

Ella's Heart

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A priest stood beneath tall, stained glass windows and raised his hands. Bells tinkled. His words droned, escorted by a trail of incense smoke wafted upward with his swing of the brass thurible, "Bless...keep you...His face shine upon you...peace."

Ella sat on the end of a row of pews forming a large half circle. Her hazel eyes narrowed and scanned the congregation, until her floral headscarf slipped across one eye. She adjusted it with the help of her husband, Jack.

Secret plans for Jack's future bloomed within her heart. *Cancer, I've beaten you for seven years...and I'm exhausted. You pull me toward death and cause pain to my loved ones. Well, you can't win...I won't let you destroy Jack!* Ella linked her arm through Jack's and lifted her chin. *My tender Jack must remarry.* Her gaze scrutinized Margaret across the aisle—a delicate, stylish, white-haired widow dressed in a red cape. *Her late husband, Tom, was a lot like Jack.* Ella nodded.

Soft worship lyrics accompanied by the harmony of blended instruments faded into silence.

Ella's family joined the worship band members in the sanctuary for a discussion of lunch plans.

Janine, Ella's daughter, spoke above the babble. "Hey, it's Daryl's turn to decide again." Jack reminded the group of an awful experience from his son in law's last choice of restaurant. "Those hamburgers were the texture of cardboard! I think we should give your turn to someone else."

"They were veggie burgers!"

Ella tugged on Janine's sleeve and drew her several steps away from the group.

Janine tucked her dark hair behind one ear and bent toward Ella.

Ella whispered, "I chose a lady."

Janine jerked upright. "What?" She held her breath and glanced up, then forced a smile.

"Hi Dad, you're stealthy."

Ella turned and discovered Jack near her shoulder.

"What are you up to now, darlin'?" He winked at Ella and raised a brow. Jack's vivid blue eyes studied their faces.

"Never you mind." Ella shook her head.

Janine looked away. Tears choked her. *This can't be happening.* Her dark gaze landed on the stage with the band's instruments and music stands. "I'll clear the stage." *God, why don't you heal Mom? You can do it...don't take her.* Janine reached for her music stand and knocked it with her knuckles. It tipped backward. She grabbed for the flying sheet music, but her shaky hands missed.

The papers fluttered to the floor. Janine stared for a moment. *Why does Mom insist on Dad remarrying?* She bent down and reached for the stand. *What do I say?* Janine rose and bumped the guitar. It slid sideways. "Stop!" She dropped the stand to rescue the guitar from a crash. A hollow *twang* reverberated from the stage. "Good heavens."

The group chatter dwindled away.

Janine stamped her foot and wiped away tears.

Daryl called out, "Wait, I'll help you!"

"I'm good!" Janine waved above her head. She gathered the sheet music from the floor, her back to the group. A tear splashed onto the papers.

Daryl touched Janine's elbow. "Are you in a hurry?"

"A little bit."

He squeezed her shoulders. "Okay, love."

Janine pointed at the instruments. "Please, ask Dad to help you load up." She stacked the papers with her face averted.

"Are you worried about Mom? She looks pretty tired today."

"Yes." Janine opened her case and slipped in the music sheets. "I'll fetch Mom and we'll meet you outside in a few minutes."

"Sure, love." Daryl turned toward the group and clapped his hands. "Hey everyone, let's load up and you, too, Dad!"

Janine found Ella in conversation with a woman in the crowded lobby. "Mom..."

Ella swung around.

Janine leaned against the wall with folded arms and glared.

Ella smiled at the woman. "Let's talk tomorrow." She followed Janine into the sanctuary.

"Mom, who did you choose?"

Ella tipped her head in the direction of the lobby. "It's Margaret. Remember her late husband, Tom? He sang in the choir with your dad."

"Yes."

"Well, Margaret and I..." Ella swayed. Her unsteady hand grasped a pew near her, and she scooted in. "Come sit with me...a moment."

Janine settled next to her.

"We became acquainted when we exchanged used altar linens for clean ones at each other's homes." Ella twisted her loose wedding rings around her finger. "Sometimes, the four of us went out. I chose Margaret because your dad is comfortable with her."

Janine clenched her teeth. "Mom, you're trying to control everything. How can you choose a wife for him?"

“He won’t do well alone.” Ella laid her thin arm across her daughter’s shoulders. “Dear, this is important to me—”

“I’m so upset with you! This is wrong.” Janine shook her head. “Dad’s still your husband!” She softly sobbed.

Ella hugged Janine. **“We’ve been together for fifty-six years. I love him and I’m not leaving him by choice.”**

“You need to fight and get well!”

“I’m exhausted from the battle, so I’m making my peace—”

“Mom...” Janine searched for a tissue in her purse. “I still don’t understand.”

“I don’t expect you to understand. This is between me and God.”

Jack and Daryl peered around the exit doors. Daryl waved them forward, “Hey, loves, we’re ready to go. Our stomachs are growling.”

Janine sniffed into the tissue and cleared her throat. She leaned over and kissed Ella’s cheek. “Did you rest long enough?”

Ella nodded, and rose with Janine’s help. “Another thing...I read about grief. People need some time...but your dad tends to get depressed and lonely.”

Janine huffed, “Mom, I really don’t want you to worry, and I don’t want to argue with you.”

“Allow me this, Janine...please? I think the best strategy is to give Margaret rides to church. Then invite her for choir lunches and bring her to family activities.”

“I’ll try, Mom...you know we’ll take care of Dad, don’t you?” She kissed her mother’s cheek. “And we’ll trust God with this, okay?”

“I’m just...worried.” *God, what if Jack blames You? It breaks my heart—*

Janine grasped her arm and led her from the chill of the church into the warm sunshine.

Ella squinted when she emerged from the shadows into the bright light. Her steps halted,

while she waited for her eyes to adjust.

Birds twittered among the pink-blossomed trees.

She looked up. Bright white clouds parted. Streaks of sunrays touched the earth.

Heaven... Lord, now I can rest, and think about home...with You.

Five years after Ella's passing, Jack courted Margaret in a measured process that Ella intuitively believed would work for him.

Their church family watched and rejoiced.

Jack and Margaret married and traveled the world on several cruises. They enjoyed new love and life together for twelve years, until Jack passed.

E. V.'s published articles are "Meaghan O'Meara's Bowl" and "Don't Bypass Joy, My Love." Widely travelled, muralist turned author/illustrator, E.V.'s published illustrations are in *Little Known Tales in California History*.