

# **Murder for Profit**

First Chapter Only

One

*Sunday to Wednesday morning*

The best thing about returning home after a holiday is that you can sleep in your own bed.

Ellie and Thomas had gone to stay with relatives in Canada for a few months while their sprawling Victorian house was being turned into two semi-detached units. The rebuild had taken longer than expected, but at long last they had been able to return and pick up the threads of their life again.

That was the good bit.

The downside? They'd arrived on a Sunday morning; not only was the house in chaos but they were greeted with the news that the sky had fallen in, Henny Penny style. Apparently something was seriously amiss at Ellie's housing charity, and she must attend to it immediately if not sooner!

Ellie had never thought of herself as a business woman, so had assembled a group of trustees to run a project to buy run-down houses, rebuild and develop them where necessary and rent them out at affordable rates. The charity had attracted a very large inheritance which in turn had enabled them to take on their biggest and most ambitious project to date. And this was now at risk?

Jet-lagged to the eyeballs, Ellie couldn't work out what time of day it was, never mind deal with business affairs.

Not for the first time, Ellie was grateful to their young friends Susan and Rafael, who had moved into the rebuilt semi next door some time ago with their brood. Not only did Rafael fetch Ellie and Thomas from the airport but Susan had

filled Ellie's freezer with home-cooked dishes so that she didn't have the bother of shopping and cooking for the time being.

Susan and Rafael were fostering Ellie's two grandchildren since their mother had disappeared into the blue, and they came round for a short visit, plus their own little imp, who was now fourteen months and into everything. Ellie had heard that there'd been tantrums from her three-year old granddaughter and anxiety issues from the boy but Rafael had developed into a loving if strict father figure while Susan's loving heart had provided the children with the loving home they'd so desperately needed. They didn't stay long, as neither Ellie nor Thomas felt up to coping with them as yet.

Thomas almost lost his temper, trying to reconnect Ellie's computer in her new study, and Ellie wept when she found her best teapot – which had been her mother's – had been broken and left in pieces in the cupboard.

Oh, dear! In their absence, the house had been redecorated from top to bottom but some of the furniture was in the wrong place. The grandmother clock in the hall was sulking because it needed another piece of cardboard under its front right-hand corner to stand straight and oh, the kitchen! Chaos ruled! Not one spoon or pan was in its accustomed place. Ellie couldn't even find the tin in which she kept her favourite brand of teabags. A new carton of them sat on the dresser but where was the tin?

Worse still, was what had happened to her beloved garden and conservatory.

Ellie was a great gardener who liked nothing better than to spend time with her plants, aiming to have colour all the year round from snowdrops and winter jasmine in January to holly and viburnum in December.

Surrounded by high brick walls and partially shaded by mature trees, her back garden had been a haven from the world, with a well-tended lawn which stretched across the back of the house and flowers in a deep herbaceous border beyond.

Between house and lawn there was a patio on which, if she had the time – which she rarely did – she would have sat and taken her ease.

And now? Disaster!

The wall and the trees remained it looked as if someone had run a tractor over the beds and the lawn was rutted and patchy with moss. It wasn't just the builders who'd laid waste to what had been there.

There was still some bright colour to be seen but it was the bright hues of children's playground equipment and not that of flowering plants. It was all very well saying that it was her very own grandchildren who had done the damage, but there wasn't one yard of the garden unaffected.

Almost, Ellie regretted her decision to turn the big house into two, three-bedroomed units with space to move into the attics if required.

Because of the links between the two families, the project had made perfect sense at the time.

Rafael was an astute, half-Italian businessman who had recently been asked to join the board of trustees for the charity which Ellie had founded and his red-headed wife, Susan, seemed able to cope with anything . . . even the advent of yet another baby.

On the third day Ellie announced that she might soon be able to cope with small doses of reality. Thomas, a semi-retired minister, received a phone call from an old friend asking him to visit and Ellie encouraged him to go. Did Thomas feel up to it? Not really, but he went, anyway.

After he'd gone, Ellie had dragged an aged but capacious ottoman from the entrails of the hall cupboard and manoeuvred it into the sitting room. The children's toys had always been kept in that, and Ellie needed to be prepared for their next incursion.

That was when the phone really started ringing.

She was told she'd been given a couple of days' peace and quiet and now really must attend to business!

The future of the charity she'd founded was at stake!

Ellie tried to clear her mind. All she could think of was that something must have gone wrong with the development at the Ladywood site, the latest and biggest project that the charity had ever taken on. They had invested so much time and money in it that it would be a tragedy if they had to pull out at the last minute.

But no, apparently it wasn't that. So what was it?

It seemed that her trustees were at war with one another. She was requested to hang, draw and quarter the wrong-doers . . . although who the wrong-doers might be varied according to whoever was speaking.

Ellie was told that she could deal with the garden some other time. It was desperately important that she have a meeting of the trustees that day.

