

AVERIL DRUMMOND



ELLEN'S  
DREAM

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by

Averil Drummond

Ellen leaned back from her computer screen. 'Matt', she called out, 'come and see what you think of this.' This was a bit of a risky ploy. She knew he had almost no interest in her writing at the best of times, and right now he wouldn't be in a great mood. Not a conventional 'bad' mood, he was too nice a person for that, but definitely running below his normal amiable level. But he'd been in the dingy little storeroom that he called an office, all morning, pouring over his accounts. She just had to get him out somehow.

She looked up at him as he appeared leaning morosely over her right shoulder. 'No one's going to call you this late in the day for a job, love, and you've got that installation at Pinsky's next week. That's five days work. Don't worry so much. Have a read of this and give me your opinion. It's my opening paragraphs. The most important bit of the whole book. I've already changed them about five times, and now I've got no idea what I'm doing. I need fresh eyes.'

The sorceress Argatha crouched in the narrow defile between two towering boulders. She could hear the children's voices, and even occasional brief laughter. It seemed, despite everything that had happened in the land, the little fools still felt safe in this relatively untouched corner - so close to their home village. They would find out very soon that since the 'Great Changing' nowhere was safe.

She tested her limbs experimentally. This was the first time that she had transformed as a dragon. Her powers were growing. Her powerful tail swished sideways. She admired her huge claws. Perhaps she was not quite ready yet to produce fire, but there would be no need, her claws and huge needle-sharp fangs

would be more than adequate for their soft flesh. She was beginning to detect the scent of that flesh now. They could not be far away. Soon she would test her strength, leap from the shadows and devour them all one by one as they cringed and whimpered in fear. Dragons show no mercy. The great hooded lids closed over her red eyes, and she sighed with pleasure.

‘This doesn’t sound like your normal style, dear. Maybe the sighing with pleasure bit?’

He didn’t sound too miserable, she thought. That was good. ‘I decided to try something new and write a children’s fantasy novel.’

‘It seems a bit gruesome to me. Are you killing off all your main characters in the first page and then do something arty with a back story?’

‘No silly, you can’t do that for a children’s book. Argatha doesn’t know that they have someone with them. He looks like a humble woodsman, but he’s really a Magaron, a powerful magician. In the magic hierarchy he is more powerful than Argatha. Although I’ve made it a close contest, of course. A bit of a nail biter until he drives her, wounded, away. OK, I know it’s a bit ‘Gandalf’, she stuck up her fingers in quotation marks, but there’s limit to the kinds of things you can come up with in this type of book.’

‘Gandalf?’

‘You know, Lord of the Rings. You saw the movies, remember?’

‘Oh yeh. I forgot.’

Matt grabbed for his pocket. ‘My phone! - Yes, yes, oh, I see. Where are you? That’s right, well I had a cancellation today so I guess I can come over now. I remember you Mrs Powell, I’ve got your address. I’ll see you in an hour or so.’

‘An hour!’ Ellen shrieked.

‘Yes, I know, bummer, bummer. It’s this rich woman we did an installation for about a month ago. Her inverter is playing up, she says. I can’t imagine why. It’s the best one, and it was working fine when we finished the installation. It’s under warranty so I won’t get a cent and with petrol so expensive. Still ...’

‘Yes, you’ve got to go, love. Customer service and all that. I’ll be off to work soon but it’s only a six hour shift I’m afraid. I’ll be back in time to make us late dinner.’

Matt frowned. ‘Can’t you get longer shifts? You used to, and you always come back later than you say you will. Are you working for free?’

‘Only if somebody doesn’t come in because they’re sick or something. I worry about my oldies, they’re really not getting looked after very well. It’s always trim everything and cut costs at that place, you know. I might have to stay to help serve up dinner but not a moment longer, I promise.’

