



The Cowboy Takes a Nanny (The Halligans of Montana #4)

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Category: Romance

Description: Single dad and rugged rancher Leo Halligan needs a nanny he can trust with his precious baby girl. Widowed English heiress Ella Staunton-Hawes needs to escape her world for a while and keep her toddler son safe. A live-in nanny role on Leo's Montana ranch seems like the perfect fit.

However, Leo has trust issues and Ella hasn't been completely forthcoming about who she really is, nor why she's estranged from hers and her son's families. The more time Ella spends with Leo, the more she wants to confide in him. But will her subterfuge destroy the spark of romance between them? That perfect feeling of belonging?

Leo knows Ella's hiding something. But the children are perfect together and Ella's winding her way into his heart and maybe they're a family in the making. Everyone has secrets—how bad can Ella's be?

This emotional tale of second chances, hidden secrets, and small-town charm weaves passionate cowboy romance with heartrending stakes. A must-read for fans of single parent love stories and ranch-set drama.

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Leo Halligan watched as Ella Staunton Hawes slid her pert little butt onto the leather kitchen stool, Mia tucked snugly on her lap. His baby daughter, Mia.

Swallowing a groan, he moved to the other side of the island, putting some distance between himself and the all-too-cute Ella.

This was a bad idea.

One he shouldn't even be contemplating; one he should nip in the bud right up front. And he would have except for just one small complication—the one she was currently holding in her arms. Mia.

Mia giggled, and it was the most precious sound he ever could or would hear.

And the fragile bubble of hope that he could convince his sister, Joey, that Ella wasn't the right person for the job, popped.

His almost daughter was known to be a slow burn when it came to strangers, yet from the first time Ella and Mia had met, no such barrier had existed.

After trialing four potential nannies over the past few months and finding none of them suitable, he was getting a bit desperate.

Not so desperate that he'd choose just anyone ; whomever he employed to care for his daughter had to be perfect.

Trouble was, Ella Staunton Hawes was a bit too perfect, and in ways that had nothing

to do with her possible nanny skills.

And that was the problem.

Finding the right nanny had to be his priority.

So far, he'd bumbled along, learning to care for his daughter as he went, his family right there by his side all the way.

They'd been beyond great, helping out, even when he'd insisted he didn't need it.

With three weddings to plan, they didn't need to be constantly coming to his rescue.

But he wouldn't rush into anything, he had to get this right, for both him and his daughter, even if it took trialing at least another hundred applicants.

What if Ella really was the perfect nanny, though?

More than once, it had been suggested that perhaps he was the problem; the reason so far no one had been deemed suitable.

And while he knew he was overprotective of his baby girl, he only had to watch his parents and siblings interact with his daughter to know they were just as protective of her and would be equally diligent in finding the right person to care for her.

Which was exactly why he was sitting across from Ella Staunton Hawes—she with the beautiful eyes, double-barrel dimples, and double-barrel name.

His family all thought she'd be perfect, and he had to admit their arguments were sound.

For starters, she wasn't a complete stranger.

For the past couple of months, she'd been living there on Lazy H—specifically in the cottage that had formerly been his sister's home. As was the way of his family, the Halligans, Ella had been included in family gatherings and had formed a strong friendship with his sister and his soon-to-be sisters-in-law—and of course, there was her special bond with Mia.

His family considered it a bonus. And it was. And there was Benny, her two-year-old son, Benny, who would be part of the arrangement and was a great playmate for Mia.

What was not to love about that deal? It sounded perfect.

And would have been, except for the fact that since he'd first locked eyes with her—that intriguing blend of gray with tawny highlights, alight with teasing laughter—he'd not been able to get her out of his head.

But living under his roof, sleeping just down the corridor?

If he employed her.

He spared a glance across at her toddler son, hair dark, where his mother's was tawny, who sat in his daughter's highchair, awkwardly engrossed in mastering the use of a crayon clutched in his little fist, the result being a swirl of blue scribbles, some of which had actually made it onto the paper before him.

He could hardly fault Ella's parenting skills. The kid was always clean and cared for. Happy. Even as Leo watched, the toddler lifted his head and immediately stretched a hand to his mother. "Mama, more please."

A request she smoothly fulfilled by exchanging the blue for a red, prompting a

reminder to say thank you , all while the other hand deftly returned the squeaky toy his daughter had dropped and was reaching for.

He noted she'd ensured the coffee he'd prepared had been placed out of Mia's reach.

Not every applicant had been so diligent, a fact that had appalled him.

He cleared his throat. "So, this, um position... I guess I've heard bits and pieces about how you came to know Nash's mother—Melanie.

Do you mind if I ask more about that?" Nash, his sister's fiancé, had recently reconnected with his mother Melanie, who'd moved out to Montana to be with them and their infant daughter, Ruby.

Melanie had invited Ella and Benny to come with her.

He'd heard their version of events, but he was keen to know hers.

"Not at all." Exchanging red for yellow, she said, "Benny and I were down in Texas, and I needed work, however I had no one to leave Benny with—well, no one I trusted or knew well enough—so I was in a bind. Melanie stepped in to help me one day when Benny was tired and upset, and I was juggling holding him and trying to buy groceries. I would have been okay, but she was kind. Afterward she suggested coffee, we talked, and she offered me a job cleaning her house and said I could bring Benny." She paused and sent a meaningful look his way.

"At the time I had no idea what had gone down between her and Nash, nor what she'd been forced to sacrifice, but I did guess something had happened.

Melanie seemed to really enjoy playing substitute grandmother to Benny, so it worked for us both—our friendship developed from there. "

He nodded, mesmerized by her voice. Her accent.

Certainly, a very strong British influence, though he'd never been able to nail it down exactly.

But beyond the round vowels, there were hints of flatter American pronunciation, and something else he couldn't identify.

Whatever it was, he could listen to her all day, but curious as he was, he was also aware this wasn't a date.

And surely there was some kind of moratorium on how many personal questions could be asked in a job interview?

Pulling himself together he continued. "You didn't hesitate when Melanie invited you to come to Montana? "

"Not for a moment. I'd moved to Texas because my mother's family originally came from the Dallas area—

"Moved from?"

"Europe, France; though my mother was born in America and raised in England. However, to finish answering your question, I had no relationship with the few relatives left in Dallas so there was nothing to keep me there. And I knew Benny would miss Melanie. He had few enough people in his life who genuinely cared, and I didn't want him to miss that. "

She had nobody. Alone with a child? That brought back painful memories of Hope, the mother of his child, who had also been alone with a baby to care for.

A familiar mix of guilt and anger rose to the surface.

He should have tried harder to find her.

Not that he could have changed the outcome.

Cancer still would have taken her, but at least they could have shared the first months of their child's life together.

Instead, by the time he found Hope it was almost too late, and he'd discovered at the same time that he had an almost six-month-old daughter: Mia.

The baby, currently sitting on the lap of the woman responsible for his wayward thoughts, was why he could not follow his instincts where Ella was concerned. Twice he'd failed women in his past; but he was damned if would fail his daughter.

"Your family turned you away? That's rough.

Family, for all us Halligans is the most important thing: it comes first, and I can't imagine turning any family member away.

" His eyes flicked to Benny, who wore a tiny frown of determined concentration on his otherwise baby-smooth forehead. "Especially a child."

Her laughter surprised him. "I know. Don't forget I've seen all you Halligans in full flight.

" Her smile melted into something more wistful.

"I've never experienced anything like it before.

The children of this family are truly blessed, and I'm.

ahh , well, very grateful Benny has been showered with some of that. Included. ”

There was something in her tone, a certain wariness. “There’s a problem with that, or am I reading more into what you just said?”

Her expression was wry, “Was I so obvious.” She sighed. “Yes and no. I love that he’s getting to experience family interaction like this—it was exactly what his father and I hoped for him—but I can’t help but worry about what will happen when we move on.”

“You’re planning on leaving?” That put a whole other slant on her potential employment. He didn’t want Mia to get attached to someone who had no plans to stick around.

“Eventually we’ll have to move on, Leo. Even if you decide I’m the right caregiver for Mia, you won’t need me forever.”

A painful twist tightened his gut. His brain, slow to keep up, floundered to fathom the reason.

The woman had been in his home for approximately thirty minutes.

Most of that time he’d been hoping for a reason to find her an unsuitable nanny for his daughter.

Yet the moment she offered him even the scantest possibility, he’d near panicked? It was ridiculous.

This wasn’t going to work.

Then Mia bopped herself on the nose, dropped her lip and lifted her face to Ella who gently kissed the child's nose, following with an equally gentle tweak that instantly had Mia's smile back.

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Then again—damn it—she could be the best idea ever .

Mia was so comfortable with Ella, and he sensed those feelings were reciprocated.

He was doomed. Though, actually accepting that fate wasn't quite as hard to swallow as he'd thought.

But there'd be ground rules. His, at least. If he secretly found the nanny attractive, then he'd ensure she never knew it.

Rule number one: no dallying with the nanny.

Rule number two: never forget rule number one.

But he was getting ahead of himself. He hadn't exactly employed her yet. And as always, she both puzzled and intrigued him. Nothing about her hinted that she had been alone and almost destitute.

"I don't want to pry too deep, but I guess I need to ask about Benny's father." He shrugged. "I'm not keen on the idea of strange men turning up when I'm not here with my daughter."

"That won't ever be a problem."

Was that regret? No, it was a deep sadness clearly evident in her eyes. "My husband was killed in a boating accident when Benny was only a few months old."

He'd guessed maybe a painful separation. Maybe even an abusive situation. This, however, hit him hard—and was eerily close to home.

“Shi—” He bit back the expletive, wishing for words even mildly profound, feeling inadequate when none came to mind. “I’m sorry. That must have been rough...” Embarrassed by his pathetic offering especially when he'd been the recipient of so many awkward platitudes himself, he avoided her eyes.

Fiddling with his now-empty coffee mug, he only relaxed when she reached out to stroke Benny's head, and her smile returned when the boy excitedly held out his drawing to her.

Her response was exactly what he expected, gushing enthusiasm. Her bond with her son was what he had with Mia, unconditional love and pride. And her relationship with Mia possessed a similar special quality. Which was what he'd been looking for but had been missing in all the other applicants.

“I guess the other question is can you juggle two kids? Two very little kids.” He looked up toward the soaring cathedral ceilings. “And this house?”

“When we initially spoke, you mentioned a housekeeper? A cleaning lady?”

He nodded. “Yeah, Bea—Beatrice—comes out from town twice a week. I'll be keeping her on.

I guess I could get help with meals and laundry, especially when I might be gone for a few days, I have another property a few hours away.

And there are times it's particularly busy on the ranch.

” He shrugged. “Harvesting, stuff like that.”

Her laugh took his breath. “Leo, mothers—and fathers for that matter—all over the world juggle way more than this. People have twins. Thanks to the generous support you’ve offered, I think we, me and my two little charges, can manage perfectly well.

So, if this is a job offer, you can hold off on calling in extra troops.

” He went to interrupt, but she held up one hand to cut him off.

“If I need them, I’ll let you know, but for now, I think we’d be okay. ”

He held her gaze, taking her point, bar one small detail. “I think the point of difference between you and those other harried mamas and papas out there doing it hard is that they’re doing it for their own children. That’s not going to be the case for you, though, is it?”

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His question hit with a painful thud and Ella worked hard to maintain the confident smile she’d kept in place so far.

Of course, he was referring to Mia not being her biological child, which was true.

But it hit too near to the truth; the secret she held close, and she clamped down on the fear that surged every time hints regarding the truth surfaced.

Facts that must be kept closely guarded.

Swallowing, she took the high road, “You think I’d prioritize Benny over Mia? That if I had to choose one or the other in a dire emergency, I’d choose him ?”

“Wouldn’t any parent?”

“If we substituted the word parent for compassionate human being, would that question still hold? Wouldn’t any caring person endeavor to make whatever optimal choices were available to them? Do everything to save both ?”

He looked uneasy. Good.

“No, course not—all I’m saying is that the parental bond is like this nonnegotiable deal you make with your kid; that instinct, subconscious instincts , would come to the fore. Any parent would act without thought and grab their own child.”

“Are you asking me to sacrifice my son in such a situation?” When he blustered his denial, she shut him down.

“Then I suggest we let this go. You’re talking about horrific scenarios that, of course could happen , but I’m telling you that I would do everything— everything—in my power to ensure both our children were safe, cared for, and loved—because apart from being a mother I am a compassionate human being.

” She paused for air, but she wasn’t finished.

“But you know, crap happens, life happens, and I am merely human. Ergo, if you want a nanny with superhuman powers then I’m not your girl.

So, we’d better be clear on that point right now before we go any further. ”

She wanted to spear more ice his way, but both children seemed to sense the tension. Jiggling Mia, she held her a bit firmer and kissed the top of her head, simultaneously reaching to tickle Benny and soothe him with a smile.

She turned back to see Leo staring at her, agog. “Did, did you just—like—bawl me out? While I was interviewing you? ”

Unfazed she raised both eyebrows. “I believe I did. And be warned, I won’t hesitate to do it again.

That’s another thing I believe we should clear up.

If you want a subservient nanny, I am not the woman for the job.

I will not interfere in your life, but I will also not hold back if something is relevant to the children. ”

He blew out air. “Okay...” Shaking his head. “Right... Okay... Good to know where we stand.” He rose to make more coffee, muttering about maybe needing something stronger, accepting her refusal of both—even though she wasn’t sure the latter offer had included her.

She watched him expertly maneuver the stainless-steel coffee machine built into its own nook in the modern kitchen, determinedly ignoring the way his soft jeans hugged his butt, and forced herself to look around.

Leo’s was the newest home on the Lazy H, completed only last summer, its sleek lines and modern exterior strangely not out of place in rural Montana.

Inside this home though, was a different story, and testament to how his life had recently been turned on its tail.

The house was barely furnished, which accounted for all the family gathering being hosted in other homes on the ranch.

The sprawling family room that flowed from the kitchen, sported only an area rug and assorted baby paraphernalia, along with a two-seat sofa and a giant television screen, to go with a lovely fireplace.

From her perch she could see into part of what she assumed was the formal living room with its plush carpeting, which was devoid of any furnishings at all.

Despite the use of natural materials,—golden river rock chimney walls and focal statement areas, glorious marble and warm-toned wood, the house felt lonely and soulless, cold despite the more than adequate heating—and that made her sad.

It was evident Leo was doing his best after being tossed in to the deep end of fatherhood, and the indignation she'd felt moments before began to melt away.

Leo's sister Joey had shared his story of discovering he was daddy to a six-month-old, and losing the woman he'd loved at the exact same time. Besides which, he'd had a long recovery after a rodeo accident.

That said, he'd healed very well. Very, very well...

And thankfully he'd sustained no damage to his face.

Or if he had, his plastic surgeon must have been a god among surgeons.

Like his brothers, Leo Halligan was a looker.

To her mind, possibly the best looking of them all.

The other two wore their nature-given gifts more openly somehow.

Leo, on the other hand was slower to reveal himself—but when he did, whoa...

It was time to hold onto your socks or be blown right away.

It had crossed her mind, given her reaction to him, accepting the position might be a

bad idea, but in every other way the job was perfect.

Absolutely perfect, even aside from the fact she already loved little Mia.

And besides, Leo Halligan would be so well used to women falling over themselves for him, that even if she ever slipped up, he probably wouldn't notice.

That rationale mightn't have worked for most people, but if they were as desperate as she was, they'd make it work, just like she intended to do.

That desperation was one reason she partly regretted her outburst of a moment before.

The last thing she needed was for him to find reason to deem her unsuitable.

But then again, his question had been not only unreasonable, it was insulting.

It wasn't that she hadn't understood where it had come from.

And yes, maybe she'd been a bit sensitive because his question honed right in to her most vulnerable spot.

But even thinking it over, she wouldn't have changed her response.

If he really didn't like it, so be it.

Breath held, she watched his return to the island counter.

Elbows firmly planted, he cupped his mug with both hands, forcing the black T-shirt he was wearing to pull tight across shoulders that begged to be admired.

Not to be outdone, those well-matched biceps bunched as he lifted the mug to his

lips, and she was grateful that the action concealed the full expanse of his impressive chest. It was a very distracting view.

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He lowered the mug and licked some foam from his top lip, and the breath she'd held exploded into the space between them. So loud and forceful, his eyes flew to hers, wide with surprise.

Her response was choked as she indicated the plastic toy Mia held. "Almost dropped it."

He merely nodded again, and Ella suddenly wanted to peel off layers of clothing; fearing she might internally combust. It was March, the beginning of spring in many parts of the North America, but not so much here in Montana.

Snow mounds still lay on the ground thanks to an exceptionally cold February, and while the thaw had begun, she'd been warned snowfalls could appear right up to May and beyond.

So, the heating was necessary, and at most times would be comfortable.

And it would be, she told herself, just as long as she kept her distance from this man.

This silly wave of lust would drift away, crawl back into its hiding place, and she'd be more diligent about ensuring it stayed there in the future.

