

Chapter One

Australia

Nell Chaytor waited until they were all sitting at the kitchen table. She smiled at her three sons, fine lads but a little lazy. She'd spoilt them because she loved them so much – and she hadn't loved herself enough. She understood that now.

She'd been seeing a counsellor for a few months because she'd felt lost, needing a better purpose in life. They'd discussed the family dynamics, especially her worries that her two youngest sons didn't seem to be making any attempt to become independent of her now they'd finished their education and got decent jobs.

She'd read about grown-up children who stayed at home well into their forties. That didn't seem right, somehow. And it definitely wasn't enough for her to act as their unpaid housekeeper. They'd even objected to the amount of food money she'd asked for.

Where had she gone wrong with them?

And even though her oldest, Robbie, was married, he was only just starting to pull his weight in that relationship now that they were expecting a baby. Her daughter-in-law had told her so bluntly a couple of months ago.

'Your son's a kind guy and I love him to pieces,' Linda had said, 'but you've spoilt him rotten and he expects me to do the same. We've been having a few battles over him doing his share of the housework and I blame you for that. Well, he's not getting away with ducking out of chores, if we have to quarrel about it from dawn to dusk.'

That had hurt Nell. It had been a struggle at times, but she'd brought her boys up with very little help from their father, who had left her for another woman when they were small. Except for the financial contributions. She would grant Craig that much. He might forget to attend a school cricket match or a parents' evening, and he hardly ever took the boys out, but he'd always paid the maintenance and his share of the mortgage on time.

As if that was the only thing that mattered in bringing up kids!

Well, things were about to change with the two youngest, which was why she'd called a family meeting. She hoped her eldest son would take note of what she was doing, though.

'Well, Ma?' Robbie asked impatiently. 'What's the big fuss? Why didn't you want Linda to come with me tonight?'

Nell's stomach felt shuddery with nerves now that the moment had come to speak out. 'I have something to tell you, and it's very important to me.' But the next words didn't come easily, because she knew she was going to upset them.

'You're not ill, are you?' Steve asked quickly.

Trust Steve to worry about that. He'd lost a friend to cancer last year and it seemed to have turned him into a worrier . . . when he wasn't partying as if there were no tomorrow.

'No. I'm not ill. It's just . . . I'm going back to England.'

'If anyone deserves a holiday, you do,' Nick said quietly. Her middle son had always been quieter than the others, even as a child.

'It's not exactly a holiday. You know I've always said one day I'd go back to the town where I grew up. Well, now I'm going to live there for a while – a year or two, at least. I have to sell this house anyway, now that Steve's finished studying and got a job, so it's a good time to go.'

'Why do you have to sell it?' Nick asked.

'I think your father's waited long enough for his share of the money, don't you?'

He frowned. 'But Dad said he'd let you buy the other half of the house on easy terms. He and Jenny aren't short of money, you know.'

'I don't want to buy this house and I definitely don't want the burden of a mortgage at my age. So I'm selling. And your father's signed the contract to sell with the real estate agent, so he'd better not change his mind now.'

They exchanged puzzled glances so she tried to explain in a way they'd understand. 'Look, I stayed here mainly because you boys needed a home big enough for each of you to have your own bedroom. Robbie moved out a while ago and you two keep telling me you're grown up, so I thought you could get a flat together. You're both earning enough to pay your way. You can have some of the furniture to help you get started and—'

They all tried to speak at once and she stopped trying to make herself heard.

After a minute or two Robbie yelled to them to be quiet, as she'd known he would.

'What will you do in England, Ma?' he asked. 'No, shut up, Steve, and let Ma speak for herself.'

'I don't know exactly. I just . . . need to get in touch with my roots, so I'm going back to Wiltshire. I've been wanting to do that for a while now, actually. I'm going to be fifty next and I reckon it's time to do a few things for myself.'

Robbie frowned. 'How will you manage if you leave your job? And where will you live? You aren't going to spend the money you get from this house, surely?'

'That's the beauty of it. My Great-Aunt Fliss left me her house in Wiltshire a few months ago.'

Three voices shouted almost as one, 'You never told us!'

