

All About Ella by Meredith Appleyard

Ella

Deep within the house, a door slammed. The air shifted. Still as a statue, I strained to listen. Nothing but the low hum of the ducted air-conditioning.

Then the rapid-fire *tap, tap, tap* of Kirsten's kitten heels on the terracotta tiles. Someone was in for it. Eyes tightly shut, I clutched a handful of bedspread and braced myself for the shriek that would follow.

It came right on cue. 'Anthony! This time your mother has gone *too far*.'

Ah, it was me this time. Had I forgotten to bring in the washing? Unpack the dishwasher? Wipe up my toast crumbs? How long did I have before the inevitable summons to my son's study? His reprimand followed by my contrition. Then there'd be the usual platitudes from him. After that his shoulders would soften, his mouth become less pinched, because his duty had been done. Lying there on the bed, quiet as a mouse, I imagined sinking into the mattress and disappearing altogether.

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A muffled knock on the bedroom door. Too soon for the summons. 'Come in,' I said, and pushed myself upright. I swivelled around and sat on the edge of the bed.

The door cracked open and Stefan's pimply face appeared. 'I'm sorry, Ella. Mum was just *there*. I had my headphones on, I didn't even hear her open the bedroom door ... And then she wanted to know what I was watching ...'

'Never mind,' I said, and waved off my grandson's apology with a flick of a wrist. 'But tell me, what were you watching, and how am I implicated? So that I can be prepared for the inquisition, when it comes. Which we both know it will.'

Amusement flitted across his face before his gaze shifted to his feet. 'Euthanasia, assisted dying, stuff like that,' he said. 'After we had that talk about how Grandpa Sam died, about all the pain he was in from the cancer, and the fact that he wasn't ever going to get better, I was kind of curious. I could tell you were too. I thought if I did some research ... for both of us ...'

'I see. That was very thoughtful of you, Stefan.'

'A pity Mum didn't see it like that.'

'I'm sorry. Perhaps she thinks you're too young.'

He snorted. 'Don't be sorry. And I'm not too young. Our conversations are cool. But for some reason, Mum's on a rampage. She's even been picking on Sophie.'

'Poor Sophie. Something must be up.'

'Yep, that's exactly what I thought. Sophie came home late *once* and now she's only allowed to use her phone between six and eight in the evening. For a month. And she has to physically *give* the phone to Mum.' Stefan paused, and his expression became one of

horror. 'What if Mum confiscates my laptop? I'll die.'

'I'll talk to her, if you want me too.'

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'I dunno,' he said, his face twisting with indecision. In the past my interventions hadn't always gone the way we'd hoped. 'You know, Ella, you should get your own computer—a laptop or a tablet. They're not that expensive. I could show you how to use it. Or the library does courses for old people. There's stuff about everything on the internet.'

'Is there?' I said. Old people indeed. I'd be the first person to acknowledge that I needed something to fill the void left by the death of my husband, however, a personal computer probably wasn't it.

In preparation for the inexorable summons, I shoved my feet into the well-worn shoes beside the bed. I stood up and swiped at the creases in my cotton capris, and then tugged at the hem of my blouse. Had it shrunk? Somewhere in the house another door closed, followed by the telltale *tap, tap, tap*.

'I'm out of here,' Stefan said, wide-eyed, his voice cracking. He gave me a vaguely apologetic grimace and vanished, the door shutting quietly behind him.

I couldn't blame him for taking off. He was fourteen, and avoiding showdowns with his volatile mother would be high on his list of priorities. For a second I was tempted to follow. But I was seventy, not fourteen, and be blowed if I'd let my only daughter-in-law get the better of me.

I ran a comb through my hair. Who was that old woman in the mirror, scowling back at me? Whoever she was, she was in dire need of a hairdresser. And look at all those wrinkles. There hadn't been nearly as many a year ago.

I smoothed on my favourite lipstick, rolling my lips together with a smacking sound. Better to face the enemy with warpaint on. Nevertheless, butterflies flitted about in my stomach. I perched

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on the side of the bed to wait. And wait. The waiting was always the worst.

Seventeen minutes later, another knock on the bedroom door.

Three minutes more and I would have gone searching for Kirsten.

When Anthony's head popped around the door I let myself relax—a fraction. The only things separating father from son were thirty-three years and a decent haircut. And clearer skin.

'Mum?' he said, tentatively. 'We need to talk.'

'Of course. Come in—or would you prefer I came to your study?'