"Ella, I apologize if I offended you earlier." His voice interrupted her internal resolve. "It was a clumsy question, and an impossible one to answer. You were right to put me in my place. I just get—"

"Anxious?"

He shrugged.

“Leo, it’s natural. And, yes, I admit I may have overreacted.

” She paused and pierced him with her gaze.

“I’m not taking any of it back, but my response would have been more reasonable if we’d known each other longer and more thoroughly.

Despite having spent time together, we don’t really know each other, and I guess I was offended because I know who I am—but in fairness, you don’t know me, yet. ”

A deep V formed between his eyes, marring his otherwise perfect features, tanned from a life lived outdoors. “You bawl me out and then give me a pass?”

She cocked a brow. “I don’t give them out lightly, sir, so if I were you, I’d take it graciously.”

“Sir?” His grin was slow but sure, responding to her own lighter tone. “Fancy title for a lowly cowboy like me.”

She almost laughed. There was nothing lowly about Leo Halligan. In a different era his likeness would be carved in marble and revered by millions.

Benny began to fuss, and she reached for the purse she’d parked beside her stool, hauling it up and retrieving the container of chopped pears she’d prepared earlier, first passing some to Benny to forestall his growing frustration.

Naturally Mia stretched her hand for some as well, and Ella looked across at Leo.

“Does she like pears?” At his nod she followed with, “Do you have a fruit sock?”

Bewilderment looked back across at her. “A what?”

She shook her head. “No matter, I have one here. It’s brand new and sterilized.

Benny’s outgrown them, but I had a spare and threw it in just in case.

” As Leo watched on, she unscrewed the plastic handle from the mesh sack and slid in a couple of pieces of juicy pear, reattached the two parts and handed it to Mia, guiding the mesh to her little mouth.

When Mia pulled back, Ella squeezed some of the fruit in the sack, pureeing it with her fingers.

Mushed fruit squished through the fine mesh and Ella scraped some with her finger and popped it onto Mia’s lips.

Her tiny tongue darted out; little brow creased for a second before she eagerly reached for the sack, holding the plastic handle with her chubby hand.

“Clever girl,” Ella praised. Not taking her eyes off Mia, she addressed Leo. “It’s a safe way for them to have fresh fruit without having to cook it or make sauce. They suck and gum it. It gives them flavor and texture, and they can munch away safely. She’s a bit little for chunks of fruit.”

Leo’s eyes remained on his daughter, his expression softening as he watched her gnawing away on the healthy treat. “You seem to know your way around kids. You’ve had other experience as a nanny?”

A little voice inside her scoffed. She’d had a mountain of experience with nannying, just not as a nanny.

“Truthfully, I kind of learned with Benny. Number one rule: trust my instincts. Children? Babies especially? They don’t know what’s right either, but if they’re warm, dry, safe, and fed—and of course, loved—they’ll excuse you a few missteps along the way.”

He shrugged. “Amen to that. I’ve had to learn a hell of a lot in the past five months, and I gotta say I agree with everything you just said. So?” He paused, raised one dark brow. “You want to give us a try? Because, if you’re still willing, I guess the job is yours.”

Both relief and trepidation rippled through her. She wasn’t worried about caring for the children, that she was sure she would manage. But the offer had come with one of those smiles, slow and sexy, one she was sure he was oblivious to the havoc caused. “Y-yes. Great. Th-thank you.”

Panic shot a quick jab to her chest. Ella had schooled herself over her twenty-eight years on this earth not to ever appear vulnerable, always calm and controlled as required.

A spark of frustration flared to join the panic at the uncharacteristic stumble as she’d replied.

To blot out that image she thrust her hand firmly across the island counter.

Naturally he responded immediately, but that’s when it all got awkward, as their palms met she instantly knew he’d felt the same tingle she did.

It was obvious in the way his eyes widened in surprise.

In the way they both drew back. And definitely in the way that, for just the briefest moment, their eyes held before each hurriedly looked away.

It was possibly the shortest handshake in the history of handshakes.

Pushing back her embarrassment, she immediately went into rationalization mode; talking herself down.

It was the novelty of spending almost one-on-one time with an attractive man.

Nothing more, and just like the most exotic fare, the finest wines, smoothest cheese—even the most glorious views—all eventually lost their allure if one was subjected to them daily, so this, too, would pass.

A lifetime of experience with all the former assured it always did. And this would be no different.

However, even though that truism did much to bring the moment into perspective, she still had trouble meeting his gaze.

She glanced across at her son, seeking a distraction; a legitimate reason to busy herself, and as she dared a lightning-fast glance across at Leo, she suspected he was praying for something similar—even as he darted from the room.

The awkwardness was still there when he returned with some paperwork, keys, credit card—and all manner of things and information she'd require—and her need to bring some levity to cut the tension was paramount. As he finished his haltingly cumbersome speech, that need flowed over into the inane.

After signing the employment agreement, she raised one cheeky eyebrow. “And just so you know, I promise not to take Mia dancing around the rim of a raging volcano—at least for the first few weeks. And definitely not at the same time as I take Benny...”

“Dancing around—?” His perplexed frown relaxed, and he tipped back his head and laughed. “ Dangerous situations? Okay... Not going to live that one down for a while then?”

“Possibly not.” She sounded in control, she knew she did—a herculean feat given that she was left staring at the strong column of tanned skin, white teeth, and wide firm mouth until he regained his composure.

Laughter that smoothed some of the worry lines across his forehead, reminded her that he was merely a year or two older than herself.

It was quite simply breathtaking, and mentally she shook her head. Oh Lord, even her attempt at levity had backfired.

Really? Was she nuts to think she could make this work?

She’d made some bold decisions in the past eighteen months. Brave or just crazy—she wasn’t exactly sure. But her beautiful baby boy was safe, away from others who wouldn’t love him or care for him as she would, and did. For that reason only, she had to believe those decisions had been correct.

But this decision? It wasn’t the boldest, but just maybe it would be the most dangerous, for her. But if it meant she could keep Benny safe, she could do it—though maybe she was going to need a fireproof suit to protect her from those lazy smiles.

The thought conjured an image of all those suits of armor that graced her childhood home. She’d never ever seen the sense in them, but perhaps that had been hasty thinking. If one had been available right at that moment, she’d probably have grabbed it.

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Two days later, Ella discovered she'd been correct about the lack of furniture to the extent she was surprised to find a bed in the bedroom she'd been allocated. The whole place was empty but for the absolute basic of basics which gave over to her wondering again about how he lived his life.

Certainly, how they'd all manage now he had two more people living in with him in what was almost a spartan-like existence.

Because living here she would be. She and Benny, twenty-four-seven, as the expression went.

That decision along with her hours and remuneration—very generous—weren't the only things they'd hammered out.

Although Leo didn't really need a nanny for the nights, he suggested they move into the house with he and Mia, to make it easier on Benny.

His argument had made sense, and she was gratefully surprised at his consideration of her circumstances.

So, here she was. Moving in hadn't been a huge hassle.

They had only their clothing and Benny's baby needs, the larger of which were all able to be folded for transport.

And she'd soon familiarized herself with Mia's routine, the house, and making plans to structure both children's needs into each day.

The house was massive, diligently considered and she wondered how much his childhood home had influenced his decisions.

The farmhouse he'd grown up in—now home to his eldest brother JD and his fiancée Evie—was, while very traditional, spacious with big rooms ready to accommodate large family gatherings and a load of bedrooms set over the two levels above the main living areas. Three levels in all.

Traditional wouldn't be the way she'd have described this place.

Maybe modern farmhouse? Though mansion seemed to fit better than farmhouse, even though that was what it was supposed to be.

However, the spacious rooms, multiple living areas and six bedrooms upstairs certainly led her to wonder if Leo had also designed this house for a large family. His intended large family? But now?

Ella knew what it was to lose someone she loved, maybe not the same kind of love that Leo had probably felt, but a loss is a loss.

But to have assumed you'd fill a home with laughing children with the partner of your dreams, only to have that ripped away?

Her heart felt heavy every time she thought of what he must have suffered.

It was definitely a house meant for a family, though.

Now, with both children down for a nap, and Leo for once not hovering, she set off to explore the lower level she'd not yet had a chance to get to.

Though vast, it was kind of a half level that followed the contour of the land and was

accessed from the main living area.

Lights automatically illuminated the carpeted stairs as soon as she opened the door.

She'd expected it to be cold, but the heating was working down here as well.

The room at the bottom opened up to an area with a huge burnt orange sectional sofa facing a television almost as big as the wall, a pool table off to the side and a wet bar complete with swivel stools, all ready for someone to sidle up and order their favorite tippie.

Off to the far side, a light hung low over what she guessed was a poker table—or at least a games table.

She had yet to learn what his favorite card game might be, and wondered if it would gel with hers.

Though why she imagined they'd be playing games together was anyone's guess.

Well, those games, anyway. Since she'd first met him several weeks earlier, her libido had envisioned many other games that one might play with Leo Halligan...

Pulling her head back into the light-bathed room, she saw that the whole back wall was glass, opening up on a low terrace—now scattered with snow mounds that the early afternoon sun hadn't yet melted—of crazy paving in river-stone like the builders had used upstairs.

It was almost dazzling to look across the expanse to the view beyond.

The stand of tall cypress; the majestic mountains further back, the dark brooding clouds doing an excellent job of obliterating the patches of blue sky that battled to

penetrate their cover.

She let her gaze sweep the space one last time.

“Great space—but why is this area furnished and not the rest?” She was talking to no one, merely muttering her rather astonished thoughts, when she heard a noise behind her.

“Pretty crazy, right?”

Given his behavior since she’d arrived, his presence shouldn’t have startled her, but it did, and she—hopefully—used that as a cover for the quick flash of heat that flooded her face.

It was something she hated about her complexion, and she’d learned no amount of decorum training or applied self-control could regulate that annoying response.

Though while she may not feel calm, she could certainly sound that way.

“Astonishingly crazy is possibly closer to what I was thinking,” she said coolly.

She turned to see him standing at the bottom of the stairs, lounging against the railing.

He nodded. “I guess I can accept that. It wasn’t meant to happen this way.

” He sighed, lifted a hand to indicate the plush sectional sofa, following her across and joining her once she’d settled.

She was acutely aware of him watching as she pulled two cellphone-sized baby monitors out of the back pockets of her jeans.

Placing them on the sofa beside her, she allowed herself a sigh of relief that he'd left a generous space between them.

"Strangely enough, I have no trouble believing that," she replied, proud to have hidden her slightly perturbed state.

He quirked a brow. "Apart from when Dad had his heart attack, I was hardly home over the past few years. I was hitting the rodeo circuit hard. Wringing out every last dime. Setting myself up. I was building a property portfolio with my brother Jack, but also literally building this place, this house. From afar, really," he added.

"Dad and my brothers were overseeing the work as time allowed, and I couldn't wait to get home to thank them; christen the place.

So, I ordered all this stuff and had it delivered and set up ready for my return.

It was going to be a boys' night—Dad, my brothers, my cousin Cody, and a few friends and ranch hand buddies.

"He mussed that thick, dark hair that she was sure must have been curly when he'd been a kid, and she itched to reach out and smooth the bits that still stuck up.

"And it was all working out, but then things kind went awry."

"Your accident? Losing your partner. Hope? I've gleaned a little of the story from the family. It's awful."

Again, he nodded. "Yeah... And I'd sure picked the worst time to get banged up. I learned about Hope and Mia when I was in hospital... There was so much going on. Hope needed me and the daughter I hadn't even known existed needed me, and I kind of felt I was useless to them both."

“Not the way I heard it.” Against all better judgment, she slid a bit closer, her voice little more than a whisper.

“The story as I heard it told of the man who pulled out all the tubes, discharged himself from the hospital, and dragged himself across the country to be with the woman he loved. I was told you were there for her in those last days; to assure her you would care for and love your daughter. Not much in that story screams useless to me, Leo. Just the opposite.” She sucked in air, braved reaching out a hand to squeeze his arm; feeling the muscles beneath her fingertips cord and bunch.

“Not everyone would find the strength to do that, and it must have been so heartbreaking to have finally found Hope again, only to lose her forever.”

His head dropped back against the back of the sofa.

His eyes narrowed as though trying to see through two upper floors to where his daughter slept peacefully in her crib.

“It’s Mia I mostly worry about,” he said quietly, his voice a low rumble.

“She’s got the best aunties and best grandmother and a whole community of people who love her and will look out for her, but it’s not the same as a mom, right? ”

She shrugged. “Sure, two loving parents, who wouldn’t want that for their child?

But if that can’t happen? Then one parent who loves that child with every atom of their being, is just as good.

” She swallowed deeply. “And if you’re fortunate enough to be able to provide strong role models—which Mia has in spades—than that’s a bonus. At least that’s what I believe.”

Her voice had dropped toward the end, and she subtly opened up the space between them again.

Leo glanced sideways. “And you damn well should believe that. You’re doing a great job with Benny, Ella. He’s a fantastic little kid, and funny like his mama.”

Benny was great. But like his mama? Forcing back a lump that suddenly and determinedly jammed her throat she hastened to lift the mood and strove to look amused. “You think my boy is developing my carefully cultivated, and very English brand of sarcastic comebacks? Then job well done, I’d say.”

Her ploy seemed to have worked, and his expression brightened.

It was a pattern they were falling into and one she wanted to continue.

She’d always found easy laughter and the ability to not take oneself too seriously very sexy.

However, Leo was a double threat, because while their nonsensical conversations might make her heart flutter and encourage other organs to join in, when he was serious, deeper, like he’d been now, her entire body didn’t even wait for the invitation. It was all in .

Besides, sparring with Leo was fun—and she hadn’t had a lot of that of late.

“Nah...” He responded, not batting an eyelid. “The kid’s much funnier. Much wittier. Got way more style.”

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His grin deepened as his gaze once more held her captive. “So, English, huh? I knew there was English in your accent but there also seems to be more and I—”

She shrugged off his comment. “I sometimes feel like I’m a citizen of the world, but yeah, I guess England is where I spent most of my formative years.”

“Your husb—”

Honestly, the timing couldn’t have been better.

Just as she was wondering how she’d navigate the questions she had a feeling were coming at her, Benny’s plaintive Mama , filled the room.

Hastily grabbing the baby monitors she stood and headed for the stairs.

“I need to get to him before he wakes Mia. He can get loud if I don’t immediately appear.

” Halfway up she called back, “Great room! Thanks for the tour.”

“Any time.” He made to follow her. “I should come up and check on Mia.”

On a sigh she paused; shook her head. “No, you shouldn’t Leo. That’s what I’m here for—just go do whatever it is you need to do.”

*

It should have annoyed her, but Ella knew she'd have been far more successful at coping with her adolescent reactions to her employer if he wasn't always hovering.

After all, he was constantly peeking over her shoulder while she tended to Mia.

At least when he was home. She spent the first couple of days of awkwardly avoiding him whenever possible until she'd come to her senses and started acting like the adult she purported to be.

Leo seemed to have come to the same conclusion, unless his awkwardness had been all in her imagination.

The past week she'd thought things had settled into a more comfortable partnership, making it—for the most part—about the kids.

At first, his checking on her interactions with Mia every time he was home was understandable, but now it was starting to get weird.

Without taking her eyes off the task of dressing Mia after her bath, she said, "Are you sure you need a nanny, Leo? Or am I not making the grade? I do know what I'm doing, you know." She'd kept her tone matter-of-fact, even though her patience was beginning to fray.

She didn't have to see him pull back, or the rueful expression she'd come to know well, firmly settle in place. She shot Benny a deadpan look.

After a long moment Leo's deep voice rippled through the room. "I'm sorry. It's just—"

"That dressing a squirming baby is a task that is beyond my skillset. Just like feeding her a bottle or changing her na—diaper?"

She lifted Mia from the changing table, bussed her noisily on the cheek, and turned to face him.

She'd been correct about the rueful expression, only she'd omitted to add the wry grin shaping his lips into something more, leaving her to wonder if he'd let it develop.

She also hadn't imagined that both his hands would be held up in supplication.

"Permission to address the bench, your honor?"

"Ohhhh," she replied with mock astonishment, "let me get this straight. You think I'm judging you?" Handing him his daughter, she grabbed a brush and fussed with Benny's still baby-soft hair.

"Irony. Funny. However, surely, I have the right to state my case?"

She pressed down the bubble of laughter that always jiggled to get free when he let his humor shine through, like now.

She'd been seeing more of it and hoped it was a sign of his building trust for her.

"Au contraire. I believe the court is well aware that you are a good father; a very concerned father—but one who is acting just a bit crazy right now."

"Crazy? Harsh."

"You prefer weird?"

"Weird?" His genuine bewilderment was almost endearing.

“What?” Hers, maybe not so endearing. “You think creeping around behind me, checking on everything I do is normal behavior?”

“You think I shouldn’t check to see if my daughter is being properly cared for?”

“Of course. You have that complete right and if you didn’t care I’d probably have bopped you on the nose by now. But the hovering, Leo. It is a bit weird.”