She shrugged. Fliss had left her some money too. She doubted anyone in the family had realised how much her aunt had put by for a rainy day because Fliss had lived quietly once her husband died, not making a fuss about being on her own. She'd always managed without anyone's help, rather like Nell herself.

Indeed, one of Fliss's favourite sayings had been: *I can manage, thank you.*

Nell didn't intend to tell her sons about the money or they'd pester her to use it to buy the other half of this house and might even expect her to share the windfall with them. If she did that, the money would vanish like snow in summer. It meant security for her old age, that money did.

None of her sons seemed prepared to wait for anything. They wanted it all, even if they had to get into debt to buy the latest electronic gadget or whatever.

As for her ex, Craig was a cunning devil where money was concerned. If he knew about her windfall, he too would try to persuade her to buy her share of the house from him – which would be much easier for him than selling it.

Well, too bad. She wasn't going to let any of them near her money.

Her sons were still looking at her, so she said casually, 'I'll probably find myself a part-time job. I'm still a British citizen, after all. If I don't have to pay rent, or buy food for your bottomless stomachs, I won't need to earn a lot. I can do some sightseeing, enjoy myself.'

There was dead silence but all three were frowning. Were they concerned about her or about themselves? she wondered. Both, probably. They did love her, she knew, in their own selfish, immature way. Yes, immature. None of them had yet taken full responsibility for their own lives, even Robbie, who left management of his finances to his wife.

It was hard, but she had to do this. Tough love, people called it.

Steve broke the silence. 'Where is it, this house of yours?'

'In Abbots Barton, a small town south-west of Swindon. I used to stay there with my great-aunt when I was a child. I stayed for the whole summer holidays most years because my parents couldn't afford to go away. I loved being there and I loved Fliss.'

She fell silent for a moment or two and they waited. 'I got in touch with her again as soon as I left home. You remember how my dad refused to contact his family after he emigrated. No, perhaps you don't. You weren't all that old when he died. Anyway, Fliss was in her seventies by the time I got married, but she'd already learnt how to use a computer. I found out her email address by writing to an old friend of hers.'

Steve's face brightened suddenly and from what he said, he'd only been half-listening to her. 'Hey, we could come and stay with you there. Have a family holiday together. See a bit of the world.'

‘You’ve just started a new job. You won’t have any holidays owing and you don’t have any money saved. I’m not subsidising you for an expensive holiday.’

He shrugged. ‘Call it a loan, then. I can always get another job when I come back and repay you. I rather fancy living in England for a few months. What’s your house like? Is it big enough to fit us all in?’

‘I doubt it. I’ve never seen it, but when she turned eighty-five Fliss wrote that she was going to sell the house because it was too big for her to manage. She was moving into a small cottage instead.’

‘Didn’t her lawyers send you photos of the house when you inherited it, or give you details? Didn’t you even try to find out, Ma?’

‘I was a bit busy at the time. It was when Steve broke his arm and I was typing his final assignments for him, if you remember.’ He’d always needed more help than the others with his studies. He was better at working with his hands, but Craig had insisted he get a qualification, so he’d gone to TAFE to do a more practical course in IT. He hadn’t enjoyed the theory, though he’d enjoyed working with computers.

She’d stayed up till all hours after work to do them from his recorded dictation while he went to bed or watched TV. Oh, she’d been such a fool over the years – a loving, kind, stupid fool.

‘Were you Fliss’s only remaining relative? Is that why she left it to you?’

‘I don’t think so. There ought to be several cousins still living in the area. My father might have fallen out with his family, but I’m going to get in touch with them.’

‘You will be coming back to Australia to live eventually, though, won’t you?’ Nick asked.

She shrugged. ‘I’m assuming so, but I can’t seem to plan that far ahead at the moment. I have to sort things out this end before I can leave.’

And then it burst out, the excitement, the freedom, the sheer joy of it, and she beamed at them. ‘I feel so gloriously free. I’m going to recharge my batteries first – it’s been a hard year at work. And then I’ll do some genealogical research, and I’ll drive around, get to know England. After all, I was born there, even though we came to Australia when I was a child.’

She smiled. ‘I’ve not been back since before Robbie was born, and even then it was only a few days as part of a whistle-stop tour your father and I made around Europe.’ Actually, Robbie had probably been conceived in England during that tour.

