

DISCOVERING
ELLIE: CHAPTER
ONE

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Chapter One



FORCED HAND

Olivia pursed her lips and fixed Ellie with a determined look.

‘They do say you know, the best way to get over one man is to get under another.’

Ellie’s eyes widened and she choked, spraying tea all over the tablecloth. Luckily it was an old one. More to the point, lucky it was there at all; she only used one when her aunt visited. The thought of tea all over her beautiful timber dining table didn’t bear thinking about.

When she’d recovered enough to speak, the best she could choke out was, “Aunty Liv!” Olivia gave a low chuckle, unrepentant.

‘Well, I can think of no other reason except sex, as to why you should be so hung up on your last boyfriend. From what I saw, and what you’ve said, he wasn’t good for much else, so I figured...’

The last couple of words were punctuated with a slight shrug of her shoulders.

Ellie flushed bright pink to the tips of her ears. This was a conversation she definitely did not want to be having with her elderly aunt. As an avoidance tactic, Ellie grabbed a paper napkin and blotted the major wet spots on the table cloth. Olivia laced her hands together in front of her on the table top.

'I'm not going to let this rest young lady. I fully intend to say all the things everybody else is thinking, but don't have the balls to say.'

Her words brought Ellie's head up and her jaw down. She had no idea what taken hold of her usually sweet and mild-mannered aunt. She'd never before been ferociously reprimanded by her—not once in twenty-seven years. Her aunt was giving her no quarter.

'Close your mouth, it's extremely unladylike.'

It was on the tip of Ellie's tongue to retort that such language, and sentiments, were also not ladylike, but she held the words, not wanting to add fuel to the fire. And on top of that, she loved her aunt dearly and didn't think she'd be capable of saying anything hurtful to her, even in self-defence.

Her aunt's gaze didn't waver and it was like being pinned by twin lasers.

'It's time Ellie. You've sat holed up in your lovely house for the past two years, moping over a man who quite frankly wasn't worth the time of day. Enough is enough. Your life is slipping past, and in case you haven't realised yet, you only get one go at life. Get out there—do things, experience sights, sounds, tastes. LIVE.'

Olivia's voice became more animated as she spoke. Already feeling defensive, Ellie's hackles went up a little more in the face of what she perceived to be an unnecessary attack.

'I thought I was living. Eat, sleep, work, repeat. You know the drill.'

Ellie fought the urge to roll her eyes. Her aunt had no such qualms and in an uncharacteristic move, Olivia rolled hers.

'You're existing, and there's a difference.'

She paused her eyes narrowing.

'And tell me, precisely how much fun is your happy little existence?'

Air quotation marks accompanied the last three words. Shock was coursing through Ellie, but it seemed Olivia wasn't finished.

'We aren't in the seventeenth century anymore my dear and there is more to life than simply working to stay alive. You need to get up with the times.'

Ellie's eyebrows rose. If she wasn't mistaken, she was being taken to task about being old fashioned by someone at least fifty years her senior. That didn't sit well and she shuffled in her seat, searching frantically for some reply, but she wasn't given the chance.

Olivia's gaze became more shrewd.

'You work from home, you entertain there. In fact you barely leave the place at all. You've made your own little fortress against the world.'

Olivia's pause was pregnant with possibilities and she appeared to be choosing her words.

'Quite frankly it's unhealthy.'

Ellie felt ambushed. She'd had no idea of her aunt's intentions when she'd rung to see if Ellie was up for a visit. Clearly her aunt had hatched a plan and was executing it. Olivia's eyes were still boring into her and it wasn't pleasant.

The fact that there existed a modicum of truth in Olivia's words was disconcerting. Ellie had arranged her life in such a way that the outside world didn't intrude unless she invited it to. And she liked it like that. Guilt that her cunning plan had been obvious, along with a touch of anger at being berated, morphed into exasperation when she replied.

'What would you have me do, Aunt Liv?'

A self-satisfied smile spread across Olivia's face.

'I'm glad you asked. I have a plan.'

And there it was. Ellie had unwittingly sprung the trap. Knowing that she'd been right came as no consolation to Ellie. She felt like a lamb being led to the slaughter. Olivia hesitated for a moment before she continued and Ellie briefly wondered why Aunt Liv was suddenly being careful with her word choice. That hadn't been a consideration a few minutes ago.

Olivia was tapping the ends of her fingers together as she thought and Ellie found the movement unsettling. Fortunately she stopped and steepled her fingers as she spoke.

