, I promise. We might as well start at Number 1 and work our way along.'

'Your wish is my command.'

'You know, the street is more attractive than modern housing in England, where every house seems to be almost a carbon copy of the one next to it. When do you think these houses were built?'

He stopped again, head on one side. 'Early twentieth century, I should think. When I find the full records we'll see exactly when and, I hope, find out *why* they were deserted. I have a vague feeling they've been deserted since World War II. That's surprising when they had such a housing crisis in Britain after the war, but I don't think the War Office returned them to the family for a while after it ended.'

He took out his phone. 'Wait a minute! Let's take a photo of the whole row as it is now, before we even trample down the weeds.'

She continued to study the houses as she waited for him to finish. 'They've all got large front windows. I think they might have been shops.'

'Could be. There used to be lots of little local shops instead of these horrible, soulless shopping centres.'

'The shopping centres are highly convenient in bad weather and when you need to buy a big load of groceries.' She watched him take out a bundle of labelled keys and unlock the door of the first house, then hold up one hand to stop her going inside. She waited, dying to explore but knowing he was right to do this slowly and carefully.

'There's a dusty smell, but it doesn't smell damp, so maybe the floor will still be sound.' He put one foot on the floorboards in the entrance, then stamped hard, still holding on to the door frame. 'Feels sound.' He stepped inside and jumped up and down vigorously, still staying near the door. 'Not a sign of sponginess.'

She moved forward and joined him inside.

'Yes. Stay there till I've tested the rest.' He stamped his way across the middle of the floor, after which he stood still and turned round on the spot, studying the ceiling and walls. 'Doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it, apart from years of dust and cobwebs.'

'Good.' She went past him and opened the door at the rear of the room, looking to her right. 'I think this must be a storeroom. It's quite big. There's a small barred window at the far end of it.'

He joined her as she went into the back room. ‘This would have been the kitchen and living area. And this door leads to... a bedroom and bathroom. Very modern plumbing for those days. Shouldn’t be hard to upgrade.’

‘So it’s a house and workshop or shop, with living quarters for one person.’ She stamped on the floor. ‘It feels sound in here as well.’

‘I’m still hiring an expert to check the houses out before we start renovating them. Let’s take notes and photos and move on to the next one.’

‘Just a minute! What’s this?’ She opened a door in one wall that looked like a cupboard and found some steep narrow stairs.

He grabbed her arm. ‘I’ll go first.’

With a shrug, she humoured his protectiveness and stepped back, waiting for him to get to the top.

‘The stairs creak but they don’t seem rotten in any way,’ he called. ‘Come up and join me.’

She went up to find that there was an attic, after all, but it had its single dormer window in the rear side of the roof, so it hadn’t been visible from the front. The space was completely empty.

‘It’s huge. You could easily put another bedroom up here.’

‘Or a separate workroom.’

‘OK. Let’s move on.’

In the next house the shop area was a little smaller, the middle room bigger with a French window opening on to a side garden about three yards wide.

Before Angus could stop her, she had gone on ahead and disappeared into the back part of the house. ‘Nell, wait!’

There was no answer. Suddenly afraid, he rushed after her and found her standing staring round her as if someone had hit her on the head. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes. I just – don’t laugh, but I thought I heard voices. The same voices I heard before I ever came to England: your family ghosts.’

‘Ah.’

‘I’m not making it up. I did hear them!’

‘Did they sound threatening? Something terrified the man who tried to break in, after all.’

She smiled. ‘Not at all frightening. They never do. They sound like a group of motherly older women. Today . . .’

‘What?’

‘They told me this will be Stacy’s house.’

‘Who the hell’s Stacy?’

‘I haven’t the faintest idea. I thought you might know.’

He shook his head. ‘I don’t know anyone called Stacy. Did they tell you anything else about her? Did she once live here?’

‘I don’t know. That’s all I heard.’

‘Maybe you were just imagining things.’

She pretended to beat him over the head while chanting the lines from *Hamlet* at him – and not for the first time: ‘*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*’ They’d had this discussion before and she refused to back down.

‘Well, if you’ve finished communing with my ancestors, let’s continue our explorations.’

They went upstairs to an area that seemed larger than that of the first house, with two decent-sized bedrooms and an old-fashioned bathroom with the sort of free-standing bath on curly feet that was fashionable all over again.

There was nothing in the rooms and the bare boards echoed beneath their feet as they walked to and fro.

The silence was suddenly broken by his phone playing the beginning of the 'Hallelujah Chorus'. 'Just a minute. I need to answer that ringtone quickly because it's the agency that gets me casual project work and it usually means a job.'

After a brief chat with someone called Jared, he turned to her. 'I was right. They've offered me a small job. It's urgent and they'll pay a bonus for a speedy result.'

'And the houses?' But she knew the answer already. When someone from the IT industry called, Angus stopped what he was doing and paid attention. It was usually very lucrative, because he had some sought-after specialist skills, and a reputation for an uncanny instinct for diagnosing problems quickly and accurately.

They walked back together, once again holding hands. But his thoughts were already elsewhere, she could tell, and he hardly said a word.

She stopped at the door to his office and grabbed his sleeve, shaking him slightly. 'Pay attention for one minute more, Angus. Is it all right if I start looking through your family records?'

'What?' His eyes blinked briefly into focus.

'Your family records – shall I go through them and see if I can find out more about Saffron Lane?'

'Good idea.'

'And if you can't go shopping for your clothes tomorrow, my lad, we'll go as soon as you've finished this job. You're not wriggling out of it.'

'Slave driver.' He gave her a quick hug and was gone for the rest of the day and half the night, too.

She'd been looking forward to a day out in Swindon shopping and having lunch somewhere nice. However, they needed the money Angus made on these specialist jobs, so it was a good thing she had her own interests and had taken over the business side of the property.

He had been one of the trailblazers in his area of IT, but he said technology changed quickly, so he needed to make as much money as he could before things changed again and left him trailing behind. Of course, he might luck out and get into another developing area or his next app might take off. He had a few ideas he wanted to fiddle with. Who knew?

She felt sometimes as if the world had suddenly turned into a roller coaster and people no sooner adjusted to one change than they were whirled away in another direction entirely and had to scramble to keep up.

But perhaps that was her own view. Some people seemed to enjoy change.

Oh, who knew anything? She'd better make a start on those records. Saffron Lane seemed very interesting.