Those impressive shoulders slumped, doing nothing to detract from their impressiveness.

“Okay, okay... Point taken. It’s just that I’ve got used to doing those things for her myself and I guess it’s harder to hand over than I thought it would be.

And, in my defense,” he said, hands aloft, deflecting her response, “can I just say that the previous contenders for this position left me with a poor impression of nannydom.”

“Nannydom?” She shook her head, laughter bubbling. “But to address your point—and for the umpteenth time—I am not one of those nannies. For that matter,” she added somewhat flatly, “I’m not really even a nanny. I’m just someone who cares for these children—my own or not.”

He truly did look properly chagrined this time.

“I know. Thing is, that’s something I’m very grateful for.

I couldn’t ask for my daughter to be better cared for than she is with you.

” He dragged a hand through his hair. “And you’re right, so I promise I’ll try to back off.

” Passing Mia back to her he stepped back, turning to leave.

“And just so you know,” he called back to her, “I do realize you’re not like the other nannies.

For starters, not one of them backtalked me. ” His tone held amused exasperation.

A little snort escaped her as she put the baby down on her bottom to play with Benny, Ella busied herself picking up the damp towels and assorted clothing to toss into the laundry hamper.

“That’s life Leo,” she returned, loud enough so he didn’t miss it, “sometimes you just have to take the good with the bad.”

There’d been a comeback, but it was too low for her to decipher. Still, she was smiling as she checked the room over, tidying a few toys and books. Like the room on the lower floor, this room was fully furnished.

The first time she’d stepped into Mia’s room she’d allowed herself a rare tinge of envy—not for its frothy pink-and-white homage to fairy princesses, and not for the bright artwork, or the books and toys—but for the reminder of what they’d left behind when she’d fled.

Benny had had such a room once; a room, thanks to his father, that was extravagant and over the top—but it had been Benny’s space.

If Emile hadn’t died, he would still have all that.

The reminders of the life they’d left made her sad for her baby boy.

It had been a brief moment of wallowing though, because right on its tail came the

reminder of why she'd left, and while it hadn't been easy, she'd not once regretted doing so. Benny might not have those material possessions, but surely the love and security she provided were of far more value?

Emerging from Mia's room into the corridor, she moved with her usual briskness, first ensuring the doors to the bathroom accessed from both her room and Mia's were firmly closed before checking, too, that Leo hadn't forgotten to latch the baby-safe gate at the top of the stairs.

It was in place before she'd arrived, so of course he ensured it was secured.

With both children happily playing for the moment and safe from all and any inherent danger, she slipped into the room she'd been allocated to make her bed and freshen Benny's crib.

Leo had generously offered another room for her son, but she was happy to have him with her.

The man's generosity hadn't stopped there, but she'd assured him she had everything she needed for Benny—at least for now.

Her boy would be tall like his father, and she was becoming more and more aware that soon he'd need his first bed, something that the magnanimous wage she was being paid would easily cover when the time came.

As always, her heart squeezed at the thought of Benny growing older, becoming independent.

He was and would ever be her main focus.

She'd thought long and hard about accepting Leo's offer to live in, wondered how it

would affect Benny, but so far, she had to admit it hadn't been as tricky to navigate as she'd expected.

Apart from Leo's constant monitoring.

Actually, if she hadn't already met Leo several times and learned of his backstory; it was possible she might have been completely creeped out.

But knowing the entire Halligan family, especially his sister Joanne, and soon-to-be sisters-in-law, Evie and Liberty, who were fast becoming more than friends to her, explained a lot.

But she did have that advantage, so his hovering was mostly an irritation.

Stories of his overprotective daddy behavior were legendary within the family circle, so she gave him another pass.

In fact, much to her vexation, the only vibes she picked up from him so far were more likely to have her running to him than away from him.

She was working on that.

But he wasn't making it easy.

Up to now she hadn't been able to find any sneaky little habits that would turn the dial back on her attraction. He didn't pick at his toenails, or have the table manners of a pig, he wasn't boastful or arrogant—and he respected women.

Really, it left her nowhere to go! Still, a girl could hope. A snort of amusement burst from her. She was wishing for her boss to be a jerk.

Having straightened her room, she looked around.

If she hadn't seen the room downstairs—and Mia's room—she'd have accused him of having no interior design instinct at all.

The room was very basically furnished, boasting no real style or color scheme.

Leo had apologized; given her cart blanche to make it her own, at his expense.

But she'd put that on the backburner, she was still acquainting herself with how the house ran, as well as Mia's routine, and how it fit with Benny's.

It was certainly a far cry from the rooms she'd once called her own—and which spanned both ends of the luxury/poverty spectrum. The latter experienced in these past eighteen months as finances had allowed.

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She'd done her best. Done what she hoped Emile would have wanted her to do.

She'd never doubted Emile's determination for Benny to have a happier childhood than either of them.

Sometimes he exhibited his love in a funny way, but she'd been ever-hopeful that he'd get the hang of walking the walk instead of just talking about it.

Dear Emile. As always a wave of sadness swept over her.

As husbands go, he was not the worst, but also not the best, though she was sure he'd have worked it out given the chance.

He had been her best friend, and that was the person she missed.

Two years ago, there'd been a moment when she'd wondered if she'd later regret the real reason for her rash decision, but it took only one look at her beautiful boy to find her answer.

He was the gift in this whole sorry mess, the one bright shining star, and if she could just hang on for another few months, they would be okay.

A grizzle from the nursery had her hightailing it back to the little ones, and her heart squeezed. Mia was rubbing her eyes, ready for her morning nap, and watching on, Benny's little face was shrouded in concern as he tried to tempt her with a toy to make her happy again. "Baba crying, Mama."

Squatting, she gently rubbed her hand across his head. “I know sweetheart. She’s a bit sleepy now.” Reaching for Mia she held the baby close, stretching a hand to Benny. “Let’s go get her a drink and you can help me settle her for a little nap.”

*

Leo looked up from his place by the coffee machine as Ella wandered into the kitchen—Mia’s head cuddled in against her neck and Bennys’ little arm stretched up to hold his mother’s hand. There was no rush and no urgency about her movements, her voice gentle as she chatted to the two in her care.

Strands of Ella’s silken hair had slipped from her ponytail, seeming to caress the gentle curve of her face.

She wore no makeup and she didn’t need it.

Her skin was flawless. Smooth, softly golden, appearing to glow in the morning light that flowed through the walls of glass surrounding them.

Her eyes lit when she spotted him, and his whole being warmed when her full mouth instantly curved upward.

“No post-hole digging today?”

“Later. I left the boys there to get on with it while I shot back here to wait for an overseas call.”

She nodded. “You got the ice auger working then?”

He flicked an eyebrow. She’d remembered?

Talk of ice augers and digging post holes was hardly scintillating conversation, especially for someone who hadn't lived the ranch life before, and he'd expected that she would have either tuned out or forgotten their brief exchange yesterday.

He'd only mentioned it because she noticed he was wound up, though why he'd blurted it out was a mystery.

"Getting there." He took a sip of his coffee and moved to a stool near the island.

Reaching to take his daughter while Ella filled a bottle, he continued to explain.

"We're gonna try an old farmer's trick and put some old tires over the spots we need to dig.

Light fires in them and let that thaw the ground a bit faster.

I need these corrals built before May and that's gonna be here way sooner than I'd like. "

There he went again, probably boring her senseless.

Though that thought vanished when he turned to see her bend to pick up something she'd dropped.

It took a superhuman effort, but redirected his gaze, knowing that was another image he was going to have to try to purge if he wanted to maintain a professional relationship with his kid's nanny.

Her jeans were snug, and outlined her every curve—like they were made for her.

Yet another thought prompted him to wonder if they had been made for her.

Her clothes weren't new, but he recognized the quality.

Brands might not be his everyday jam, but his success the rodeo circuit had allowed him to build his real estate portfolio, and gained him entrance into the so-called higher echelons of society.

Where he'd met enough indulged women to at least have a nodding acquaintance with the brands they preferred.

His foray into that world had been short, but more than enough for a lifetime.

Ella reached into a high cupboard and one of those brands stitched into the back of those cute little jeans that rode her hips told him one thing was sure, she hadn't bought those at the western wear store in Marietta.

Where had she really come from?

Melanie, his sister's soon-to-be mother-in-law, had known Ella for more than a year.

He knew she was twenty-eight. So, where had she been for the previous years?

Melanie had warned everyone that Ella was very private about her former life and had quietly asked that they respect it.

He'd suspected Melanie knew a lot more than she'd ever shared, but he'd gone along with that request because he believed everyone was entitled to their privacy, but he had to admit, she intrigued him.

And Melanie wasn't the only one who trusted her—even his mom had added her vote to him employing Ella. Why not? She fit into his extended family easily; nothing she'd done had raised any flags or been cause for concern, and yet, she was a puzzle.

A puzzle who was caring for his child...

Yet again, he couldn't fault her there either. And her dedication to Benny spoke loudly of how well she'd managed there. Ella was cutting some carrot strips for Benny to munch on while she waited for Mia's bottle to warm.

"May is when the new herd arrives?"

Wow, she'd really listened—and man, he'd obviously spilled the lot. "Yeah. Hopefully we'll get the pastures ready for hay planting in April, but those corrals have to be ready by May."

"If they're not? What if the weather turns?"

He shrugged. "The herd is small. Nash and I are hoping to develop a superior breed of bull for the rodeo circuits. We've both had some ideas.

There's a heap of big operations supplying the major rodeos, but there are loads of smaller rodeos that need quality bulls.

We'll focus on that market and that'll give us an idea of how we're going.

" He shook his head, needing to clear it.

"But that wasn't what you asked... So, if the corrals aren't done?

One of the others, JD, Jack, or Nash, will help me out in the short term, or I could send them to my other property, but it'd be better if I was ready. "

She nodded as she carried the bowl of carrots and Mia's bottle to the sofa.

Benny followed and scrambled up beside her.

He liked that; a close relationship between kids and parents were important to him.

In his family, that closeness had given them all the confidence to follow their own paths.

A close relationship helped independence become strong.

Or so he hoped... For him, the future with his daughter was something that both excited and terrified him.

Especially as he'd be doing the parenting single-handedly.

His head gave a mental shrug. Just like Ella with Benny.

She settled Benny and held out her arms for Mia. "Unless you want to?"

"I'd better not. My call is bound to come through."

Taking the baby, she kissed the soft curls on the top of her head and settled her into the crook of her arm. Mia sighed contentedly, a little sound she'd recently developed that tickled him every time.

"You really love this life, don't you," she said softly.

He should go into his office; there was plenty to do.

He remained because it was where he wanted to be. He stoked the fire, inspected the safety catch on the fire-screen, and told himself he was being helpful. "Yeah, I'm blathering on about it enough. I'm sure you're used to more..." He searched for the

right word. “Sparkling conversations.”

He’d heard the growl in his voice; there was no censure intended and immediately worried she’d misinterpreted his intent. He should have known better. Her eyes gleamed as she looked up at him; in the way those dimples tried so hard to keep her grin in check. And the tightness in his chest eased.

“Aww... Don’t be so hard on yourself, Leo. Your social skills aren’t that much worse than Benny’s—though, when he hits two next month...?”

He reached to find some level of indignation and failing miserably, his chest bubbling with an amused chuckle, but he kept it low so as not to wake Mia. “Well, there you have it. Something for me to aspire to. Looks like I’ll be coming to you for lessons, little man.”

Sensing he was now part of this conversation, Benny looked from one of them to the other, screwing his little face into some kind of feigned hilarity and barked out a false laugh. The kid was hilarious. Even funnier was that within a split second he was back to soberly munching on his carrots.

“Cute trick. I should remember that one.” Keeping his eyes on the boy, Leo lifted his hands in mock surrender. “But what? You think I’m not up to it? Seems like you and I are gonna have to have some serious talks about the Bro Code, man.”

Mia’s eyes drooped and the nipple fell from her cherub lips, abandoned.

Ella moved it away from the baby’s mouth before turning to her son.

“And then, my darling baby boy,” she said sweetly, “you and I will have a serious chat about why it’s never a wise move to choose a brother over your significant other—who at this point of your life, is me—your mother. ”

Leo slid back onto the stool he'd recently vacated; he really should go into the office.

“You’re kidding me, right? Every guy needs his brothers—how else will he know when he’s making a jackass of himself?”

Another guy—your brother, your pal, even your dad—will give it to you straight.

Not always leaving you hanging—guessing—like girls tend to do. ”

“That’s your counterargument? Well, trust me—I’m about to set your mind at ease.

” Her reply was way too smooth, her tone sickly sweet.

“Leo Halligan, you’re not alone. I’m here and I’m quite happy to take on the role of jackass judge.

If I see you being a jackass, I promise there’ll be no dissembling, no confusion—I’ll give it to you straight. ”

“Very noble of you. But then again, something tells me that role wouldn’t be much of a hardship for you at all; that you’d be well suited.”

She ignored his counter jibe. “Do you have a daily criticism tolerance level? I might need to know that. For example, how many times you can realistically tolerate being told you’ve messed up?”

“How many...?” He controlled his laughter by chewing on his inner lip.

“What can I say? The level of faith you have in me is awe inspiring. Such a lift to my self-esteem. And while I appreciate such concern for my feelings, I might have to burst that fun bubble and tell you I’ve been working on that part of me.

Found a program. Weaning myself off jackassism.

Down to—ohhh—hopefully not more than once a day, now. ”

“Really? Commendable. Your sponsor must be so proud. Though if it’s your brother Jack I won’t hold out for your graduation ceremony.”

More laughter bubbled in his chest. “You’re right to be concerned. The guy is a jackass genius. Taught me everything thing I now wish I didn’t know.”

“Ha... That , I believe.” The teasing gleam faded, eclipsed by a soft smile. “I didn’t mean anything nasty about Jack. I like him, he’s a good sport. And a good brother. Maybe just a bit,” she paused, “ full-on ?”

That’s when his dam finally broke and he laughed out loud, dialing it down when she shot him a quick frown accompanied by a finger pointed at his sleeping daughter.

“You’re spot on. And he’s a great uncle, and a great brother.

But full-on is a fair and accurate—and generous—description of my next brother up.
”

Grinning, he took a swig of his now almost cold coffee.

When was the last time he’d really laughed?

Especially with a woman he wasn’t related to?

Before she’d come into his life? It’d been a while.

But damn, it felt good to just be—What? Silly?

Carefree? He was a father, a rancher, and had a reputation as a tough rodeo competitor.

Silly had never been in his make-up, and even further down in his vocabulary.

However, when she stood, obviously intending to take the baby up to her crib, and absently performed some kind of little shimmy to shake those skin tight jeans into a more comfortable position, his thoughts went in a completely different direction.

Like, how long had it been since he'd flirted with a gorgeous woman?

Because a worrying twist in his chest more than hinted at the possibility. Had they been flirting? Or two friends having a bit of a laugh? Was he supposed to know this stuff? He refused to watch as Ella left the room, instead he watched Benny trail after her.

Nah... The kid probably had no more idea that he had; no use asking him.

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The next few days passed in a busy blur for Ella, her focus firmly on caring for the children and seeing that the house ran as smoothly as possible.

She'd met Bea, the sturdy middle-aged woman who cleaned for Leo, but apart from giving Ella a lot of sideways and blatantly curious glances, she'd had barely said a word.

Still, Ella had hopes that before her time in Leo's home came to an end that she could build some kind of relationship with the woman.

It was important to her; ingrained. The one thing her father had done right was to always respect his staff, no matter how lowly their position.

Leo had been gone during the day, so it was just her and the children, but they all seemed to be adjusting well.

Though it was both sweet and kind of heart-wrenching at the same time to see Mia's little eyes searching for her father in the places she usually found him.

She was handling the transition beautifully, but Ella was constantly aware that this was a trial for Mia as well.

If Ella had harbored any faint hope that Leo was staying away because he didn't trust himself around her, the thought was dashed when the load of materials he'd been waiting for arrived.

He'd been stretching daylight hours ever since; trying to get a start on the new

corrals, which meant he was gone early.

But never without first greeting his daughter.

Ella's room was adjoined to Mia's via a bathroom so she heard Leo fussing with Mia through the open doors before he left each morning, changing her and blowing noisy raspberries on her tummy. She'd seen him do it often enough to correctly identify the sounds and subsequent giggles.

Like the coward she was, she always waited until he'd gone before she and Benny would take Mia from the crib back to their room.

There the three would tussle on the bed, play hide-and-seek with bed sheets and have a little fun before going down for breakfast. It was probably a good thing Leo had already left the house because if he heard the shrieks coming from her room, he'd probably think they were all being attacked.

Ella had also taken to eating with the little ones, and have both children bathed ready for bedtime before Leo came home.

Unless he was going to be away, or working late, he'd take his baby for some daddy time before putting her down for the night, and later going back downstairs for the dinner she'd left prepared for him.