He bent down and kissed her. ‘Why don’t I believe you? We are both idiots, working for nothing and going broke. That job next week, it’s the last biggish one on the books, we could really be in financial trouble soon, you know. Lose the business, lose the house. We may as well go and look for Argatha and get her to eat us and get it over and done with. Anyway, on that happy note, better go. See ya love.’

Ellen leaned back again. She felt good about this book. Yes, there were lots around in the same style, but there also seemed to be an unlimited appetite for them. She had wanted to say, ‘Maybe I will get published this time’, but that was wishful thinking. She hadn’t told him about the British competition that she planned to enter. First three chapters and a synopsis, but the first prize was 500 pounds plus editing and publication. The only problem was that it

was 50 pounds to enter. That would be a lot in Aussie dollars, but she was determined to do it anyway.

Matt found himself humming along with the song on the radio while he was driving. He must be mad, he should be in total despair. They really were in plenty of trouble, more than he was letting on to Ellen. Maybe he could have kept his head above water if it was only himself to think about, but he had to keep on a full-time employee. One who, from no fault of his own, had done almost nothing this week. Peter was just too good to let go. He'd be lucky to get someone like him again, and he'd never be able to do some of the bigger jobs by himself. They were good mates too. Maybe the thought of the two of them working hard together next week was cheering him up. But that was delusional, unless something else came up. He'd been advertising like mad, even driving round dropping leaflets in letter boxes. Desperation-ville, but you never know, he told himself.

It was a nice drive, that helped his mood. He really didn't mind getting out for a bit and leaving the suburbs behind. Mrs Powell lived up in the hills in an enormous house surrounded by landscaped gardens. She was obviously as rich as Croesus - a phrase that Ellen often used. He wondered if he could fix the problem. It was a bit of a worry, a top of the range inverter playing up after only a few weeks.

When he arrived, she immediately came down the front steps to greet him. Surprising, he was expecting a subservient wait on the doorstep. He had barely seen her during the installation. 'Mr Taylor, how good you are to come out so quickly.' She actually took his hand. 'It was my son, Cade, you see. He thought the panels weren't delivering the power that was promised. He read the brochure and then started playing around with the inverter. I begged him to stop, but he wouldn't listen. Finally, it stopped working all together. We pressed 'reset' so many times, but nothing happened. You know we have decided to go off

grid, my husband insisted. He's become a green convert. We burnt our bridges, so to speak. So, I was beside myself. I just didn't know what to do.

'Now Mrs Powell, I did explain that you had shade from the trees over some of the panels during the day and that would drop the input from all the panels. I asked if you wanted us to set it up so each panel worked independently, but you said not to bother.'

'Did I say that? I couldn't have been listening properly. Please, please come back and change it as soon as you can. But you can look at the inverter now and get it to work again, can't you?'

Now Matt had heard the story he felt quite confident. He had the specifications with him. Key them all in, then 'reset'. Bingo! A functioning inverter, and another job. Fixing up the panels would take a couple of days at least. Yes! Bless you Cade, you little know-all.

Ellen was going through the motions with her mind-numbing job in the kitchen of the retirement village. It was lunch, so just cold meat and salad with a bread roll. Why had she chucked in her Uni course because she wanted to become a writer? What a bloody idiot she was. The job itself was OK. She loved talking to the people in the village and the other staff were nice. But the pay was appalling. Plus, all this cutting of shift hours. The poor residents, some of them needed help to eat, and they looked forward to their meals so much. She just had to do extra unpaid hours sometimes just to make sure that they got fed properly.

She would read through her novel one final time and enter the competition. That was something to look forward to. Spending money that they didn't have. She had a good feeling, but then she always had a good feeling about competitions and all she had managed to do was get on a longlist twice. Maybe she aimed too high. She always went for the international

things. Well one local one, but she hadn't done any better than the longlist that time either. It was all so depressing really.

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Matt came charging out of his office. 'Ellen, Ellen,' She looked up from the computer. She'd just been checking again, but nothing from her British Children's Fantasy Novel competition. Not that she should have had anything yet, in theory, as it wasn't the date on which winners would be announced. But she knew that it didn't work that way. If she had done any good, they would want her photo and a bio before the announcement. Oh well, another failure. Another waste of precious dollars.