She and Craig had had a lot of fun together until the boys were born. He hadn’t enjoyed being the father of small children, though, and the fun had gradually stopped. ‘Over twenty-seven years since I’ve been back. It’s been too long. It’s part of my heritage, you know. And I still have dual nationality.’

There was dead silence. Steve opened his mouth to speak and Nick dug him in the side, so he shut it again.

She stood up, ‘I’ll make us another cup of tea, shall I?’

Robbie looked at his watch. ‘Er, no. I have to go.’

‘Oh, stay and have a cuppa,’ Nick said. ‘It’s not often all three of us get together.’

She knew that while she was in the kitchen they’d be discussing what to do to stop her taking such a drastic step. Let them talk and manoeuvre as much as they wanted. They wouldn’t change her mind.

The first step had been hard, but she’d done it, told them what she was going to do.

When she went back with the tray, they were waiting for her. Nick took it out of her hands, Steve pushed her gently into a chair and Robbie leant back, as if dissociating himself from what they were going to say.

‘We’ve worked out what to do,’ Steve said. ‘It’s obvious, really. You can take Dad up on the mortgage, then Nick and I can rent this place from you and maybe rent out another room to a friend. That way you’ll have somewhere to come back to and the mortgage will be paid while you’re away.’

‘And once you move out, in a year or two? Who will pay the mortgage, then?’

Nick leant forward. ‘That’s the beauty of it. When you come back, you can sell the English house and pay off the mortgage here. *Voilà!* Problem solved.’

‘I’m afraid not, boys.’ She used the excuse her counsellor had helped her prepare and rehearse. ‘I don’t want a mortgage hanging round my neck ever again. You know how I feel about getting into debt. And I won’t want a house this big when I’m on my own. Too much maintenance.’

They all started protesting at once.

She held one hand up in a stop-the-traffic signal they’d all recognise from when they were children. ‘There’s something else. You might not realise it, because you were very young when your father and I split up, but this house has some bad memories for me.’

It was Robbie who muttered, ‘I remember you and Dad quarrelling a lot.’

She’d never told them all the details but it was time for the truth. ‘He slapped me around towards the end, you know.’

The two younger boys exchanged horrified glances.

‘He didn’t!’ Nick protested.

Robbie surprised her by stepping in to support her. ‘He did. I heard him thump her a few times. I heard her crying sometimes, too.’

Steve scowled at him. ‘Well, I never heard anything. Dad was probably just angry. He does have a bit of a temper. He didn’t mean to hurt you, Ma.’

Robbie came over to put his arm round her shoulders and give her a quick hug, then turned to his brothers. ‘You were too young to realise what was going on, but Dad did it too often for it to be an accident.’

Nick stared at her in horror. ‘Why didn’t you say?’

Nell spoke up again. ‘It was between your father and me. I couldn’t do much to stop him, he was so much bigger than me. I was glad when he met Jenny and left me.’

‘But you’re still angry at him,’ Nick said. ‘Why? Isn’t that old history now? He’s changed. Time to let it drop.’

‘He’s changed because he got counselling about his violence after he married Jenny. She threatened to leave him if he didn’t. He refused see a counsellor when I asked him, several times he refused, and when I threatened to leave, he told me to go. Only I couldn’t. I had you three to look after.’

‘That’s the real reason why you don’t like to see him, then, even now,’ Steve said slowly.

‘Exactly. Even if I were staying in Australia, I’d sell this place. I don’t want to be in debt to your dad. I don’t want to be in contact with him in any way once I leave. I intend to be done with him completely and finally. I’m not going to come between you and him. That’s a different relationship. But I want out, completely out.’

Craig was still a control freak and even now, after they’d been separated for fifteen years, he sometimes acted as though he had a right to tell her what to do.

The boys stopped trying to persuade her to keep the house, ate most of the cake she’d baked for them, then Robbie went home and the others vanished into their bedrooms, as usual.

But she knew it wasn’t over. They wouldn’t give in so easily.

Over the next few days Nell’s two younger sons tried several times to persuade her not to sell the house. She could get a mortgage from the bank, no need to be in debt to their father.

Craig came round and cornered her in the garden one day after work. ‘We need to talk.’