Ellie told herself that business came before pleasure. If only she didn't feel so 'woolly.' She'd heard jet-lag called 'brain fog.' It was a good description..

Dependable Stewart, general manager of the charity, had been the most temperate in his language. 'Ellie, hate to worry you so soon, but the charity's in deep trouble.'

'Something's gone wrong at the Ladywood site?'

'No, not at all. What made you think that? No, it's the agency. We need to get together asap. Perhaps not everyone. Just you and me and Kate, the original team. As for Rafael, well, I know he's something of a favourite of yours, and perhaps you'll want him to come, too, but I must warn you, he's not thinking straight about this. Kate says he should resign and . . .'

Then clever Kate, whose financial brain had steered the charity through rough waters to its present respected position, phoned. 'We can't sidestep this, Ellie. It

affects our future. It's clear what we ought to do, but Rafael . . . I really think he ought to resign and give us some space to come to terms with . . .'

What had young Rafael been up to? Perhaps due to his Italian ancestry, he was generally considered to be a trifle on the tricky side, but he'd been a real asset to the charity precisely for his ability to think outside the box.

Perhaps he would never be considered a hundred percent respectable, but he was clever and – which is more than might what's more than might have been expected of him – he seemed happy to take his part in bringing up Ellie's grandchildren.

Now when Rafael had collected Ellie and Thomas from the airport, he'd not even hinted that bad news was in the offing. He told them that Susan had left a casserole in the oven for them to eat that evening, and that she had filled the freezer for them. He'd apologised in advance for the mess in the garden, which he said Susan was planning to deal with.

He hadn't said anything about trouble at the mill and yet it seemed that Kate and Stewart blamed him for whatever it was that had gone wrong at the charity and thought he should resign.

Which was ridiculous, wasn't it?

Ellie didn't understand the problem. Some hate mail had been circulating which might affect the work of the charity?

Really? Annoying, yes. Serious? No.

So why did Kate want Rafael to resign?

Ellie dithered. She had half an hour till the trustees would descend on her. She liked to put flowers in the sitting room but there were none in the garden at the moment. They could do with flowers, but they couldn't do without chairs to sit on.

One; for her, as chair of the meeting.

Two; for their finance director, Kate, who would need space to lay out her laptop and papers.

Three; for Stewart, the charity's general manager, who would bring common sense and an I-pad to the table.

The last chair would be for Rafael, the man who Kate and Stewart said had caused the trouble which was tearing the charity apart.

Ellie looked at the clock. Time to make proper coffee for the meeting . . . though from what she'd heard, a dose of aspirin all round might be more appropriate.

Was her hostess trolley still sitting in the corner of the kitchen? Were there any biscuits in the tin? Biscuits heavily covered with chocolate would probably calm them down better than aspirin. If only she could locate where the biscuit tin might have been put? It should be . . . ah, it was. And filled to the brim.

Susan was wonderful!

Ellie approached the coffee machine with trepidation. Rafael had given it to them as a coming-home present. Thomas had fallen in love with it and used it already but it frightened Ellie silly. It was so very . . . robotic? It looked as if it would switch itself on and start cleaning the carpet at the word of command.

Using the new machine would show Rafael she was on his side.

*On his side? Don't be ridiculous!*

Ellie told herself she was taking the situation far too seriously. But still, there was time for an arrow prayer.

*Dear Lord, you know I'm no financial brain. I haven't a clue who's in the right in this matter. You know we founded the charity to help those in need. Please clear the muddle in my mind so that I make the right decisions.*

Ellie scolded herself into action, finding a jug for the milk and a basin for the sugar; laying out mugs and biscuits on the trolley.

She told herself she'd done the right thing when she'd proposed Rafael as a trustee for the charity. His background had been perfect for their purposes. He'd inherited a run-down block of flats, done most of the renovations himself and now ran the place as a business. His experience of such work had made him a most suitable candidate to join the charity. Although that ought not to matter, he was also a young man of considerable charm; tall, dark and handsome.

It was true that he'd had a reputation for cutting corners in his younger days but he'd promised never to go down that road again when he'd persuaded his red-headed Susan to marry him.

And, he was doing a great job bringing up the two children who'd been abandoned by Ellie's daughter Diana.

*Oh, Diana! How could you just walk away from your children! Yes, your husband had just died in tragic circumstances, and the man you'd been meeting on the side had not been prepared to divorce his wife and marry you . . . but surely you could have worked something out so that you could keep the babes with you?*

Ellie told herself that she would NOT get aerated about that today! What's done was done, and the children were a lot better off with Rafael and Susan than being taken into care.

The fearsome coffee machine produced a brew which smelt both rich and strong.

The doorbell rang. Two sharp rings.

That would be Kate, stick thin, always in a hurry, always on time. Financial affairs always in order.

Ellie hastened to let her in.