He'd repeatedly told her not to bother, that she had enough to do, but she liked cooking—and surely all those expensive French cookery lessons she'd had should be put to good use in the surprisingly well-equipped kitchen.

While the children happily drummed on upturned pots with wooden spoons at her feet, Ella put the finishing touches to a beef bourguignon, ready to slip into the oven for a long slow bake, when Leo entered via the mudroom.

The set to his traffic-stopping unusually serious features, stilled her movements. The cacophony of sound at her feet produced a frown. Leaning around the counter he simply raised an eyebrow in her direction.

She forced a cheeky smile. “Please tell me that’s not hideously expensive French cookware?”

His mouth pulled in tight, and she willed him not to do that. “And if it is?”

She deliberately brightened her smile. “Well, I guess we have that to thank for the superior quality of this recital. Just imagine how bad it could have been if they were a cheap variety?”

He shook his head, making a show of clearing one ear. “Yeah, just imagine.” Charade over he leaned closer to the glossy red Dutch oven pot she was stirring; watching the last of the chopped herbs disappear to mix with the rich beef, red wine, and vegetables.

“Smells great.”

“I made an order with the grocery store, and they delivered yesterday. I should have mentioned it. I ah, I hope that’s okay?”

I noticed that Mia was having mostly canned food and—” She held up her hand to ward off any arguments.

“Not, and I emphasize, not that there’s anything wrong with that.

But?” She shrugged. “It’s also good for her to have fresh, experience the different textures.”

“You have time for all that?”

“I won’t always. But if I do, then why not?”

He shrugged. “Sounds great to me, and no arguments here. Whatever is best for Mia is good by me, as long as you don’t overload yourself. And, yeah, if you need anything, not just for Mia but yourself or Benny—just order it. That’s why I gave you the credit card.”

The phone buzzing in his hand elicited a frown.

“I’m gonna have to go. But I’ve been meaning to thank you properly, the meals have been amazing—where did you learn to cook?

” He frown at his phone, therefore saving her from answering.

“But you don’t have to go to so much trouble.

I’m quite capable of grilling a steak when I get back. ”

The phone buzzed again, and she deciphered the word he silently mouthed. “I actually came up here for a reason, but I need to push off.” Raising a hopeful eyebrow he said, “Do you think you could stay down and have dinner with me, tonight? There’s always way too much food.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Is something wrong?”

He’d started to walk back toward the mud room. “Nope. Just need to clarify some stuff.”

“By the way, your sister called.”

He turned, nodded. “Which is why we need to talk. I’ll be back before seven.

I’ve gotta head down the highway with JD this afternoon.

He wants some help picking up some supplies and then we have to trek on way out to Fraser.

We need a new baler; been kicking around a few different models, and new stock has arrived.

But I swear, choosing new farm equipment with JD is like picking out a prom dress. ”

“You chose your own prom dress, Leo? Well done. Very new age.”

He sighed. Rolled his eyes. “Okay, let me rephrase that to worse than picking a prom dress.”

“Still not helping yourself,” she responded in a sing-song voice. “I’m picturing it now, and it’s not doing a whole lot for your street cred.”

“Save the jokes and spare me some pity, woman. I’m not kidding here.

I can only hope they don’t make ’em in different colors, or I might not make it back till tomorrow.

” Nodding to the not very harmonious little ones on the floor he added.

“I might also pick up some earplugs.” Screwing up his face he added, “I’ll get two sets. You can thank me later.”

Her grin faded, she could enjoy these snippets of happiness, but she had to be

prepared to walk away when the time came.

Despite his parting shot leaving her with all the ideas of how she could thank him.

It was a throwaway, she knew that. There was no hidden message, but her body totally wasn't on that page.

It was reading from a different chapter completely, one that was intent on mobilizing every organ with a chant of let me count the ways...

Thankfully it was time to get lunch for the littles, she needed to keep herself occupied. And while they napped? She could go and shovel snow. And then maybe shovel it right back again. Anything to burn off some of this nervous energy.

She checked the sky outside those mammoth windows. One thing was definite: After their naps, she was taking them for a long mind-numbing walk.

*

Dinner was as delicious as he'd known it would be, and Leo made short work of the casserole accompanied with creamy mashed potatoes and green beans.

And the apple crumble—as she'd called it—for dessert, filled and warmed him; but he had a worrying niggles that being in Ella Staunton-Hawe's company had as much to do with that sense of well-being as the food.

Initially things had been a bit awkward between them, but they gotten past that, and he couldn't deny there was still an underlying tension—sweet underlying tension—in the easy comradeship they'd fallen into over the past several days. Plain and simple: he liked her company.

And he sure as hell liked the rest of her.

But there were still things about Ella that puzzled him.

His eyes flicked to where she sat beside him at the kitchen island, wishing they were at a table so he could see her face.

He really needed to get furniture. Hell, he even like the delicate way she ate.

It was evident that she'd been used to a more—he searched for the word—luxurious life?

That didn't seem quite right, but he sensed she'd certainly known a lifestyle was usually associated with substantial wealth and privilege.

He'd done well with his earnings, had invested well, and much of that was due to the ethics and examples set by his parents and grandparents before them. His family had always been generous with their support and the encouragement to do his best.

He'd also—briefly—moved in those fancy circles, the ones only accessible via a written endorsement from your bank manager.

He swallowed the last mouthful of his beer, for once tasting only bitterness.

He'd quickly realized those particular social circles weren't for him.

His brother Jack had learned to play the game and yet still kept somewhat apart—not allowing himself to be sucked into that shallow pond.

Leo didn't have the heart for it and could never fall for the kind of woman who frequented that world.

He wouldn't have called himself overly hard to please, but authenticity and sincerity were two compromises he wasn't willing to make. Which wasn't that big an ask.

And that brought him right back to Ella. Was she authentic? Being her true self? Or were he and Mia—this job—just some kind of temporary stopgap? Would she suddenly tire of caring for his child and move on? Decide to find her way back to the other life he suspected she'd once lived?

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Despite his concerns, his daughter was as happy as she'd ever been; his house was filled with the joyful chatter, music, and laughter.

And it felt like a home for the first time when she'd stepped over his threshold with her meager suitcases, a cute little guy on her hip, and the somewhat mysterious smile that had felt like a challenge from the moment he'd met her.

Napkin neatly folded, shoulders straight even perched on a stool with no back support, she twisted to face him, her head slightly tilted to the side, the movement of hair tantalizingly close to his shoulder released the scent of her shampoo, or was it her perfume?

Whichever it was, it made him think of summer, sweet and yet sultry—and seemed to be as much a part of her as her mysterious smile.

“You said you wanted to talk about Joey?”

He heard the concern in her voice and held up both hands, hoping maybe to wave it away. “There was no problem—just the opposite. She called you today?”

Ella nodded. “Yes, she suggested that she and the other girls—Evie and Liberty—might come for coffee tomorrow, and I—”

“Yeah, I know. You told her you'd check with me?”

She shrugged. “You are my employer, meaning you pay me to actually work and—”

“Ella, this is your home; you’re not on the clock.

I gotta say,” he continued on a sigh, “that it threw me a bit. I figured we must have missed a few points when we talked about your position—and I just needed to clarify, want to make sure you know how much I appreciate you being here, but that you’re not required to be on the clock twenty-four hours a day.

You’re not some kind of servant. Ella,” he continued, earnest sincerity underlining every word.

“Being Mia’s nanny doesn’t mean you can’t have fun; do stuff.

If you want to go into town for coffee, or the park, or the library—the beauty parlor—just pack up the kids and go.

Call the others to meet you and have a party! ”

“You came back up from your work to tell me that today?”

Inserting as much as emphasis into his response as he could muster, he replied, “Yeah, I did. I also told Joey you’d love her and the girls to come over, and yeah, I might have mentioned that the snacks were on them.”

“You mean morning tea ? Really, Leo? I can do the snacks —as you so eloquently call them.” She pulled her exasperated face.

“But thank you, that’s very gracious of you.

And yes, of course I knew it was okay for your sisters to be here—they have more right than I to be here—but manners decree that I check because we hadn’t discussed it. ”

He leaned his elbow on the island, wondering why they were having this discussion perched like birds on a wire when they could have been comfortable on the sofa. His eyes slid sideways. The two-seater sofa?

On second thought? The stools were fine.

He cleared his throat. “Yeah, well, I just needed you to know you’re free to do whatever you want or need to do, that I’m okay with that.”

Her eyes softened, and he was reminded she’d probably had a really busy day. “Thank you,” she whispered.

She’d ended on a sweet sigh that wrapped around him and he had a hell of a time trying to pull his eyes away from her.

His fingers itched to tuck the silky strands of her hair behind her sweet little ear; felt the all-too-familiar tightening in his jeans.

He’d meant every word, he was fine with her doing whatever she needed to do. Or wanted to...

The pressure in his jeans increased. Sadly, he wasn’t going to give himself that same permission.

Leaning forward, he went to roll his knuckle gently down that soft smooth cheek; checked himself. “Go to bed, Ella. I’ll clean up. You look beat.”

Breaking their connection, he rose to his feet.

The abruptness of his action startled her, but she didn’t argue, and he was relieved; because if she didn’t go, he would no doubt say the words clawing up his throat, And

because you're far too beautiful and way too tempting, and I don't know if I can trust myself if you stay...

*

Ella wasn't sure whether there was a reason Leo had conveniently appeared around the time the visitors were due to arrive, but there he was fussing with the coffee machine.

Things had been a bit tense between them last night, and she'd thought he might have made himself scarce.

However, there'd been no indication from him this morning that he'd even noticed the sparks, and yet she'd been sure she hadn't imagined it. There had been a moment. Hadn't there?

Confused, her gaze slipped to the two cherubs at her feet. To save everyone's ears from permanent damage, she opened the cupboard filled with brightly colored plastic containers, which she assumed had probably been supplied by family members.

Turning, Leo watched them for a long moment, a frown forming even before he spoke. "Is this some kind of subliminal message? Should we be buying more toys, or something?"

She couldn't deny his use of we sparked a momentary little flutter in her chest, but relieved to fall back into their lighthearted patter, she covered her reaction with laughter as she spun to him, mouth bunched in mock horror.

"You think they have a plan? Conspiring against us? Guilting us into getting them more new, sparkly playthings?"

“Maybe that’s the real meaning of the term Toddler Terror .”

Eye contact was a totally normal part of communication.

What they weren’t supposed to do was linger.

Leo’s eyes did all that, and more. They dropped to her lips, still pursed, frozen under his scrutiny, brushed across her face once more, found their way back to her mouth, now slightly parted.

Bone-melting heat curled through her, puddling in places that begged for attention, and her heart picked up its tempo to ensure she hadn’t missed the other messages.

She didn’t miss the moment his body registered its own signals in the quick intake of air, the softening of his gaze as it stayed on her lips.

She saw his chest rise, felt his gaze rove her face, pause on her lips once more, lips she had an uncontrollable urge to moisten—her heart picked up the tempo.

How did he do that to her with just a look?

This time it was she who broke the spell, turning back to her work with an earnestness it didn’t warrant.

He turned just as abruptly. “Um, yeah, so you’re okay for today?”

Adopting a nonchalance she didn’t really feel, she nodded.

“Given your lack of suitable amenities I’ve decided we should use the room on the lower floor.

The man-cave. Are you okay with that?” Without looking at him, Ella continued to artistically plate the dainty tarts, scones, and ribbon sandwiches she’d slipped out of bed early to create before the children woke.

It was typically English, and she was hoping they enjoyed the little feast.

Thoughts of her imminent guests calmed her, providing a much-needed distraction. All three women were amazing—warm, funny, and kind—and she was grateful for their friendship and would have happily included them into her circle of friends no matter where she’d met them.

It was one of the things she missed most—having that trusted friend her own age to lean on or chat with—and these ladies had eased the loneliness and filled a need for friendship she hadn’t even realized how badly she’d needed it.

Abigail, her best friend, now floating around on the Riviera, had been her only real contact; the only one she’d trusted enough to stay in touch with.

Apart from phone conversations, Abbie had made it her duty to supply her version of emergency care packages for Ella.

Usually a mix of luxury cosmetics, perfumes, hair products, and lotions.

Often even clothing. At times when Ella had desperately needed diapers, the packages almost made her cry, but they mostly made her smile.

Not because she needed those things, or even for the most part, even wanted them, but it was a connection to another human being who knew her story and understood; didn’t judge.

Someone who cared, loved her, even if that someone had absolutely no understanding

about how Ella now lived—and probably never would.

“Ahhh, yeah... Go ahead and use the downstairs, it makes sense. Just tell Mia and Benny to go easy on the bourbon. It’s a top shelf; they probably wouldn’t appreciate it.”

Not breaking concentration from her task, she shot back just as dryly, “I don’t know how you can even joke about that.

Quite shocking, actually. Everyone knows a child must first be introduced to wine.

Their palates are far too undeveloped to be subjected to hard liquor this early.

It’s a gradual process. Surely you know that?

I have bottles of Babychamps all ready and waiting in the refrigerator—already fitted with nipples for Mia. ”

His snicker reached her first. “Always good to be prepared.” He’d moved to the other side of the island, his eyes scanning the platters, obviously intent on sneaking a taste, and neatly avoid eye contact.

“Though if that’s the truth, my mom has some serious questions to answer.

I figure she also owes me a whole heap of alcohol she denied me in childhood.

” His hand darted out. “Is that lemon under that meringue thing?”

A sound from the entry saved his hand from receiving a sharp slap and he grinned and strode in that direction, returning a moment later with his nearly three-month-old niece, Ruby, snug in the baby carrier.

He placed it on the island between them.

Joey followed, hauling a bulging bag, rosy-cheeked from the effort and the cold.

Both Leo and Ella fussed over the baby, earning a gummy grin in return. Then Leo lifted both Benny and Mia in turn so they could greet Ruby.

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Joey was more intrigued by the elegantly laid platters on the island, turning wide eyes on Ella. “Wow, when you messaged that you had this covered, you weren’t kidding! This looks amazing!”

“Thank you! And if you’re thinking I’m blatantly showing off, you’d be quite correct. It’s been a while since I had the opportunity to do anything like this, and I happily hijacked this occasion for my own selfish purposes.” She shrugged. “Not just so you’d think I was awesome.”

Joey’s laughter rang through the vast space. And without looking over, Ella knew Leo was chuckling as well.

Moving to her side of the island, Joey threw an arm around Ella’s waist. “But we already know you’re awesome, don’t we Leo?”

Leo looked at them, his expression amused, but he caught and held her gaze for just that fraction too long. “Sure do.” Then confusing her by pulling back to an expression so bland that it left her wondering if it had been her imagination.

Oblivious, Joey added, “And as I told her, despite how cute it is, she also deserves a break from all that constant baby babble.”

Determined to prove to him she wasn’t affected by any lingering glances, imagined or not, Ella’s eyes immediately found her employer. “But it’s okay, Leo, I explained how it’s not all bad, that you’re almost managing words of three syllables now.”

Eyes dancing with laughter, he stared straight back at her. “Aww, and to think I’ve

been holding back so you wouldn't get lost in a language perhaps more developed than you're accustomed to. And by the way, in case you missed it, that sentence contained two three-syllable words."

Ella barely blinked. "I can think of more appropriate ones."

"Ella, Ella." Both eyebrows rose to meet that rich cocoa-colored hair and he tsked loudly. "With three children present?"

"I don't think they'll object to philistine."

His roar of laughter startled Benny, who scrambled to clutch at Ella's leg.

Bending to pick him, she saw Leo's little sister had been chuckling along with them, but Joey's laughter had faded away somewhere between quips.

Now the woman stood there, mouth open, her eyes wide and sliding across from Leo back to Ella.

Uncomfortably aware of the flush that clearly signaled her awareness of Joey's intent interest, Ella rushed to busy herself, grateful when Mia lifted her arms to her, so she scooped her up as well.

Leo reached for his daughter at the same time. Was he embarrassed too? And if he was? Served him right for being so irresistibly distracting; she mentally sidestepped the fact that it had been she who'd begun their banter. An exchange, that admittedly could be misinterpreted.

Ella scrambled to put her own attraction aside, as she silently reminded herself that she and Leo were building a friendship.

They were living under the same roof, endeavoring to create a stress-free, stable environment for the children—and if they’d found they shared a sense of humor?

Surely that wasn’t a bad thing. It was natural that they would develop some kind of rapport. Wasn’t it?

Leo cleared his throat. “I need to get back to work on the corral. Why don’t you girls go on downstairs with the other kids, and I’ll bring Mia and then lug all this stuff down. Is this all, Ella?”

She pointed toward a tray loaded with everything required for tea, noting that despite his outwardly calm nod, he barely glanced at her.

Which she noticed despite avoiding looking at him just as fiercely.

Thankfully Evie and Liberty arrived, and the subsequent hustle of greetings and gushes over small children who allowed the fuss with their usual, tolerant, oh-so-cute sense of entitlement, and blatant enjoyment of the grown-ups vying for their attention.