‘Since you can do your job from anywhere, I think you should sell your possessions and head overseas for a while. Move around the world and absorb all it has to offer.’

One of Ellie’s eyebrows rose in scepticism, her voice was flat.

‘Be serious.’

Olivia leaned forward slightly, fixing her attention on Ellie intently. There wasn’t the slightest indication of any humour in her aunt’s expression.

‘I am being perfectly serious. You have no ties to keep you here—no nine to five job, no kids, no pets. No responsibilities whatsoever. And that’s a good thing. Sell the house; it’s a seller’s market at the moment. If you’re lucky they may want the furniture too. Get rid of the car and go. Jump on a plane. Pick a country and start there.’

Ellie was lost for words in the face of what she considered to be lunacy on the part of her aunt. She was seized by the sudden desire to call a responsible adult and have them come over and handle the situation. It was sobering to realise that she was going to have to be that person. The conversation was starting to feel like rowing upstream.

‘But...’

Frustration flooded Olivia’s face, along with a massive dollop of determination and she pinned Ellie with her gaze as she continued.

‘Give me one good reason why you can’t.’

Olivia sat back in her chair, her body language daring Ellie to provide an answer to the contrary. Ellie’s power of speech had fled and the best she could manage was another, “But...”

She’d never been good at thinking on her feet, which is why she’d never gone into debating or the like. She much preferred being cocooned in her world of children’s fiction, where normally she wasn’t under attack.

Ellie's silence fuelled Olivia's determination and it was radiating off her in great clouds. A hint of a self-satisfied smile tugged the corners of Olivia's mouth.

'I imagined you were going to be difficult, but I didn't expect to have to do everything for you.'

With a slight shake of her head and a soft huff, Olivia rose from her chair and went over to the bookcase. She searched until she found what she was looking for. When she returned to the table she spread the book open on the table. Confusion drew Ellie's brows down, not helped by the fact that Olivia was rummaging through one of the drawers on the sideboard. Ellie had no idea what she could possibly need.

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, Olivia returned to the table with a drawing pin which she placed on the table in front of Ellie.

'Pick up the pin, close your eyes and randomly pick a country.'

Ellie was feeling panicky and was overcome by nausea. The perfume from the scented candle suddenly became cloying. In one fluid movement, Ellie rose from the chair, snatched the candle off the sideboard and raced through the kitchen and into the laundry. She snuffed it out before placing on the bench top and pulling the laundry door behind her as she left.

Ellie took a couple of moments in the kitchen to slow her erratic heartbeat and regain her composure. She had no idea what had gotten into Aunty Liv, but this had now gone too far. She took in a deep breath and squared her shoulders, ready now to go back and stand her ground.

Ellie took her seat, folding one leg under her and clasped her hands together on the table in front of her. She looked over at her aunt, hoping she wasn't about to injure her feelings. As much as she felt battered herself at the moment, she would never want to visit that on Aunty Liv.

'Aunty Liv...I can't make serious life decisions by randomly stabbing a book.'

Olivia raised one eyebrow.

‘Do you have a better way to choose where you’re going to start your adventure?’

Ellie paused as she chose her words.

‘I’m not looking for an adventure. Please be reasonable Auntie Liv. I like my life. I don’t want to sell off my possessions and roam the world. I like my home. I like the suburb it’s in. I’m happy with the friends I have, the job I do. I don’t want to change any of it.’

Olivia reached out a hand and grasped one of Ellie’s shoulders, a long sigh collapsing her body as she did so. Ellie wasn’t certain in the muted light of her family room, but Olivia’s eyes appeared to be glistening, which caused a lump to rise in her own throat.

‘Sweetheart. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but you’re sitting in this house waiting for your knight in shining armour to rescue you and it’s not going to happen. You’re a beautiful, intelligent, young woman sitting here withering away. The world’s your oyster. Before you settle down and raise a family, if that’s what you want to do, get out there and live a little. There’s much more to the world than what Brisbane has to offer.’

Ellie tried to swallow past lump in her throat as tears pooled her eyes. Olivia blinked rapidly as she gave Ellie’s hand a quick squeeze. Her voice didn’t sound perfectly steady as she spoke again.

‘I love your mother dearly, she is my sister after all, but she’s lived her life according to what she thought was expected of her. Don’t get me wrong, she’s done a fantastic job, but please Ellie, explore, experience, and then if you decide to come back to Brisbane, marry and raise children, fine, because it’s an informed decision. You’ve had the chance to weigh up all the options and decide for yourself.’