‘So talk.’

‘It’d be better to do this inside.’

‘You’re not coming in.’

He leant against the wall of the house and folded his arms. ‘You are such a bitch about that. It is half my house, you know.’

She shrugged. ‘And you know how well I’ve looked after it. Now, hurry up and say what you have to. I’ve got things to do.’

‘The boys are worried about you, Nell.’

‘They’re more worried about living on their own, having to do their own washing and cleaning.’

‘They’re worried about you. And so am I. You’ve always been an impractical fool. For heaven’s sake, stop this stupidity. Go over to England for a little holiday, by all means, but don’t burn your bridges here. You’ll soon want to come back once the English summer’s over and the cold weather sets in. What will you do if you don’t have a home here any longer?’

‘I can always rent somewhere till I decide. I’ve got a house of my own in the UK now. It may be small but it doesn’t have a mortgage on it. I’ll probably stay for a year or two.’

‘So the boys said. What sort of a house is it exactly? A terrace? A bungalow? I can look it up on Google Earth if you give me the address.’

She stiffened. What did he know about English houses? He’d only once visited the country. She’d met him when she was backpacking round Australia. He’d been tall, lithe and suntanned, fun to be with. She’d been dazzled by him, and he was still good-looking, the rat. ‘What has my English house got to do with you?’

He shrugged. ‘Just thought you might need some financial advice.’

‘I don’t. And if I did, I’d not ask you for it.’ She looked at her watch. ‘I have to go out soon, so get on with it. I can’t stand here chatting all day.’

‘Let’s go inside and talk properly.’

‘You’re not due an inspection, so you’re not coming inside.’

He breathed deeply and scowled at her. ‘I’m not letting this drop. You’re making a big mistake and for the sake of our sons, I think you should—’

She went quickly into the house and banged the door in his face before he could push in after her. She leant against it and took several deep, slow breaths. She didn’t let him ride roughshod over her anymore but even so, it was always an effort to stand firm against him as he loomed over her. She wished she’d been born tall and strong.

It had been a big effort to be so tough with the boys, too.

She wondered if she’d ever do that sort of thing easily.

The dreams started that night. She was walking round a garden, a beautiful place. It had a sundial in a walled square that was like a garden room, and a shabby summer house to one side. It was a very English garden, with masses of soft flowers, like living rainbows. She loved gardens like that.

Beyond the summer house were some tall old trees because the garden seemed to back on to a park.

There was a house, too, but it was only a shadowy outline, and however hard she tried, she couldn’t see it clearly.

She could hear voices, women chatting. They were too far away for her to make out what they were saying but the sound was soothing.

For the next two nights she had the same dream, each time seeing another part of the garden: a huge vegetable patch, a few old fruit trees, a rather neglected rose garden in full bloom. She still couldn’t see the house the garden belonged to or the women, but she kept hearing them chatting, laughing, clinking their teacups.

‘Who are you?’ she called out to them on the third night.

There was soft, musical laughter and a voice said, ‘We wondered if you could see us yet. I’m the original lady of this house. You’ll visit it when you come here. Hurry up. You’re needed.’

‘I can’t come to England till I’ve sold my house in Australia.’

More gentle laughter. ‘In two days it’ll be Lady Day. You’ll sell your house then. Very appropriate, don’t you think, Nell, for a nice lady like you?’

The dream began to fade. She snuggled down and fell asleep almost immediately, feeling comforted by the thought of selling this house quickly and by their compliment.

All day she kept remembering the garden. It had been so beautiful, she wished she could go and walk round it. Why hadn't she been able to see the house, though? One day she would, she felt quite sure of that.

How stupid! She was acting as if that garden and those people in it were real. Who believed in dreams? Not her. She was a modern woman, more used to computers than spooky stuff.

Out of sheer curiosity – she didn't believe you could foretell the future, no way! – she checked Lady Day on her favourite search engine: *Lady Day, March 25th, tied in to the Equinox*. It was the end of the financial quarter and had been the traditional time for signing annual contracts between landowners and tenant farmers.

And it was the day when her house would be open for the first time, for inspection by potential buyers. That must be what had sparked the dream.

She hoped the house wouldn't take too long to sell. She was eager to start her new life.