Downstairs the gushing continued as Liberty and Evie drooled over the morning tea she’d set up, asking questions about life in the United Kingdom that she answered, though she kept her responses non-specific.

Joey, on the other hand, was very quiet. Unable to avoid eye contact with Leo’s sister any longer, Ella lifted her chin, not at all surprised at all by Joey’s directness.

“So, you and Leo...”

“Yes, it’s... it’s working out well. Mia’s settled.

The children are getting along famously.

It's so cute to watch Mia follow Benny, copying his every move.

And so heartwarming to see how Benny protects her—like it's instinctive somehow.

I know from my short experience with daycare facilities that two-year-olds are not always so perceptive, so of course I'm very proud of him. ”

As she'd listened, Joey sucked in her top lip, obviously trying to hide the grin that was desperate to escape. “That's great. But how about you and Leo? How's that going? Seemed to me that you pair have really hit it off.”

Intently deliberating over a ribbon sandwich that she didn't even want, Ella feigned a calm she also didn't feel, acutely aware of the questions in the eyes of the other two women as well.

“We're getting into a routine. Leo is very considerate of Benny's and my needs, and we're making it work.

It's been a big adjustment for us all, but Leo and I are both dedicated to providing a calm, happy environment for the children, we want to make it as easy for them as possible. ”

“Well,” Joey said, not even trying to hide her enjoyment, “that's, um, good, right?”

“Hmm, yes.” Nodding, Ella passed around one of the platters. “But hey, I really want to—”

Joey was nothing if not persistent. “Hmm, it's just that I haven't seen Leo so relaxed a long time. Even before Hope, he'd grown more serious—more like JD than Jack.

But this is the Leo I grew up with, lighthearted funny. It's great! But I'm just wondering what's caused the change?"

Joey's eyebrows were high. Her tone questioning; and her expression innocent.

But Ella wasn't fooled, there was nothing innocent in that question.

"I would imagine it's due to Mia being settled, and that he's also fit enough to get on with his work after his rodeo injury.

Those things can make a big difference to anybody—pheromones, I suppose. " Ella cringed. Wrong word to use.

"Pheromones, huh?" Joey nodded, still playing the innocent. "There's a few things that can induce those..."

Ignoring that, and the knowing looks shooting between her guests, Ella focused on pouring tea. "What I started to say before was that I'm dying to hear about this triple wedding! I still can't get my head around the fact you girls are really all getting married on the same day!"

Curiosity was replaced by enthusiastic smiles, and Ella breathed a sigh of relief.

Much as she loved her new friends, the last thing she needed was anyone getting into their head that she and Leo would make a great couple.

In fairness, while that scenario might also play a big part in her fantasies, it wasn't something she could risk happening. Protecting Benny was her priority.

"I know—it's crazy right? Especially for Jack and me—it might seem hasty, but..." Liberty shook her head, as if she was amazed by the craziness of their decision. "But

it's also fun..." She looked across at the two women who would soon be her sisters. "And perfect," she added softly.

"Mom's floating on air. And Dad keeps telling her to just take it easy, but then he's going around inviting every person he bumps into! They're so excited—like kids!" Joey rolled her eyes, but it did little to hide how thrilled she was with the reactions of her parents.

"You're having the weddings here at the ranch? I know there was some debate..."

"Yes, here. The vote was unanimous," Evie said.

"JD's dad and some friends are clearing out one of the barns—it's going to be huge!

Obviously, it'll provide an indoor space in case the weather turns.

This is Montana! June or not, I'm told it still could snow.

It's rare but apparently, it has happened, so they're ensuring everything is prepared.

We've all had a say in how we'd like it decorated, and it's going to be gorgeous. "

A twinge of envy slithered through Ella, but she smiled through it. "You have your gowns and everything?"

"They have," The mock despair in Evie's voice made them all smile as she looked pointedly across at petite Joey who'd apparently bounced straight back to her pre-pregnancy figure, and Liberty, the gorgeous willowy Hollywood star, who would probably make sackcloth look elegant.

On a sigh Evie rubbed her hands across her protruding belly.

“The completion date of my dress is rather fluid. More of a month-by-month plan. And I’m sure one day, I’ll laugh about why I agreed to get married when I’ll be eight months pregnant.”

Joey slipped an arm around her friend and soon-to-be sister. “Because it’s romantic, and you love the idea and because we’re doing it as a family.”

Tears filled Evie’s eyes, and smiling gently, Liberty leaned across to squeeze her hand. “Family,” Evie repeated. “Our family.”

Ella wiped her eyes. “Oh gosh, you’ve got me crying now. And I know you don’t need my opinion, but I think your triple wedding sounds wonderful!”

Joey beamed and Ella instantly suspected she knew where the idea had originated. “We’re hoping Mia and Ruby will be part of the combined bridal party—and hey! We should include Benny! That would be so cute!”

The other girls immediately agreed, all cooing over how sweet Mia and Benny would look, toddling down the aisle together. “Mia will be walking properly by then,” Evie added, “And it’s evident she adores Benny, so she’ll probably be more comfortable with him beside her.”

For a moment Ella couldn’t reply. The weddings were less than three months away, and while she had no plans to leave before then, her future—hers and Benny’s—wasn’t something she had complete control over.

Misreading her hesitation, Joey jumped, in her eyes apologizing before her words even left her mouth. “Ella, I’m sorry. I do that all the time—jump in, make assumptions... Of course, if you’re not comfortable...?”

“No, no—it’s not that at all. It’s—”

“Your own wedding?” Liberty suggested gently. “It couldn’t have been that long ago, and it would be understandable that talk of our plans might bring up memories that are painful for you.”

“Oh Ella, I’m so sorry.” Joey was a picture of misery. “I—”

“Stop.” Enough was enough, and Ella hoped her smile took the sting out of her command.

“I’m fine and if you remember, I was the one who raised the subject, and I’d love to hear more.

I think your suggestion regarding Benny just took my breath away for a moment.

It’s lovely and such a surprise. You’ve all been so welcoming, but still, to be invited to be part of a wedding party is very special indeed, and I know he will love it. Thank you.”

“So, all this wedding talk hasn’t upset you? Really? Even given your own situation?” The relief on Evie’s face sent a shot of guilt through Ella, but she continued smiling, nodding to confirm her assertion.

‘Not at all.’

“Phew... But now I can say what I was really thinking. Ella, you must have been a beautiful bride. You’re stunning.

” Obviously with her concerns allayed, Joey was again beaming.

“And perhaps it’s your gorgeous accent, so crisp, but I can’t help but think it must have been like a wedding of the year of something. ”

Or something... Wedding of the year? More like shock of the year.

From her father's perspective it was the disappointment of the year, although perhaps he was secretly glad given his reduced circumstances.

Maintaining her smile was difficult, and Ella found herself silently wishing she'd moved the conversation in a completely different direction when she had the chance.

"Nothing so grand, I'm afraid," she said simply. "A quiet country wedding." Very quiet.

"In England? The English countryside? That always looks so pretty..."

Ella sucked in air. "Ahh, no France, actually. My husband, Emile, was French."

"France! That's even more romantic."

Ella smiled across at Joey and tried to redirect the conversation.

"France is beautiful, but everything is relative, isn't it?"

Montana is beautiful, too, and sounds very exotic to people from elsewhere.

Your day will be wonderful." She was still smiling when she'd finished speaking, but she hoped this one held the finality as she intended.

"So, Liberty, Joey had mentioned you're taking a break from films at the moment?"

When the conversation finally moved to other things, a weight lifted.

Ella was eager to learn more about these women, loved hearing their meet-cute

stories, and how they'd connected with their partners.

She was comfortable with baby talk—at least until it came to birthing experiences.

That she shut down with the assertion that Evie needed to focus on her own experience and not compare it to others; good or bad.

And knew she'd dodged another bullet. Though, for how long, she didn't know.

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Ella was fast learning that just like parenting, ranch work was a seven-day occupation.

Be it Thursday or Sunday, animals still needed to be tended, and repairs often had to be carried out immediately, with no consideration for day or time.

Only the weather, and even then it had be significant, seemed to have much bearing on chores being delayed.

Leo worked long hours, but had insisted Ella take time for herself—and his family members were continually just as insistent, often calling to offer babysitting for both children.

Ella, however, saw it differently. To say she loved her time at the Lazy H as a whole; and even more specifically here with Leo and Mia, was a gross understatement. Indecent longings and fantasies aside, she couldn't remember a time when she'd felt more fulfilled and at peace.

She knew there would be times when she'd appreciate a break, but for now she rationalized that a day off work wouldn't look very different to every other day.

She'd still be caring for her son, doing much the same things except that she and Benny wouldn't have Mia with them.

And nor would they see Leo. She wouldn't see Leo.

The thought left her with a strange empty feeling, but she'd worry about it tomorrow,

not today.

The weather darkened as the day wore on, and Leo had called it quits shortly after lunch. He'd sauntered in, his wide stance filling the space and holding her attention. As it had since the day they'd met.

Her life had been littered with polished, sophisticated men whose every move, every word, was considered and refined.

Men in pristine tuxedos, looking like they'd be born wearing such attire, men with their manicured hands, men who knew the effect they had on women and wielded their charm with the skill of a practiced swordsman.

And knew exactly where to strike for the desired outcome, whether that be to tease, provoke, or move in for the kill.

Men who could charge the atmosphere in a room just by entering.

Leo Halligan was nothing like them, exhibited none of those cocktail party skills, even though she guessed he probably could if he put his mind to it.

But he was a cowboy, a rodeo champion, a rancher—his hands were broad and rough.

A man whose face, perfect and jaw-dropping as it was, would one day bear the lines that told of too many hours in the wild elements.

A man whose daily uniform of flannel shirt and jeans that hugged powerful thighs and rode low over sinfully sexy hips was perfectly suited to. And that hat...

A man a world apart from all those other men—and yet, she'd never before met anyone who commanded a space like he did with no more than that his sauntering

stride.

He found them on the deeply carpeted floor of the otherwise empty living room, and stood staring down at them, maybe waiting for Mia to notice his arrival.

He didn't have a long wait, and he squatted to meet his crawling little torpedo as she made a beeline straight to him.

Mirroring his friend, Benny followed suit, and dropped to speed-crawled across to Leo.

Ella's heart squeezed when the man made just as much fuss of her son as he had of his daughter scooping them both up in powerful arms as he crossed to her.

Ella nodded her greeting, swallowing to try to moisten her suddenly dry mouth and forced her attention back to the block tower she'd been building with the children before he'd hijacked their attention.

"Too wet?"

Sliding the children down, he watched as Benny ran to get his soft-filled soccer ball to bring it back for Leo's inspection, jabbering his excitement all the way, while Mia returned to the blocks, preferring to throw them rather than build.

"Yeah, frozen ground under and mud and slush on top. We were getting nowhere. At the moment I'm using Nash and JD's guys. They've gone back to their own patches, and I figured I'd snag some time up here."

Benny handed over the ball and backed away, and on a chuckle, Leo gently kicked it to Benny who swung his leg for the big return kick—the way Leo had shown him—only to meet with air.

Naturally the missed kick set him straight onto his backside.

Ella saw his bottom lip quiver, but she simply smiled at him.

“Oopsie! It’s okay. Pop up and we’ll have another go.

” Crawling across to him she steadied him while he tried again, both she and Leo cheering when his dismay of a second earlier was forgotten in the excitement of connecting with the ball, that Leo sent back his way.

Ella warned Leo that he might tire of the game way faster than Benny, but his own enthusiasm hadn’t waned at all by the time Benny got distracted by a singing dancing crab that sprang to life when one of Mia’s block missiles made contact.

Shaking his head, Leo flopped onto the floor beside her, his long legs stretched out. Legs she was determined to ignore.

“I reckon that kid’s got talent.”

“You expected less from my child?”

Laughing Leo held up his hand in surrender. “I wouldn’t dare, not with that expression on your face? Even if I doubted it, there would be no way I’d be foolish enough to admit it.” His laughter drifting away he added, “Seriously? He’s such a great little guy. He’s not two yet, right?”

“April eighth.” She shook her head, so proud of her sturdy little boy, but always sad that life traveled by so quickly; wished she could slow it down a bit. “Just a few weeks away.”

“Yeah? Eighth? Mia’s birthday is the thirteenth, maybe we should give them a

combined party.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Here? With no furniture?”

Feigning surprise, he looked around the room in mock wonder. “We have no furniture?”

Her eye roll merely amused him, so she slid back to the main point of his comment.

“The girls mentioned Mia’s birthday when they were here the other day.

But while I’m grateful for your kind offer to share with Benny, we couldn’t do that—couldn’t crash Mia’s special day.

It’s her very first birthday; a day she should celebrate with her family. ”

“You’re suggesting a birthday party without her little wingman and her favorite person in the world? And yes, it pains me to admit that you might be more popular with my daughter than me.”

Ella laughed, leaned back on her elbows watching the little ones each absorbed in their own separate activities. She was pleased that though they loved to play together and were often raucous, they were also happy to entertain themselves. It was a good balance to develop and nurture.

“Not by a country mile. Don’t get me wrong, I’m thrilled with the way Mia and I have bonded, she’s a tiny cuddly ball of sunshine and love, but she’s definitely Daddy’s girl.

She looks for you throughout the day, you know?

And as the day nears its end, she's looking even harder.

"She eyed him sideways. "However, I don't believe for one moment that you doubt her complete devotion to you.

You see how excited she gets when you walk in the door, squealing for her Dada . "

His smile spread wide. "It's pretty cute, right.

Kinda humbling and empowering all at the same time.

"He sobered, let himself fall right back onto the carpet, looped his arms behind his head.

"It's different, isn't it?" he said softly, his eyes never leaving his daughter.

"I love my folks, my brothers, my sister—and all their partners. Loved my grand-folks. But this—this love that I have for her? It's crazy different. More powerful—"

"Wondrous? I agree completely. It's nothing like I've ever experienced either.

It's a fierce protective energy, and a love that's somehow bigger than everything else.

I read that expression once in relation to a mother's love and it resonated at the time, but I figure it's a description that fits both mothers and fathers. Mostly," she added quietly.

He rolled onto his side to face her. "Mostly? Not your experience? Your dad or Benny's?"

It was a very personal question; she could have sidestepped it but for some she didn't

want to.

“There are fathers and then there are fathers, Leo. I guess it’s the same for mothers.

Emile barely had time to learn how to be a father.

I know he would have been loving, even if somewhat misguided, much like my father.

Or maybe easily distracted is a better way to describe them. ”

“You mean not attentive? As in ignoring the kids?” He pushed up to lean on one elbow.

She sighed as memories came flooding back, mimicking his relaxed position by stretching out, noting how Leo’s eyes traced the line of her body before flicking back to her face.

Noting that her own body reacted, she hurried on with her explanation.

“In Emile’s defense, he’d had a poor parenting role model.

As did I, for that matter.” The admission slid out as unexpected as it was unbidden.

“Emile’s father married six times, and I guess when he wasn’t trying to appease his latest wife, he was searching for the next—and often the two activities overlapped.

Emile grew up in boarding schools, and to his credit he really wanted to break that mold, be the father he’d never had.

But it’s fair to say he was still a work in progress when the accident took his life. ”

She could see Leo trying to process her response, struggling to find the right words of sympathy but she didn't need them. "It's okay, Leo. It was what it was , as the saying goes. The only thing that matters to me is Benny's well-being and happiness."

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He nodded, his expression a cross between awe and compassion, and something like guilt trickled through her.

She didn't want him to canonize her, she was no saint, far from it.

Nor did she want him to think of her as a victim.

Because she wasn't that either—so how exactly should she describe herself?

Her conscience reminded her she was living a lie, and she couldn't push down the guilt, even if she was doing it for all the right reasons.

Oblivious to the war her heart was waging with her morals, Leo asked, “Your own dad?”

“Oh, he was much more discerning than Emile's father. He only married five times. Quite conservative really.” She shrugged. “Though London gossip would have it that they both dallied with the same woman for a short period, though thankfully not at the same time.”

Jackknifing to a sitting position Leo stared down at her, eyes wide. “Wha—? You're kidding?”

Ella shook her head, her tone wry. “Trust me, you have no idea how much I would like to say yes , but sadly no. It's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the sordid, grotty truth.

” Another sigh slid into the space between them.

“As an adult I see the only positive is that both our mothers—mine and Emile’s—avoided having to suffer the humiliation of a wandering husband.

Both passed away young. Of course, as a child, it was very different; I used to pretend my mother was just away on holiday and would return and all would be well again. ”

“How old were you when she passed?”

“Just three, but I remember her. At least I think I do. Remember her laughter, her cuddles...” Frowning she added, “It was a senseless death. Stupid and her own fault in a way. The story as I know it is that my father purchased a horse that proved to be very difficult. He deemed it too dangerous to ride and had decided to sell it. My headstrong mother was not one to be bossed. She loved the horse and was determined to prove my father wrong. She defied him, and the horse threw her, broke her neck. She lost the argument. And her life.”