Ellie’s mind was racing. She’d never thought further than working, marrying and raising children. Nor had she considered not doing it. A new spark of respect for her aunt ignited inside her.

'Is that why you've never had children? Because you made the decision not to?'

Olivia nodded her head gently.

'I never wanted the responsibility, as selfish as that sounds. And raising children is a long haul project.'

The tears beaten back, Ellie worried her bottom lip with her teeth.

'You make it sound like an either or situation. Can't I have both?'

Olivia grinned.

'No doubt you can. Anything is possible.'

Olivia grabbed both of Ellie's hands in hers, the urgency in her expression evident.

'Ellie love, you're the creator of your future. Not me, not your parents, not your agent. You.'

She released Ellie's hands and wrapped hers around her tea cup.

'If you want to have it all, then go for it. Personally, I wouldn't choose a life of travel and children together, but that was my choice and I made it. Many people travel with children, but I always feel sorry for the poor devils. Long haul flights wrangling kids can't be much fun.'

Olivia grinned at Ellie.

'I put my earphones in, close my eyes and sit there enjoying a pleasant rest. Not a care in the world.'

One corner of Ellie's mouth twitched with the beginnings of a smile. She would hate to have to control a child on a domestic flight, let alone for twelve or more hours. The thought caused a shiver to run down her spine.

Ellie slumped against the back of her chair lacing her hands together on top of the table. Her thoughts were tumbling about and she had no idea how she actually felt about Olivia's idea, but it couldn't hurt to humour her for a bit. She reached out and picked up the drawing pin, holding it between her thumb and index finger, the point resting gently against her thumb. She flinched and the point stuck her a little. She had a

sudden fleeting image of being a cow forced down the crush with a cattle prod. She dropped the drawing pin back onto the table.

Her voice fluttered a little as she spoke. She couldn't meet Olivia's eye and her eyes were firmly fixed on the open atlas.

'So, hypothetically speaking, if I were to agree to your ludicrous suggestion and travel, where would you suggest I start?'

Olivia's chuckles brought Ellie's head up. Confusion flittered across her face as she searched for the humorous element in her question. Kindness shone out of Olivia's eyes.

'That's not for me to say. Your journey is a different one to mine. Serendipity is an individual thing.'

There was a soft, sad smile on Ellie's face when she replied to her aunt's comment.

'You make it all sound so easy, and frankly a little magical.'

Ellie softly blew out a breath and her voice was barely above a whisper as she continued.

'I'm not sure I believe in magic anymore...'

Ellie let out a huge sigh as she finished and looked out the window to her burgeoning garden. She'd believed in fairytales once upon a time, but life seemed to have a way of beating that sort of innocent expectation out of you.

'Ellie love, don't let one bad egg...'

Olivia didn't get any further before Ellie held her hand up.

'Please stop Aunty Liv. We've been over the Simon situation a million times. Let's not go there again.'

Olivia nodded in a resigned way before she grabbed one of Ellie's hands squeezing tight.

'There's magic all around sweetheart. You've just got to know where to look.'

Ellie let out a most unladylike snort and her response was delivered dead pan.

'That sounds like something Snow White would say to the happy host of woodland creatures as she's merrily dusting her lovely little cabin, eagerly anticipating the return of her

menfolk at the end of their workday. You do know that even children's books don't work that way anymore?'

Olivia's lips flattened, her eyes searching Ellie's face.

'When did you become such a glass half-full person?'

She shook her head gently before she continued a whimsical smile transforming her face.

'Have you any idea, the wonderful people that I have met on planes? The fantastic stories of their lives and dreams that have been related to me? If I'd had your gift for words, I'd be a billionaire, earned off the tales I've been told and the ideas thrown in my direction.'

Olivia became animated and she started to use her hands to illustrate her words.

'The earth's heartbeat resounds in each of us. We are what adorn the world with beauty and grace.'

Olivia paused for a moment, lost in her fanciful memories.

'Some of the most wonderful experiences of my life are due to the enchantment of other people. We are different in lots of ways, but essentially the same, and each person's story is unique. We enrich each other's narratives.'

Ellie found her aunt's enthusiasm contagious and a gentle smile transformed her face.

'It sounds fantastic, but I still don't think it's as easy as you make out.'

One of Olivia's carefully manicured eyebrows rose.

'And why shouldn't it be easy? With the internet, you can be working from anywhere. The possibilities are endless.'