"Guess what love, we're in the money. You remember about three months ago when I had to go and fix an inverter for that woman, Mrs Powell, who's son had stuffed it up.'

'Not really'.

'Well, anyway I did. You said I had to provided good customer service. I remember. But guess what? No, don't, you never will. Her husband is building an eco-village. Permanent housing, one hundred and sixty homes. All recycled and tank water, carbon neutral building materials and... solar panels and batteries of course. Guess whose got the contract?' He dragged her out of the chair and danced her round the room like they did in movies. 'She told her husband that I was so nice and so competent that he had to give the contract to me. I didn't even have to apply. I'll even need to take on more staff because – you won't believe this – it's going to be the first of a whole series of eco villages and tourist locations. If we do a good job, and we will of course, we will have the contract for the whole lot.' His face was going to split open with smiling. She had never seen him so happy, even on their wedding day she suspected. She was happy. They were secure. They could keep their

house. What did it matter if she would never be a real writer? She could probably give up her job, but she didn't really want to. Too many friends to lose. Life was good. Get a grip Ellen, she told herself. You are one lucky woman.

She left work late, of course, after her dinner shift. There was no one else to pack the huge dishwasher. On the way home her phone started ringing. She didn't even try to get it, there was no where to pull over, and she was nearly at the house anyway. She didn't really like phone calls that much. She knew this was irrational, but they were so often just charities requesting money that she didn't have and giving her a major guilt trip in the process.

Matt had gone to bed, he had been up really early that morning and even excitement obviously hadn't kept him awake. This was a funny number, it looked International which made her heart speed up a little, but it was no doubt just an international scammer. She could always hang up, so she dialled it.

'Hello', someone with a plummy English accent said on the other end. Oh hello, pardon me, is this Mrs Ellen Taylor? You just caught me at a moment of distraction.'

'Yes, I'm just returning your call.'

'Oh, thank you so much. This is Deborah Furness from Evenstar publishing. I'm delighted to inform you that you are the winner in our Children's Fantasy competition... are you there?'

Ellen's heart was definitely thumping now. 'Oh yes, thank you. This is a bit of a surprise.'

'Well congratulations,' Deborah went on in her slightly officious fashion. 'The judges found it a very entertaining read and feel sure that the intended demographic will also. Now we will need your picture and a short biography to put on our web site. Do you think you



could provide that in the next few days so that it will be ready for the official announcement? Ideally, we would also prefer it if you could attend the awards ceremony. Would you be able to consult your diary in the next few days and get back to us so we can make arrangements?’

‘Yes, yes,’ Ellen stammered. This woman must be wondering by now how someone with a vocabulary of only about three words could possibly have won a writing competition.

‘Well, I’ll wish you good night then. Just phone this number any time in business hours and ask for me. Congratulations once again.’

Silence. Had that really happened? Wow. She raced for the bathroom, sluiced down her face, skipping all the cream ritual, cleaned her teeth and leapt into bed. ‘Matt, Matt,’ she shook him, ‘you’ll never guess...’

‘You’re not wearing anything, my brilliant writer’, he said, after giving her a big kiss and a hug.

‘I forgot to put on my pyjamas, I was so excited. Although now you’re awake I did wonder...’

‘Wonder no more you wanton woman. I am at your disposal.’

Later she snuggled into his warm back, drifting into sleep.

‘It’s amazing, isn’t it?’, he said. ‘Only a few days ago everything was bad. We were going down the plug hole at a rate of knots. Now you’re married to a rich business owner, and I’m married to a famous author. Yes, just kidding, but... I don’t know, I feel like a huge dark cloud has parted over our heads and glorious sunlight is shining through.’

‘It’s amazing. Life can hardly get any better than this. It’s all like a dream. A dream come true,’ mumbled Ellen.