It was a moment before he said anything, but all the while his eyes were telling her how sorry he was.

It was always quite strange that she could remain fairly detached while repeating that story; like she was talking about someone else, not her own mother.

She suspected it was that she’d been so young and probably hadn’t understood any of it at the time.

Due to that strange detachment, she also understood his concerns would come from a different angle and Ella wasn’t surprised by what came next.

“That’s... I can’t even imagine what that must have been like for you, but maybe one day, Mia might...

Did it...?” He shook his head, blew out air.

“I guess I’m trying to find out how that affects you being here and not be too clumsy about asking—are you okay to be around horses?

” His mouth pulled in at the sides as he gently picked his way through his thoughts.

“I mean, this a ranch. A working ranch. Horses are part of not only our work, but our lives. They’ll be part of Mia’s life.

Benny’s too, while you’re here—if that’s what you want, of course. Will you be...?”

She waved away his concern. “I was very young Leo, and while it devastated me to lose her, I didn’t see the accident, and I don’t think I really equated her death with horses at the time.

She was just gone. There was just me, no siblings and perhaps that made it easier for my father to ensure I was raised without fear of horses, but certainly with respect.

It was probably harder for him to do that than for me to... you know...”

Despite his nod of understanding she rushed to pile on more reassurance.

“When we were staying at Joey’s old house, I often took Benny for a walk to see the horses.

Since we’ve been living here in your house, the weather has allowed us to get some fresh air most days, and we three have been down to your stables several times. ”

“I didn’t realize that.” A flurry of emotions crossed his features and clearly telegraphed his appreciation, however she wished the wave of warmth cascading through her in response wasn’t quite so intense.

He hadn’t noticed, and judging by the frown lining his tanned forehead, his head was still consumed with curiosity about her father.

“So, he was a good dad? The picture you’re painting is a bit blurry and I’m kinda confused about the guy. ”

“Oh, please feel free to join the club.” Her wry tone triggered a grin that chased away his frown.

“I’ve spent my entire life being confused by him, mostly exasperated though.

And not just me. Depending on who you asked you’d be told he was an insufferable cad, a heartless beast, selfish, and mean, with no thought for anyone else .

That’s almost a direct quote by the way, or at least a mishmash of quotes tossed around by his ex-wives, or ex-lovers.

Or perhaps you’d hear he was handsome , generous, charming, brilliant, and irresistible —those would be opinions expressed by current amours, plural.

Another popular assessment you’d encounter would be as a man who’s living on borrowed time .

That one is more likely to come from cuckolded husbands he may have crossed.

And lastly, irresponsible, rash, and gullible —that one would be from his accountant.
”

Leo's chuckle had grown heartier with each revelation, rumbling through her, gently brushing sensitive nerve ends, leaving her with the goosebumps to prove it, and unable to prevent herself responding with her own little giddy snicker.

“And his daughter? What would she say?”

“Indeed, what would she say?” Ella's eyes roved the ceiling, choosing her words with more care this time.

“Let me put it this way. My father loved me and was affectionate. He was just... busy . I believe he truly loved my mother, and he kept her memory alive for me. I also believe he was trying to replace her—as much for me as for himself. Sadly, my mother aside, the man has ghastly taste in women and absolutely no common sense about them at all.” She shrugged.

“He's easily dazzled, makes ridiculously rash decisions, and then sincerely wonders why it all went wrong. ”

His curiosity turned to mirth as another startled chuckle arrived on a rush of air. “You say he is easily dazzled? He's alive?”

Ella wasn't sure she covered the sudden blast of sorrow that his question had initiated.

“Yes, alive and presumably well,” she answered, relieved her voice hadn't shaken as the memory of their last meeting rocked through her.

“And before you ask, yes, we had a falling out, and no, we haven't managed to rebuild that bridge.

Possibly never will. End of story. And I mean that literally. ”

She could see he had more questions despite her decree that the subject was closed; but on this she wasn't going to be drawn in.

Lazing about on the floor with him, the children playing happily, the fire crackling off to the side—his mellow voice, as always, rippling through her, seducing her into opening up to him—words had flowed too easily, but now she had the feeling she'd said too much, and definitely enough.

She'd spoken more about her father to Leo than she'd uttered for the past three years.

Especially since arriving in the US. From that moment, she had determined to keep as much of her life and background to herself as she could.

She was determined to keep life as simple as she could for Benny.

If needed, and she prayed it would never be, it was imperative she be able to prove that her son was always safe and cared for.

That she was providing a loving stable life for him.

While Leo had trusted her with his precious daughter, guilt continued to nag at her. It didn't sit well that she was bending her own rules. After all, she was living under the man's roof; and she wasn't being completely honest with him.

So, sharing a little, without revealing too much was only right. Quid pro quo? It seemed fair.

Leo had said nothing since her adamant embargo on any more questions about her father, and lying there on the carpet, his long body so close to her own, the silence between them grew heavy and awkward.

Though surely that had to be an atmosphere conjured by her imagination given the racket echoing around them in the otherwise empty room.

Big noises created by little people. After Benny had moved on to banging a toy drum, Mia had crawled over to accompany him with the xylophone, managing to actually strike a plastic key and not just the frame or Benny every third or fourth swing.

The silence gnawed at Ella, her thoughts bouncing in all directions as she searched for a way to elegantly extricate herself from the topic without appearing churlish or overly secretive.

Relief came in the form of her beautiful baby boy.

She watched as he toddled over to rescue her, not due to some spiritual mother-son connection, but because Mia had taken his drum.

Any upset had obviously been brief and as always, she found it impossible to resist his gorgeous smile; the one so like his father's.

A smile that also warned mischief was afoot; she was ready for him when he launched himself, squealing as he straddled her, his sturdy little legs pumping as he bounced up and down on her tummy.

“Horsey wide! Do horsey, Mama!”

Laughing she grabbed him and stretched her arms high, jiggling him until he laughed so hard a long string of drool dripped toward her face, prompting her to squeal in return.

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Not one to miss the fun, Mia had speed-crawled over and joined him, assuming the same position Benny had taken up and was bouncing on her stomach as well.

“More! More!” she called, her nose scrunched as she mock-laughed.

It was her latest trick, one that mimicked Benny, and Ella loved it.

Plonking Benny back to include Mia in the fun, Ella rocked up and down, as wild as she dared, until both children slid off to roll around the carpet, laughing and shrieking as they dragged themselves up for another turn.

“Whoa! Let’s give poor Ella break!” Leo scooped up his daughter. “Come here little tiger. You wanna play rides? I’ll show you a real ride!”

“It’s a competition? Really Leo?” She shouted indignantly to be heard over the shrieks, the sparkle in his eyes confirming she’d hit the target.

“Alright! Let’s show these colonials a few tricks, Benny boy.

They think because they’re rodeo people, they can do better than us?

Challenge accepted!” Still holding her son she rolled to her knees, competently hoisting him up onto her back with one hand.

“Hang on beautiful boy, we’re heading out! ”

Familiar with the game, Benny grabbed her sweater with his little fists and hung on as

she, on all fours, raced him around the empty space. High on her back, Benny laughed so hard he almost slid off several times, rocking and rolling from side to side.

As expected, Leo was a fierce competitor, but still, her confidence took a bit of a hit when she felt him come up beside her, overtaking her with way too much ease, ignoring his passing quip about eating dust. But she didn't give up easily.

Eyeing his determined grin, she hastened her pace, but after a very short sprint fraught with potential carpet burns, Ella was forced to admit Leo had superior horsey skills.

Especially when he had Mia perched on his shoulders, not his back, and crawled—very quickly—using just three limbs, his other hand steadying his daughter so she wouldn't fall.

Show off.

No one had ever accused her of being a good loser, though, and that wasn't going to start now. Giggling so hard she was in danger of collapsing; she tried to grab his shirt. “Unfair advantage! I'm calling foul.”

“On what grounds?”

“I believe I should have been given a handicap—my jockey is at least five pounds heavier than yours.” Though while she wouldn't admit it out loud, she was quite content with the very acceptable consolation prize.

Traveling behind Leo Halligan while he was on all fours had its distinct advantages. Not a bad view at all...

Collapsing, his chuckle was contagious, easily swinging Mia into his lap, and

reaching for Benny so Ella could collapse beside him.

This time the silence wasn't awkward and after watching him for a few minutes, she dared to ask for his thoughts.

His sigh was resigned. "That this room isn't going to be half as much fun when we get furniture in here."

"Really?" She shook her head. "But you'll be able to use it as a room. It will actually be useful."

His eyes snagged and held hers. "Maybe. But it seems to me that there's still a whole lot of fun things to do here just like it is. Plenty of room to roll around..."

"Oh." It was all she could manage. Had there been innuendo there? She thought so, but...

Flames swept through her and she momentarily stilled; snatching her eyes away as she busied herself with everything possible that would keep her from having to face him.

Unfortunately it took mere minutes to tidy away the toys, and she was left scrambling to find something else.

She heard his low chuckle but refused to turn to him.

Perhaps he'd laughed at one of the children. And perhaps not...

Irrespective he'd gone and done it again. Planted the seeds that would later grow to fantasies and keep her awake long into the night.

Her head spat out a silent sarcastic thank you .

Her body refuted the sarcasm, insisting on focusing on the pure delight.

Closing her eyes she forced herself to breathe slowly; and calmly pull herself together. Even knowing it was an impossible ask. Her body throbbed with an energy that could be salved by only one thing—one man.

And as that was never going to happen. She was in big trouble.

Perhaps the township of Marietta could use a one-woman, human snow plow. Surely that was one way to get rid of this energy!

“Hey,” he called softly. “In a few days I have to go away, and I was thinking maybe we could all make a trip down into town before I go? Grab some lunch... I could introduce you around. I figured it might help you get more familiar with Marietta.”

Okay... Interesting. She was conjuring erotic fantasies, and he was thinking about introducing her around town?

That was a bucket of cold water, right there.

Lingering too long to position colored rings over the plastic post they circled, she ordered her body to behave, and only then finally turned to him.

“I... ah...” Her head was whirling, it would be churlish to refuse.

After all this was as much for his daughter as it was for her.

Making the townsfolk aware of her role in Mia’s life made sense, particularly as he was going away.

She pushed back the disappointment his declaration caused.

“Yes, of course. That would be lovely. Thank you.” She truly hadn’t meant to deliver those words with such clipped formality, and yet she had.

His one raised eyebrow told her he’d noticed, and though she’d attempted a smile to soften the blow, she knew she’d failed.

So she dragged her phone out of her rear jeans pocket.

“Goodness, look at the time. I should begin preparing dinner for these two. Do you have things to do? Should I take Mia with me?”

His eyes narrowed, assessing. “No. leave them both. We’ll play a bit more.”

Nodding she rose to go, feeling his gaze on her, only daring to breathe properly when she was out of sight.

Later that night she’d get on Google and look up yoga positions to build emotional resilience.

Pranayama might be one if memory served.

Child’s pose? Leg up the wall? She couldn’t remember any specific moves for suppressing an overactive libido, but that last one sounded eerily appropriate. Or maybe it was the opposite...

Her groan was long and low. Suddenly she felt defeated before she’d even begun.

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Marietta was a really sweet little town.

It didn't have the Old-World traditional beauty of an English village, nor a French one; but it possessed a warmth and sense of welcome that she found precious, and added to its prettiness, was a pure delight.

Ella found herself smiling as they walked along the sidewalk under the roof covering that protruded from the strip of stores and cafes that lined Main Street.

Just about every person they met stopped to chat to Leo, coo over Mia and Benny; their curiosity fading when they learned of her role in their lives. Their welcome and offers of assistance in any way, was heartwarming.

They wandered through Crawford Park, admired the old library building, the refurbished movie theater and the elegance of the Graf Hotel.

Taking a break in the town square they let Benny have a run, chuckling when Mia loudly protested the unfairness of being forced to watch from her stroller.

All the while, Leo led a commentary, pointing out the establishments he deemed most important; like the beauty parlor, bank, and grocery store.

Of course, he also figured Rosita's Diner, Java café, Grey's saloon, and Sage Carrigan's Chocolate Shop were also essential for her to be familiar with.

Leo's suggestion that they get in early to grab a table at Java proved to be a wise move. Snagging a corner table with a view of the street, and with two highchairs, it

was good to be able to position themselves out of the way of the lunch crowd—many waiting for takeaway food or coffee.

They hadn't chosen the position for privacy and it was just as well because, once more, they were regaled with greetings as customers and staff alike beelined to their table.

During a lull, she set down the giant toasted sandwich and took a sip of her cooling hot chocolate. "Is it always like this? Or are you some kind of rockstar to these people?"

He shrugged. "My family has ranched here for over a hundred years. Five generations and," he added nodding across at his daughter, "Mia, Ruby, and JD and Evie's baby are the beginning of the sixth.

So, I guess it's safe to say that the Halligans are pretty well known.

My parents—especially Mom—and my grandparents were all very involved with the community.

Sometimes the folk here are slower to accept someone new, but once you're in, you are one of theirs—a member of the Marietta family. "

"How slow is slower?" She shrugged. "Asking for a friend."

He chuckled, leaning over to put a couple more French fries on the tray of Mia's highchair, checking Benny's stash before looking back at her. "Maybe a year or two. Why? Worried you won't qualify for Sage's frequent customer discount?"

"Well, discounted chocolate certainly would be a reason to be anxious for acceptance. But I was actually comparing Marietta to some villages in Europe where one can still

be considered a newcomer even after living there for twenty years! Of course, these villages can be up to eight hundred or more years old, so I suppose it's all relative. ”

“That’s all? Not considering moving on from here?” His tone had changed, and while he’d attempted to keep it light, she sensed the undercurrent of something deeper than curiosity.

She took her time answering, savoring another bite of sandwich.

In an ideal world, she would never leave.

Of course, in an ideal world she’d be free to make other choices, and while that time would inevitably come, it wasn’t here yet.

“I suppose that depends on my employer. Every employed position is tenuous to some degree, dependent on the needs of the employer.”

“Smooth... You sidestep my question by putting it back on me?”

“Is what I said is not correct? That the employer holds all the cards?”

A trio of lines in the middle of his forehead signaled his consideration of her response. “In fact, there are times when they do. Like, for example when the employer’s need for certain skills elevates the employee to a higher level.”

“If we’re talking about you and I—us—I think you just provided me a valid incentive to abuse my position. Perhaps I should start making ridiculous demands; inducements to keep me satisfied and continuing to work for you.”

Satisfied? She actually said the word satisfied ? She stifled a groan just as a smile tickled his mouth and she instantly knew why—even if it was infantile on his part to

latch onto her poorly worded response.

“Oh yeah? And I wonder what those demands might be?”

“And I hasten to add,” she said, hating the heat burning her face, and knowing it was patently evident to him as well, “I am very content with my situation at the moment, though should any secret desires arise, I shall inform you immediately.”

Damn, she’d just gone and added fuel to the fire.

His roar of laughter, startled both children but only until they caught up joined in. Three against one. It was never going to be a fair fight, even allowing for the fact that two of them had no idea what was so funny.

Leaning back in his chair, he eyed her through lowered lashes.

Long gorgeous lashes that cast shadows on his perfectly chiseled features.

“You don’t have any secret... desires... at the moment, Ella, or just none you’re prepared to share?”

” He shook his head, the remnant of his amusement still evident in in the cheeky sparkle in his eyes.

“You’re a woman with secrets, Ella Staunton Hawes. ”

She didn’t bother denying it. “It bothers you?”

His mouth pulled in at the corners. “I admit it to being curious.”

“Curiosity can be dangerous, Leo.”

He arched one eyebrow, his voice deep and sure. “I’m happy to take my chances.”

And that was the problem, because she wasn’t.

*

He watched her expression close down, but like the sun always returns, he knew she’d bounce back.

That was Ella—she didn’t sulk or do moods—she just recalibrated, and he’d learned a lot about her character witnessing those adjustments.

Like the fact that her default was calm and happy.

Sure, she had moments, which was natural, and he’d have questioned her mental stability if she didn’t.

And he surely appreciated her frankness.

A pang of guilt sliced through him followed by a sneaky shame chaser.

It still felt like betrayal to harbor any negative thoughts about Hope, his baby’s mama; and he hated it when they slipped in.

Like now. He and Hope had had so little time together, but even so, he’d sensed something amiss in her, a sense that grew over the time they’d had together.

It made more sense when he’d learned of her background, but their phone conversations after he’d first gone back onto the rodeo circuit had been painful at times.

Most times. Long periods where she gave him nothing, and he'd had to fill in the blanks, begging her to tell him what he'd done wrong.

He'd asked her to come with him when he left, but she'd refused, and then seemed to resent him for leaving.

But he'd had no choice. He'd had commitments.

He knew it was unfair to compare Hope and Ella, even if it was where this current train of thought had originated.

If his guess was correct, Ella's life had been as different from Hope's as night was to day.

And he'd never had the opportunity to laugh with Hope, to completely relax, not like he could with Ella.