Excitement spread across Olivia's face and Ellie struggled against letting it infect her. She took hold of herself and shook her head.

'I can't. As tempting as it sounds, it's a mad idea.'

Olivia cocked her head, her eyes twinkling.

'Is it?'

Ellie resisted the temptation to roll her eyes.

'Of course it is. Could you imagine what mum and dad would say?'

Olivia's answering smile was wry.

'I can imagine their reaction perfectly. But it isn't their decision. They have had a chance to live their lives according to their ideas, and now it's your turn.'

Ellie's gaze dropped to the atlas and the world map spread over two pages. She couldn't do it; the idea was ridiculous, as much as Aunty Liv thought she was helping. She lifted her eyes to meet Olivia's. The other woman didn't say anything, merely held out the drawing pin. Ellie raised one eyebrow and Olivia's face broke into a huge smile.

'Just for shits and giggles as they say.'

Ellie's mouth dropped open again. Where on earth did her aunt pick this stuff up? Snapping her mouth shut and reluctantly taking the pin, Ellie looked at the map. Olivia's voice brought her head up.

'Make sure you close your eyes.'

Ellie's muttered response of, "As if that's going to make a difference," wasn't missed by Olivia, although she declined to respond to it. Ellie's lips flattened at the ridiculousness of the situation she found herself in, but she closed her eyes nonetheless. She calmed her irritation—they were only playing "what-if" and she had nothing to lose. With that, Ellie took a random stab at the atlas and opened her eyes.

Olivia clapped her hands together in delight.

'Scotland. What a wonderful place to start an adventure.'

Ellie frowned.

'Scotland? But it's cold there.'

Olivia raised one shoulder nonchalantly.

'Just over five million people live there and manage to deal with the cold. You'll be fine.'

Ellie's voice rose in consternation.

'Scotland?? What on earth would I do there?'

Rather than sharing Ellie's horror, Olivia looked delighted.

'Wonderful place. Loved the time I spent there. So rich in history. And the people are great fun.'

Ellie shook her head.

'Aunty Liv, this was a make-believe game. It's not going to happen.'

Olivia ignored Ellie's comment and beamed, clasping her hands together in front of her.

'There's a timelessness to Scotland. Almost a sense of continuity throughout the ages. It's simply amazing. And you'll love the men. I did.'

Olivia winked as she spoke the last two words.

Ellie blushed bright red again.

'Aunty Liv!!'

Olivia waved away Ellie's words.

'I was young once too you know.'

Ellie covered her face with her hands.

'Please, please, please don't go into details. I'm soooo not ready for that.'

Olivia let out a short chuckle.

'Not my intention to embarrass you my dear. My job is simply to get you moving.'

She looked thoughtful.

'It's February now, so by the time you get organised and actually get over there, winter will be over.'

Olivia's face brightened.

'You'll miss the worst of the cold, if that's what's worrying you.'

Ellie let out a laugh that to her sounded slightly maniacal.

'In the circumstances, cold would be the least of my concerns.'

Olivia bounced up and down in place, clapping her hands together.

'I'm so excited.'

She certainly looked it and Ellie squirmed uncomfortably in her chair.

'You will have the time of your life. It will be so good for you.'

Ellie was stunned. She and her aunt were on completely different pages. Her aunt was treating the idea as a done deal,

yet to Ellie it was just fantasy. She was hesitant to burst her aunt's bubble, but at the same time realised that she needed to put an end to the silliness before it went too far.

'Aunt Liv...you do realise I can't do this, don't you?'

Ellie looked at her aunt beseechingly.

'I mean, it's a fun idea, but not one that I can follow up on.'

Olivia's eyes went wide.

'But...why not...?'

Ellie reached out and put a hand on Olivia's arm.

'I can't simply sell everything and head off to the other side of the world on my own. Surely you must realise that.'

Olivia had stilled.

'I did it and back then it certainly wasn't the done thing.'

Ellie felt bad.

'I'm not that person Auntie Liv.'

Her vulnerability shone through her trembling voice.

'I'm just not that brave.'

Neither of them spoke for a couple of minutes. Eventually Olivia broke the silence, a fond smile transforming her expression.

'The die's been cast Ellie love. You'll go to Scotland and sooner than you think.'

Olivia sounded sure in her pronouncement and allowed Ellie no response as she pushed her chair out and stood, gathering the tea things and making her way to the kitchen. Ellie watched her go, wondering if this change in her aunt was something she should be worried about.