He glanced over his shoulder. Then his gaze returned to me, or rather, a point somewhere behind me.

'Anthony?' I said, and leaned sideways in an attempt to intercept his line of vision.

'Let's go out,' he said, surprising me. 'I'll shout you a coffee.'

'All right.' I stood up and found myself pulling at the hem of my blouse again while I waited for him to precede me out of the

room. He didn't move. He kept looking at that point behind me. I turned to see what had caught his attention. There was nothing there except the drapes, and behind them a sliding glass door that opened onto the patio. There was a dining and barbecue area, a jungle of plants and a swimming pool.

The penny dropped. 'What if I meet you in the carport?' I said.

'Two minutes.' He held up the equivalent fingers and then he was gone. Things must be serious if he didn't want to risk a face-to-face confrontation between his wife and his mother.

Willing myself not to speculate, I parted the drapes, opened the door and stepped out onto the patio. Sliding the door closed behind me, I skirted the ostentatious table and chairs in the alfresco dining area. The barbecue, a stainless steel monstrosity, slumbered in the corner. There'd only ever been one time—the Christmas before Sam's diagnosis—that we'd been invited to sit around

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the rattan-and-glass dining table and share an evening meal: the leftovers of the Christmas dinner lavishly catered for Kirsten's family and friends. Who'd known it'd be Sam's last Christmas?

'Oh, well,' I murmured. It's not as if things had ever been any different when it came to my daughter-in-law.

When I emerged from the maze of potted plants into the carport, Anthony was unlocking his four-wheel drive. Lights flashed and the vehicle chirped. *Ridiculous*, I thought. He was a public servant who worked in the city, for goodness' sake. With some effort, I levered myself into the passenger seat. Stefan, bless his environmentally conscious heart, refused to ride in what he called his father's 'urban tractor'. His twelve-year-old sister Sophie didn't care what she rode in, as long as it took her where she wanted to go.

I worked hard at not playing favourites between my only two grandchildren. But Stefan was intelligent, curious and easy to get along with. And he had a quirky sense of humour. Sophie could be sweet, and she could be as uptight and demanding as her mother. 'I must be in real strife this time,' I said, with a sideways glance in Anthony's direction.

He reversed out of the driveway. 'You know how Kirsten can be,' he said, and his attention didn't deviate from the road. It's what he always said, although this time he didn't follow up with, 'But she'll come around.' He just pressed his lips together into a firm line.

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Ella

Our destination was a tiny but trendy cafe in a clutch of shops about a kilometre from Anthony and Kirsten's leafy, eastern suburbs home in Adelaide. We'd been there before. It was mid-afternoon Saturday, the weather unseasonably warm for early May. Hard to believe winter was only weeks away.

Anthony chose a table outside. When our orders were taken— coffee and no cake, not even a biscuit—Anthony folded his arms and I thought, *Here it comes.*

‘How are we going to make this work, Mum?’ he said, levelling his gaze on me for the first time since we’d gone our separate ways in the guest bedroom.

‘You don’t think it is?’

‘Do you?’

‘It’s only been two weeks, and I’m doing my best. I look out for the kids whenever you ask me to. It’s no bother because I enjoy their company. I’ve kept the guest room tidy, done my own laundry and helped with meals and other housework. And I try to keep out of Kirsten’s way.’ I felt like I was back at boarding school.

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He looked away, then said, ‘I’m seeing the builder next week, but it’ll most likely be months before the new place is ready for you.’

‘Oh, that long,’ I said, and looked down at my hands clasped tightly in my lap. The skin was thinner, the veins on the back more visible. My fingernails blunt and unpolished. I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, wishing I was some place else, but not knowing where that place might be.

The sun was warm, and in the background was the low buzz of conversation from the group at the next table. Despair swamped me. I hadn’t asked for any of this. Kirsten’s rules and expectations changed daily, sometimes hourly. And when Anthony wasn’t around she ignored me, unless she was telling me what to do.

In that moment I envied Sam, and had to swallow hard against the outrage that rapidly replaced the despair. Outrage because Sam had died and left me at the behest of my family. Outrage at my own inertia and the part it’d played in putting me in the situation I was in: virtually homeless.

In the days after Sam died, our three children had worked hard to convince me I wouldn’t manage on my own in the house I’d lived in since marrying their father fifty years before.

‘Downsize, Mum,’ had been second son Julian’s advice. ‘Buy into one of those retirement villages. Age in place. Although, I’m not certain what sort of an investment they are ... You’d have to do your homework.’