He thought he'd been in love with Hope, and yet he'd hardly known her.

And then there was Kristina; he'd thought he was in love with her, too, and she wasn't the person he thought she was.

What about his feelings for Ella? Were they anything more than a carnal response?

The thought pulled him up short, but as quickly as it had crept in, he shoved it away.

Ella was hot, and they lived under the same roof; shared a concern for their children... They were friends.

It was nothing more. And it never could be.

Yet, every day he longed for the sound of her voice, her laugh. Waited eagerly for the first glimpse of that mysterious smile, the one that made him wonder and want.

“Ice cream!”

After leaving Java they’d wandered through various stores but now her confident enthusiasm was once more washing over him. The word was just the distraction he needed to pull him out of the confused funk. “What?”

Pointing with one hand to a sign outside the little store, she used the other to cheekily tip his Stetson sideways to free his closest ear. “Ice cream!”

“I heard the first time. I just thought you were having some kind mental breakdown. Ice cream? Really? Have you seen my kid eat ice cream? She gets it everywhere. And besides, it’s freezing!”

“Part of the fun of it, Leo, and anyway, we can eat inside. Besides, think of it as practice for when she’s taking over the kitchen and creating some exotic face mask; something to enhance her complexion.”

Horror shot through him. “She’ll do that?”

Ella shrugged. “Who knows? But she’ll certainly be a teenager, and they’re known to do such things.”

“Did you?”

She chuckled. “Why do I feel I’ll be incriminating myself no matter how I reply.” They reached the counter. “You buying or me? I’ll have rocky road, and Benny will have vani—oh what the heck, let’s make it strawberry. Baby sized. That should really make a mess.”

Grinning he pulled out his wallet. “Rocky road, huh?” he cocked his head, pretending to siphon wisdom from the air around him.

“Let’s see, compellingly complex. A lot going on underneath the surface?

Sound right?” Ridiculously, somehow it did, and he wondered if he’d have guessed her preference if asked.

Sweet and marshmallow soft, but with zing of bitter chocolate to keep him hopping.

He jammed the brakes on that line of thought real fast.

He put in hers and Benny’s order, adding a vanilla baby cone for Mia.

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Beside him, Ella had been looking for a table to accommodate the baby, but her sudden gasp indicated his observation had finally connected. “You didn’t... Excuse me? An ice cream-based personality analysis? Really?”

He stifled a grin, trying not to direct her attention to the sign on the back wall—the sign he’d just read as if it hadn’t hung there for years.

“Hmph! Okaaay,” she shot back. “Just remember you started this. Now, let me guess,” she continued, almost startling him with how aligned their thoughts had been, “you’re a choc mint kind of guy.

” A perfectly shaped nail tapped against her lip as she thought about that.

“Some might say a risk taker, but I’m going to say someone who can’t commit to one flavor! A bet hedger!”

His lips twitched, and quickly rescanned the sign and hastily changed his order, hoping that Marion, who’d been serving ice cream to him and his brothers for more years than he could count didn’t automatically reach for the choc mint. “My usual butter pecan, please Marion.”

The woman who’d surely heard the conversation choked back a laugh, but didn’t rat him out, thank goodness.

“Butter pecan?” He heard the frown and disbelief in Ella’s voice.

“It’s what the man said,” chortled the voice behind the counter.

“Gotta say, I’m surprised as well,” Marion deadpanned.

“Butter pecan? Let’s see—charmers, I believe, smooth talkers.

Not to be trusted. If I were you, Miss, I’d hold out for the choc mint guy,” she added a wink in his direction, “but you had that a bit wrong. Choc mint is much more reliable, and I’m almost certain his perfect partner is a rocky road gal. ”

“Pity there’s no choc mint guys around then.” Ella shot a narrow-eyed glare in his direction before turning to remove mittens and attach a bib to each child in an effort to protect their jackets.

He was still chuckling when he took his seat, but they’d barely taken a bite of their creamy dessert before the bell above the door announced another customer. Looking up was instinctive, but it was Mia’s squeal of delight that directed his attention to the big guy entering. Of all the days...

Jack’s grin was broad as he strode to them, greeting Mia first. “Hey, little one!” he called back. “How’s one of my two favorite nieces?” His eyes slid straight across to Benny. “And what about you, big guy? Having fun?”

“Ice cream!” Benny joyfully waved his baby cone, managing fling a melted blob on Ella as it passed her face.

Greeting the two adults, Jack grinned. “Taking some time out? That’s great. Nothing like an ice-cream break, right?” His grin turned to a frown, and Leo knew he was about to be outed.

He wasn’t wrong.

“What’s with you, bro? Marion’s out of choc mint?” Looking across at Ella he added,

“We used to bet him that he couldn’t choose anything else when we were kids. He’d be all fluff and dander about it, but in the end, he just couldn’t make himself do it!”

Leo watched as Ella’s mouth curved with amusement, and she shot him mocking glance.

Jack took in this silent communication, and his roar of laughter was echoed by both children who were, as always, happy to join in.

“Choc mint?” she said innocently. “Now, who’d have ever guessed? Sounds like a noncommitter to me. Someone a bit slippery, not quite as upfront as they pretend to be?”

Ignoring the last part of her assessment, Leo felt his own mouth twitch as he tried not to laugh. “Maybe the choc chips guys are slow to commit because the rocky road gals are bossy and smart-mouthed.”

“The rocky r—”

Leo was so glad he’d kept his eyes trained on her because he wouldn’t have wanted to miss her reaction for all the choc mint ice cream in the store. He watched as she recalled what Marion had said. He saw it in her eyes, as a soft pink flush stained her smooth clear cheeks.

And he was suddenly grateful for the fact that he was sitting; and had a table to hide his body’s reaction.

She was breathtaking. He looked away and licked his ice cream, glad of the distraction of the frozen treat, yet knowing it would take more than a butter pecan cone to quell the fires she ignited in him.

A quick glance over found her eyes were still trained on him, and dammit he needed to pull away but she somehow her gaze drew him in and held him captive.

“Maybe I need to repeat this,” Jack was saying to no one in particular, “but as I said half hour ago, take all the time you need. I’ll just tend the kids, okay?”

Ella reacted first. “Half—?”

Shaking his head, Leo answered her unfinished question. “He’s joshing. Being a smart— donkey , as usual. He also needs to know when to read the room. Surely you have someplace— else —to be, bro?” He glared up at his older, should-know-better, yet smirking, brother.

“Dunno, why I’d want to leave when the fun’s all here...”

Eyes narrowed, Leo held the gaze of his next brother up, his mouth clamped tight as every cuss word he knew danced on his tongue.

Of course, Jack didn’t miss his silent message, which only made his older brother laugh harder.

*

There was still daylight, and that meant there was still time to get more work done, but Leo had been restless all day.

He tried to blame the trip he had coming up the next day but he knew deep down it had been the look on his brother’s face yesterday at the ice-cream store that continued to burn into him.

It’d been a look that said the man was reading way too much into a simple moment.

A blink in time. Nothing more. He thought he'd caught a similar look in his sister Joey's eyes when she visited a few days ago.

And he was going to have to do something about it.

Ensure they both knew they were wrong; that whatever they thought they'd seen, there was nothing going on.

The last thing he was going to admit to either of them was that Ella Staunton Hawes turned his heat dials up to high.

But there was nothing more to it than basic attraction.

The last thing he needed was to throw fuel on his siblings totally imagined fires.

No, that was the second last. The last thing he'd ever want or do was embarrass or humiliate Ella.

There was no valid reason for calling it a day when there still work to do, but the crew hadn't argued when he'd announced they could head home.

However, he was glad he did when he entered the back of his house.

Even from the mudroom he could hear the music.

Some pop song, maybe on the radio, but it was Ella's voice, sweet but slightly out of tune, that he heard above all.

He hadn't meant to sneak up on them, but the racket they were making covered his approach—and he was grateful to have a moment to just stand back and watch.

With Mia on her hip, and her other hand hold Benny's hand, Ella swiveled her shapely hips, her saucy little derriere, outlined in skin tight jeans, moved in time to the music as she danced the kids around the room to their laughing delight.

His heart filled and tightened, the only thing holding him back from joining them was that it was so awesome to watch. This was what made a home... How would he ever fill that gap for Mia if, or when, Ella moved on?

And you? How will you fill the gap in your life?

He brushed away the thought and focused on trying to stay in the moment, but the magic was broken and other little things crept in through the cracks.

Like the realization that Ella was singing in a different language.

French? He'd been so mesmerized; he'd initially missed that the music wasn't coming from a radio, it was a recording.

But it was his daughter's baby-soft voice that speared him, yanking him cruelly, back to the present. "More, Mama! More!"

What the—

Leo strode to Ella and reached for his daughter, he said nothing until, Mia clutched to his chest, he'd killed the music. Only then did he turn back to her. "What's going on here?"

Unfortunately, Mia, reacting to his tone, dropped her lip, her arms reaching back to Ella. "Mama!"

Shaking her head at Leo, Ella pulled Benny close. "I don't think this is a discussion

we should have in front of these two, but I need to make it clear this is the first and only time she has ever done that, and given the opportunity, I would have corrected her.”

He said nothing, his thoughts whirling as an army of emotions stabbed at him from all sides—guilt that he had to find Mia a substitute mother.

Anger that he hadn’t seen it coming; but more telling, was the frustration of admitting it had felt right!

Ella was a mother to Mia in every other way except she hadn’t given birth to her.

And it hit hard.

Benny’s quavering little voice filled the loaded silence. “Mama?”

Of course, Mia adored the boy. She copied everything he did—the good and not so good. It was natural she would imitate his speech. It was how kids learned—by emulating. But had this really been the first time?

Did it matter?

Yes, it did! But only if Ella hadn’t corrected.

He hugged his daughter closer, soothed her, silently begged forgiveness that she didn’t have a mama of her own.

His anger ebbed as he took in Ella’s pallor, but also her straight back and determined stance.

She wasn’t going to be cowed by his reaction.

“Leo, if you want to discuss this further, I suggest we do so after dinner. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Benny and I will go and begin the preparations.”

“Stop!”

Whirling to him her eyes were wide. “I beg your pardon?” Indignation frosted every word.

Leo swallowed; he deserved her tone. “I’m sorry.

I didn’t mean to bark at you. I apologize.

I just...” he stalled, wishing like hell that he had furniture.

That they could sit and discuss it. “I just wanted to say that I’m sorry I overreacted.

It was stupid.” He hauled in air. “And I get it, it just took a minute. Or ten. But I get that Mia was only copying Benny.”

“You’d rather they weren’t together?” She didn’t try to hide her indignation.

“No! I mean, they’re great together and she seems to be developing more skills since they’ve been playing together. He’s good for her, and that’s great; a huge bonus. He provides kind of company that you and I can’t. I’m glad they’re together.”

“But?”

He sighed. “There is no but , really. It just hit hard, brought up a load of stuff. I’m sorry.

I mean it, Ella. It was a dumb thing to get upset over.

” He wasn’t sure if the guilt he felt about missing out on the first months of Mia’s life was what had him so afraid, but he wanted the best for his daughter, and he knew Ella was just that.

He watched some of the tension leave her. “It isn’t, and I wouldn’t be happy if Benny called some random man Daddy .” she said slowly, “I’m upset that you believe I would allow it to happen.”

He brushed his free hand through his already mussed hair.

“You’re dead right. It was what I was thinking and I’m owning that.

I apologize for that as well, because I do trust you, Ella.

Trust you completely. And you gotta know, trust isn’t something I find easy.

I’m a slow burn. But you’ve had it from the start if I’m truthful, and I should have listened when that part of me doing its best to remind me of that.

” When she didn’t answer, he added cautiously, “So, are we good?”

The lump he watched her swallow must have been a stand-out because it sure hadn’t been easy, but she managed and his admiration for her slid up another notch. But it did nothing to ease the tension holding his body taut. And still he waited.

“Ella?”

“Oh Leo...” If anything, her crisp English accent was even crisper. “I’m always good . We British pride ourselves on it.”

He admired her attempt at levity, but it lacked her usual finesse, and it worried him.

Still, he nodded, forced a smile. “Good to know.”

He was grateful when Benny pulled away from his mother and ran to his soft-filled soccer ball, running back to land it at Leo’s feet. “Kick the ball?”

The little guy was so cute with his hopeful expression, that there was no way Leo could refuse. And to Benny’s delight, Leo tapped the ball across the room.

Grabbing it again, Benny looked expectantly at his mother. “Play, Mama! All play! Pwease?”

Her eyes flicked to Leo, and he saw her agitation melt until only the love she had for these children remained.

In his arms Mia struggled to get down to join the fun. Keeping his eyes on Ella, he lowered Mia to the floor. Breath held he waited, his chest relaxing only as each of her words reached him.

“Play? Why not, gorgeous boy. Let’s show these mountain folk how real football is played.”

He sniggered. “You know I won’t go easy on you, don’t you?”

She lifted her pert nose into the air. “Nor I with you. So be warned.” She shrugged. “I think the term is game on .”

He didn’t release her from his gaze. “So, we’re okay? Really okay?”

She held his eyes, her smile wistful. “We’re okay Leo, or at least about as okay as we can be.”

While he pondered that, she scooped up Benny and slid around him and Mia, effortlessly moving the ball along as she passed him.

She cheered. “I believe,” she said with a cheeky smile, “that was a goal. Are you up to the challenge of taking on this mighty French Brit team?”

The light in her eyes, and the cheer reassured him. The challenge? Way, way too tempting. And he waved good-bye to another night’s sleep thanks to the fantasies her taunting provoked.

He grinned as Ella scooped up both children and once more ran the ball past him.

It was for his daughter, he reminded himself. Yep, for Mia.

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From where she was sprawled on the only sofa the upper level of the house offered, Ella heard Leo's return from his lightning-fast trip. It was late, as she'd expected, but she was pretty sure he'd want an update on Mia's day, so she'd waited downstairs, both baby monitors on the floor beside her.

She knew she should probably get up; pretend at least some modicum of professionalism, but she was staying put until she absolutely had to move.

Reluctant to even lift one eyelid until his voice alerted her to the fact that she'd left moving a bit too late.

Not only was he in the room already, and so close she decided she may as well stay where she was.

"Tough day at the office?"

"Jest away. But until you have tried all day long to reason with two cantankerous children with a combined life experience of less than three years, come back and we'll talk."

His tone sobered. "Mia—the kids—they're okay?"

With a sigh she forced both eyes open and dragged her weary body to a sitting position, shuffling up so he could join her on the sofa. "You could use more furniture, you know that?"

He scraped his hand down over his face, the rasp of the day's whiskers loud in the

silence that had previously only been broken by the crack and pop of the fire. “Yeah, so you’ve previously mentioned. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about it—I might need some help there.”

“Feel free to ask, but if you’re imagining any kind of insightful interior design advice tonight, I’d keep my expectations low.” Her yawn stretched every facial muscle, and she blinked as the extra oxygen forged a faint path to her brain.

“Noted. And the kids? Mia?”

“Both asleep—now—but I don’t imagine we’re in for a peaceful night. I have no clairvoyant skills but if I’m correct, they may be coming down with something.”

“Mia’s sick?”

The panic in his voice snapped her out of her drowsy state and while she understood his concern, it annoyed her that having to explain was going to keep her from her bed.

She knew it was ridiculous to resent him, but it was likely she’d be up and down all night if thing went the way she was expecting.

Reaching across she snagged his arm, halting him before he charged upstairs.

“I don’t think it’s anything serious. Joey was here earlier, and she phoned to say both she and Ruby had low grade temperatures and it felt like it was developing into stomach flu.

Melanie had it a couple of days before, and they thought maybe they’d dodged it.

” Ella yawned. “And as usual Benny and Mia were loving all over both baby Ruby and your sister, and I guess the bug must have been left here with us as well. We’re

all hoping it doesn't amount to much, but mostly that it passes over Evie. ”

She saw the concern in his eyes and shot him a tired smile.

Despite the occasional awkwardness between them, and their habitual ragging on each other, she loved and respected his dedication to his daughter.

She knew well the level of fear she experienced when Benny was unwell, and for Leo, it would probably always provoke anxiety for Mia's well-being.

She at least could help share the load with Leo, something she hadn't always had.

She would be a voice of reason, and help him keep things in perspective.

“There's nothing we can do right now but wait and watch.

We have fever medicine ready and if something does develop, we are prepared.

They're both sleeping—I've been up and down to check a dozen times. ”

“Why didn't you just stay up there with them? Grab some sleep?”

She shrugged and didn't try to stem the next yawn. “I wanted to update you, prepare you for what might come. And there's dinner in the fridge—you can heat it up in the microwave—thought I'd better make sure you knew it was there, in case you were hungry.”

The smile lit his face. “You waited up for me?”

He really should give a girl a break! His slow smile had her instantly regretting admitting she'd worried that he may not have had time to eat. “Of course not. I

assumed you'd want to know about your child."

The corners of his mouth deepened. "Nah...You waited up for me. Thanks, Mom!"