‘Mum, this place is way too big for you. And don’t even thinking about coming to live with me because my place is too small, and you’d hate Darwin in the wet season. Air-conditioning makes it tolerable, barely.’ This from Olivia, the youngest. The thought of Olivia’s one-bedroomed apartment and Darwin in the wet season had had me breaking into a sweat, air-conditioning notwithstanding. And then there was Olivia herself. She was my daughter

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and I loved her, but could we live under the same roof again? I doubted it.

Surprisingly, it had been Kirsten who’d suggested she and Anthony could extend onto their home and build a granny flat

for me. 'You could be completely independent,' Kirsten had said. 'Come and go as you pleased.' Anthony had appeared as bemused as I was.

I'd said, 'That's very generous of you, but what about all of our furniture? Our belongings? I'm not ready to part with Sam's things just yet.'

'Obviously, all that would have to go. There wouldn't be room,' she'd said, and just like that, any fleeting warmth I'd felt towards my daughter-in-law dissipated.

In the end, after numerous discussions that went around in circles, a granny flat had been the most plausible, and the most palatable, of their suggestions. Sad and exhausted, I'd agreed to consider it. 'As long as I don't have to do anything now,' I'd said. 'I'm too tired, and it's too soon.'

'No worries, Mum,' they'd said. But then with lightning speed, using the excuse they were all together now and didn't know when they would be again, they'd begun making moves for the beautiful old bluestone home to be put on the market. My protests had fallen on deaf ears. Outnumbered and stripped bare by what I'd been through in the past months, I hadn't had the wherewithal to fight back.

A fortnight later Julian had flown home to New York and Olivia back to Darwin. But distance didn't mean they lost their collective momentum. Anthony pushed things along and the For Sale sign went up the following February. Sam had been gone for six months. When I first saw the sign I'd wondered what he would have thought.

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During those months, with Anthony's constant nagging, I'd robotically sorted through a lifetime's worth of possessions and the memories that went with them. Making decisions about what I'd keep to take to the proposed granny flat was cruel; no one possession was more precious or important than another. All the while I'd felt a deep and consuming sorrow. My life partner was gone and now I was losing my home.

In mid-March the real estate agent rang with the first offer, and all my misgivings coalesced. I'd listened to him, murmured something I'd hoped was appropriate, before disconnecting and going into the bathroom to vomit. Up until then there'd been the hope that no one would want to buy it and I'd be able to stay.

Where would I be without my home? The possessions that defined me? Who would I be? Sam and I had come to the house as newlyweds. We'd renovated, extended onto the back. It's where the children had grown up. It's where Sam had died. It's where I'd imagined I'd live until I died.

The hardest thing by far was imagining another family living there when I'd moved out: cooking in my kitchen, relaxing in my sitting room, letting weeds grow among my roses. During those weeks, from offer to settlement, I'd felt as if I was existing outside

of myself.

When I'd tried to articulate these feelings and uncertainties to Anthony, his response had been brusque. 'Don't be ridiculous, Mum. The place is too big for one person. Dad didn't want you to struggle along here on your own.'

'Your father said *that*?'

'Not in so many words, but I know he would have expected us to look out for you, and we think downsizing is best. It's the only sensible thing to do. I don't have the time to look after you and this place, as well as my own.'

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'I haven't asked you to look after me, or this place.'

'Mum, maintaining a property this size doesn't come cheap.

I know because I've been seeing to the bills since Dad got sick,' he'd said, as if I hadn't spoken.

'And believe me, I'm grateful for all your help, but I can manage the house and the garden, and when I can't, I'll pay someone to do it for me. You know your father provided well for me.'

'I know he did, but apart from being too big, how safe are you here on your own? And we've noticed you've become quite forgetful. Imagine if you forgot to turn off the gas stove, left the iron on ...'

'The iron turns itself off and there's nothing wrong with me.

I know when your father was dying I was a bit vague at times, but it was a lot to deal with.' My distress must have pricked what Anthony had left of a conscience because he'd drawn me into a one-armed hug. But then he'd ruined it by saying, 'Mum, the first offer you get is usually the best offer you'll ever get, so my advice is that you take it,' and I'd pushed his arm away.

Julian and Olivia had rung me within the hour, one after the other, echoing their older brother.

'How good is that,' Julian had chirped across the ether from New York. 'Sounds like a fabulous offer, Mum. You won't have to worry about any more open inspections. I can't believe you're having second thoughts. You can't stay there. I'd worry.'

I hadn't doubted he'd worry, on the off-chance he gave me any thought at all. And there wouldn't have been any open inspections if my home hadn't been on the market.

'Mum, a granny flat at Anthony's is perfect. What's the problem?' said Olivia. 'And spare us kids a thought. It's not all about you. We grew up in that house and when it sells we won't have a place to come home to either.'

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Her words had stung. It hadn't been *my* idea to sell.

'Mum?' Anthony said loudly from the other side of the table.

'You haven't been listening to a word I've said, have you?'

'What?' I said, fumbling my way back to the present.

'I said, it'll be months before your place is ready so we need to have a better plan for the interim, otherwise it'll be hell for all of us.'

The waiter came with water and glassware. Someone at the next table laughed. I filled a glass with water and gulped down half of it, embarrassed by how far I'd drifted. 'I don't know what more I can do to fit in,' I said.

'Well, for one thing, you can tell Stefan and Sophie to go back to calling you Grandma, not Ella.'

'Why? It's my name. They asked if they could call me Ella, and I don't mind at all.'

Anthony's face took on a pained expression. 'Mum, don't make this harder than it is. Kirsten doesn't want them calling you Ella. She thinks it's inappropriate. And she doesn't want you influencing Stefan any more.'

'That's what *she* thinks. But what do you think, Anthony? Stefan and I talk, that's all.'

'So you're okay with a fourteen-year-old watching graphic video clips that show old people how to take their own lives when they're fed up with living?'

'He's curious, looking for answers. He's a smart kid.'

'He's fourteen!'

'If you take what he was looking at in the context of the conversation we'd had earlier—'

'Then you do admit to influencing him?'

'If influencing is having a frank conversation about how much his grandpa suffered, especially towards the end, then yes, I suppose

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I'm guilty as charged. Stefan asked me why the doctors let things happen the way they did. Why Sam was in so much pain. They're questions I've asked myself, over and over. In a country like Australia, why *do* we give the terminally ill so little real choice about how and when they die?'

The pitch of my voice had risen with every word and Anthony glanced nervously at the tables nearby. 'I'm not sure this is the time or the place to talk about that,' he said tightly.

I eased back in the chair and gritted my teeth, otherwise I would have rolled my eyes. When was the time to talk about it? Any wonder Stefan was looking for answers on the internet, because he certainly wouldn't get them from his mother or father.

'Mum, I know Stefan's a bright kid, but I'm not surprised Kirsten reacted the way she did when she saw what he was watching. And I'll fully support her in whatever disciplinary action she decides on.'

'You're going to punish him?'

Anthony held up his hand and although I desperately wanted to challenge him, going by his mutinous expression, I'd be wasting my breath.

The waiter arrived with the coffee: cappuccino for me and a long black for Anthony. I reached for the sugar. For a split second Anthony's gaze dropped to where the buttons on my blouse gaped. I emptied two packets of sugar into the coffee and stirred, tempted to call the waiter back and order a slice of Black Forest cake. With

a curl of his lip, Anthony shook his head. He took a sip of his brew and then rested the cup back in its saucer. He cleared his throat. 'Mum, we need to talk about money. When the time comes, the architect will need to be paid, and the builder will expect a deposit up front.'

I fumbled with the cup. Coffee slopped into the saucer. A conversation about money was inevitable but I had not expected it so

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soon. The seven-figure sum from the house settlement had barely landed in my bank account. My mouth opened then closed again. Sucking in a deep breath, I sat up straighter in the chair, my heartbeat whooshing in my ears. There were things I needed to say.

Anthony squinted at me. 'Are you all right, Mum?'

'Define what you mean by all right,' I said.

He sniffed and downed the remainder of his espresso in one long swallow.

It was now or never. I leaned towards him. 'Anthony, I need some breathing space,' I said. 'This past year has been like a bad dream. My whole world has been turned on its head and I desperately need time to not think about anything. Not about the awfulness of my husband's death, not about packing up and selling my home, not about what the future might hold.'

'We lost our father as well. We're all grieving,' he said. Then his eyes narrowed. 'What are you really saying, Mum?'

'What I'm really *asking* is for you to put the granny flat plans on hold for a while because I don't want to make any big decisions now. Not until I've had time to—' I paused to search for the right words. 'Rest and regroup,' I said finally. 'That's the best way I can describe what I need to do.'

Anthony's cup clattered back onto its saucer and he stared at me from across the table, his expression one of horrified disbelief.