Ella blinked. "I think that's my exit line." With a haughty sniff, she pushed off the sofa, wobbled a bit until she got her bearings and then began to stride toward the stairs.

"Hang on just a minute, yeah? I'll come on up with you. Give me a minute to bank this fire and kill the lights, you're not looking too steady on your feet."

"I am perfectly fine, thank you. Actually, in quite good condition for someone old enough to be your mother ." And, of course she tripped on a stray toy she'd missed in her weary cleanup earlier.

Somehow, he was there before she hit the floor, his muscled arms arresting her fall, holding her against his chest, just like in her most regular fantasies.

She permitted herself a moment to enjoy his warmth, his strength.

Her heart hammered, and not just from the fright of almost falling. There was a bit of that, but she didn't fool herself that it was mostly due to being held in this man's arms—even if it wasn't quite the way her fantasies had played out. She sucked in air and tried to pull away.

He resisted and continued to hold her against him. "Just give yourself a moment." His voice was, low, whispered, right near her ear, tickling the sensitive skin, sending tingles through her.

Despite her inward groan, she didn't argue. It was easier. The quicker she regained her balance, the sooner this delicious torture would end.

“You want me to carry you?” He started to bend, to scoop up her legs and she stiffened.

“Only if you want a broken nose.”

He straightened, but damn it to hell, that put his mouth right near her ear again—and his low chuckle started the whole tingling thing over.

“That’s a no? Definite?”

Absolutely maybe. “Set in concrete.”

Forcing a smile and a muttered thank you , she finally managed to pull away, before Sir Lancelot here decided to go all he-man and ignore her decision.

She was learning fast that Halligan men took their chivalrous duties very seriously.

And she wasn’t sure she was strong enough to hold out against them, so without waiting, she headed up the stairs.

The staircase in Leo’s home was a work of art.

Long and white, with a gentle curve, it was enclosed on each side, and seemed to free float from the floor above.

But for once she didn’t wonder at its beauty, or marvel at the engineering.

She simply—carefully—took one thickly carpeted tread at a time.

She hadn’t raced up, nor dallied, but somehow by the time she was at her bedroom door, Leo was beside her. Her intention was to first check on Mia, but Leo lightly

caught her arm.

“Ella?” When she turned to him, all traces of teasing were gone, allowing her to truly note the weariness in his eyes; the shadows under them not quite disguised by his tanned complexion. The genuine warmth in his gaze was something else.

“I, ah, yeah, well, I hope I didn’t go too far down there? You know? With the mother wisecrack?”

Hands behind her back for support, she leaned against the door jamb and matched his tone.

“Not for a minute. I know how to dish it out, and I know how to take it. I hope you know it would take more than that to offend me, Leo. Besides, your mum is a rockstar in my opinion, so it’s really a huge compliment. ”

He grinned. “We agree on that, and she’d like that description. But I also just wanted to say thank you for caring for Mia the way you do. I know I’ve been a pain in the ass sometimes, but I see you with her and I know you really care and it means everything to me.”

“Thank you. She’s very easy to love. And Leo? That gratitude goes both ways. You’ve been very accommodating with Benny. Another child wasn’t what you bargained for when you were looking for a nanny.”

He leaned an arm on the wall beside her. “He’s kind of turned out to be a bonus. A playmate for Mia—and he’s a great kid. Not sure where a less-than-two-year-old gets that kind of patience, but he’s good with her.”

“He’s no saint, Leo. He has his moments and no doubt you’ll witness that before long.”

“I think I could handle that.” His grin sobered. “I, well, I guess I’m trying to say I like having you here, Ella.”

Her breath held and for a moment they both stilled, her tongue slipped out to moisten suddenly dry lips. His eyes tracked its journey.

Had he leaned her way? Her body swayed toward him... No. What was she doing? Blinking she pulled back, breaking the moment. And it had been another moment. “Leo, I—”

He seemed to break free of the madness, stepping back, before stumbling to add, “Both of you. I like having both of you here. It’s livened up this place, made it nice to come home to... That’s all. I just...”

Mouth dry, she nodded. Shook her head. Vaguely waved toward the door behind her. “I um, that’s great... I, er, I’d better check on the children. I—”

He straightened as well. Shoved his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. “Yeah, sure... Me too.” He turned away and then spun back. “I’ll check on Mia. You go see to Benny, and try to get some sleep.”

After that encounter? She doubted it. Closing the door firmly, Ella willed her heart rate down, praying that when the euphoria currently surging through her died away, her weariness would return. That would be her only hope of snatching any rest.

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For long minutes, she sought calm by staring down at her beautiful boy; reminding herself why any relationship with Leo would be foolhardy, no matter what her body craved.

Benny's face was flushed but he wasn't feverish she noted as she gently pushed back his feather-soft hair.

Soon it would grow coarser like his father's; hair that would hold any style with ease.

Emile's private stylist had called him a gift to work on, and Emile had lapped up all the praise, as always, confident of the looks that spoke more to his Italian mother than his French father.

She'd tolerated Emile's conceit and vanity, laughed it off, but after they'd married it had become wearying. Benny would never be that way; hopefully he'd never need to seek the envy and admiration of others.

Feeling more centered, she straightened, breathing a sigh of relief that she'd banished the restlessness Leo had aroused in her.

Or so she thought but a mere minute later, stripped of her jeans and sweater, she was standing only in tiny silk panties and a thin T-shirt when the tapping on her door brought it all back in a rush, completely dousing any flicker of hope that she could control her reactions to Leo Halligan.

She considered ignoring Leo's knock, but then her mind conjured a dozen scenario, and she padded toward the door, She hoped Mia wasn't unwell and he needed her

help?

It was the likely scenario.

But seeing he'd shucked his shirt and was standing in the hall bare-chested, clad only in unclasped, low-slung jeans didn't help her wild imaginings fade away.

She was careful to only reveal her head, keeping her barely clad body out of sight.

"Hey, I hope you weren't asleep yet? I just wanted to give you this." This was one of the baby monitors. "We left them downstairs. I've got Mia's, but I didn't know if you needed Benny's."

Her eyes narrowed. Was he joking? Why would she need a monitor during the night for Benny when he was sleeping right beside her? She noted the weary lines fanning out from eyes that were shadowed and glassy. Sleepy eyes. Her heart kicked up into a samba. Sexy sleepy eyes.

Closing her own to hide the rampant thoughts flooding through her, she reminded herself he was exhausted.

He'd been correct about her waiting up for him.

Certainly, she'd needed to update him on a potential health issue for Mia, but she'd worried about him.

He'd left before dawn, told her of the back-to-back meetings with his bankers, along with various property inspections, about the trip a hundred miles further south to meet with someone about his planned breeding program—and even she could tell it was going to be a lot, not even withstanding the almost three-hundred-mile round trip to get back home.

He should have stayed over as he'd originally planned. He must be dead on his feet.

She opened the door wider to accept the monitor. "Thank you. I hope you get some rest as well." Her eyes had been on the device, only flicking back to him as she finished speaking.

And caught her breath.

The way he was looking at her...

Swallowing the rush of saliva that threatened to choke her, she immediately pushed the door partially closed, her heart racing, trying to ignore the evil voice in her head that crooned, Really?

Would it really be such a bad thing if you opened the door?

Accepted the invitation in his eyes? Follow him back to his room?

Benny stirred, moaned in his sleep. So softly but she heard it; a splash of cold water.

Yes, it would. Very bad...

"Goodnight, Leo."

*

By the time Leo got to his room the exhaustion had kicked in hard and fast. Realizing he had both monitors in his pocket had been a surprise, and before he'd considered his actions he'd made his way to Ella's room intent on returning Benny's monitor.

He was more than willing to grab another opportunity to gaze at her gorgeous face, an

image to stay with him as he slid into dream time?

His head said foolhardy . His body said bonus . Sweet dreams.

Back in his room, the crazy daze that had robbed him of rational thought receded and he slumped onto the side of his bed.

He'd all but convinced himself that this situation with Ella could work. Basically, had told her so just minutes earlier! Other than a few intense moments, he'd been holding it together, controlling the feelings he had for her—or so he'd thought.

But he'd been wrong.

Now he had to admit the very thing he'd been trying so hard to ignore. That those feelings had been growing each day; and she occupied way too much of his head space. Of his sleep time.

He wasn't a fool. He recognized his reaction for what it was—a primal response to a beautiful, desirable woman from a man who'd cut himself off from all female encounters since the day he'd met Hope, close on two years earlier.

That was all it was.

Tonight however? He'd like to blame his exhausted state, but seeing her standing there, took in her bare shapely legs, those tiny panties, the T-shirt of such fine cotton that it was almost sheer...

He'd almost lost it. Had certainly lost himself in the whole package that was Ella.

The temptation to drag her to him and taste those delectable lips, to inhale the essence of her, hold her soft body against his own, to crush their beating hearts together...

He tried to think back to what had really happened.

Had she said something before she closed the door?

He couldn't remember, and embarrassed heat scorched a trail through him.

He was reasonably sure he hadn't said anything too stupid, but only because he figured he'd been incapable.

But he'd gaped, and that had been enough.

Way more than enough... Too much, in fact.

It was the clarity he'd needed, he hadn't really known he'd needed it. But now he did.

Decision made, he'd apologize. Again. Do it while he was telling her this employment situation wasn't going to work out, after all.

He'd try to get her other work, hell, he'd pay for childcare for Benny if that's what she needed.

Pay whatever she needed to keep them both.

He knew Ella would think he was crazy after what he'd just said.

She'd be right. He was crazy. But for his own sanity and if he was going to keep the promise he'd made to himself and Mia, when he'd failed Hope, Ella would have to go.

He hadn't fought for either woman, but he would fight for Mia. Even if it was himself he had to fight.

He knew his family would protest, but he'd come up with something.

He brushed aside the argument that they didn't really know much about her.

That was unfair and it cast a shadow over Ella she didn't deserve, even if there was an element of fact that statement.

The time to raise that concern had been at the point of securing her services, not weeks later after she'd proved day after day that she was perfect for Mia.

Still, they would all side with Ella. And why not? She was doing everything and more than he could have asked for regarding his daughter; she'd become a part of the family; a friend to them all...

But he'd failed two women already; he wasn't going to fail his daughter. Could not allow himself to get distracted by another woman. Mia was his everything. His only everything.

With so many mixed emotions his whole being was buzzing he went back downstairs to grab a quick bourbon, before a cold shower. He wasn't expecting much sleep despite his exhaustion. And he was kidding himself if he thought there'd be much in the nights to come either.

His gut soured at the thought of telling Ella her services were no longer required.

Images of a future that suddenly loomed bleak and empty ahead of him.

He swallowed back the rising bile. Mia would be heartbroken.

But it was for the best... Better sooner rather than later, and he could hope that one day she would understand he'd made the decision for her.

He reached for a glass. Glanced at the sectional sofa, the place he'd sat and chatted with Ella. On second thoughts he'd better snag the whole bottle. His next thought was for his daughter.

And put the bottle back.

*

In spite of everything, he must have dozed off, he frowned, trying to identify the sound that had woken him.

Running water? Somebody was showering. He glanced at the clock. Why was Ella showering at three in the morning? Was she unwell? His gut twisted at the thought, and rubbing a hand across his face, he threw back the covers and strode to the door. He should check on Ella, and then he'd look in on Mia.

The door to Ella's room remained closed, and after pausing briefly to see if he could pick up any other sounds, he continued on past it, to Mia's low-lit room.

He frowned when he realized that not only was Mia not in her crib, but the adjoining bathroom door was open, and from there came not only the sound of running water, but Ella's soft sweet voice. Ella was singing? Where was his daughter?

"Ella?" His whisper elicited no response, and with his heart beating too fast, he stepped quietly into the bathroom, his eyes sweeping the space, fears and questions building—only to come to a sudden grinding, painful halt.

What the —

He tried to form a sentence, spit out words, but nothing was happening. It was a moment before his head comprehended what it was seeing, and when it did, his heart

was suddenly too big for his chest, and a lump the size of Montana lodged itself tight in his throat.

Ella was in the shower, mindless of the fact the drenched tiny panties and strappy camisole she wore clung to her like a second skin, that her hair was plastered to her head, glued to her back.

Mia was clutched to her chest.

His daughter's little head lay in the crook of her neck, and Ella rocked and crooned as the water gently trickled over them both.

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When Ella finally looked up, there was only concern in her eyes, but as she ran her free hand across Mia's brow, she smiled—a weary but relieved smile. “Her fever has finally broken.”

All he could do was stare. It was too much. This beautiful, warmhearted woman, her skin pebbled under water he knew would only be tepid, holding his child. Caring for her. Keeping her safe.

Nothing since he'd first met Mia had brought him to this level of emotion, but the sight before him almost brought him undone.

Perhaps sensing his presence, Mia raised her head, offering a sleepy little smile and softly called, “Dada,” before dropping back onto Ella's shoulder.

His daughter really was okay.

Eyes back on Ella he could only stare, try to process the thoughts whirling around inside his head. He knew she was kind, that she'd take care of his daughter; of course she would. That was Ella...

His voice, strained as it pushed past the tightness in his throat, hurting as he rasped out, “I didn't hear her. I—Is she's okay? I'm so—”

She waved away his apology. “You gave me the wrong monitor,” she whispered. “But it's fine, she's much better now. Calmer. I truly didn't mind.”

Leo grabbed a towel from the stack in the cabinet as Ella made to step out of the

cubicle. “Here, let me take her.” Leo was no longer a stranger to fevers and babyhood ailments, and while he’d never be complacent, he’d learned not to panic. Well, not much, anyway.

Now though, he could probably have benefited from a bit more distracted panic—anything to keep his mind from straying to where it shouldn’t go.

Reaching in to take his daughter took all his determined focus, careful of where he placed his hands, not allowing his eyes to move off his daughter’s face—but dammit—even as hard as he tried there was no way to avoid the sight of Ella’s top as it outlined the curve of her waist, let alone how it clung to her breasts, full and luscious, visible beneath the now transparent top.

He immediately looked away, but he knew there was no way to unsee what he’d just seen. His head went back to an earlier assertion. Perfect in every way.

Every way.

Every wrong way as well as every right way.

But it was all the right ways that had hit him hardest tonight, bringing with them a dose of reality that obliterated all those senseless thoughts about terminating her employment. His baby daughter was unwell, and Ella had stepped up. Above and beyond. Nights weren’t on her. That was his domain.

She could have batted this issue back to him.

She hadn’t.

And he’d be every kind of idiot known to mankind if he didn’t open his eyes and accept that unless he intended to be a full-time, twenty-four-hour-a-day, hands-on

father—that Ella Staunton Hawes was the best thing he could offer Mia at the moment. Probably ever.

All he had to do was man up and get over this insane reaction he had every time he was in her presence.

Like now, when she was standing before him almost naked.

Right. Easy.

Leo clamped his jaw hard. He could do it. Would do it. Ignoring the irritating voice in his head that laughed hysterically at his delusional declarations.

His eyes flicked briefly to hers, the rosy flush now staining her cheeks told him she noticed his perusal. That didn't help, and he was almost grateful when, as soon as the exchange was made, she crossed her arms, covering her chest. "I—I, um... I'll come and see her wh—"

Deliberately turning away from her, he shook his head. "Stay there, and dial up the water temperature, you need to warm up. I'll fix Mia and check on Benny. Make sure this hasn't disturbed him."

"Oh." There was a tremor in her voice as she responded, and he doggedly put that down to her body temperature. "Okay, that would be great. I won't be long. Thank you." Perhaps she turned back, he wasn't game to look in her direction when she added, "Oh Leo? Don't dress her too warmly."

Having quickly checked on Benny, who appeared to be sleeping soundly, Leo was just fastening the last of the snaps on Mia's onsie when he felt Ella beside him.

Hair caught up in a towel and wrapped in one of the outsize toweling robes his mom

had insisted he needed for the guest bathrooms; she was almost luminous in the dim light.

Perfume from her body wash or some kind of lotion wafted over him—sweet and fragrant, reminding him of his mother’s spring garden—as she leaned in to place her fingers once more on Mia’s forehead.

Nodding she turned to face him. “It could return. Ruby had rolling fevers so Mia might be in for the same. Did you check Benny?”

It was his turn to nod. “He seemed fine. No fever.”

He felt as much as saw her shoulders drop in relief. “Good. Thank you.” Twisting back to Mia, she added, “I’ll go and get a bottle made up for her. Hopefully it’ll help her get back to sleep.”

Quickly fastening the safety belt across Mia to prevent her rolling or trying to sit up, Leo reached out to snag Ella’s thickly padded arm as she made to leave. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

She shrugged, and the overly generous robe moved, baring one slender shoulder.

She quickly covered again. “You were beat. And...” she hesitated.

“I wasn’t really sleeping so it was no bother.

” Another flush stained her face at the admission, and he wondered if her reason for restlessness was the same as his own.

A flash of hot need that he immediately clamped down came on the heels of that thought, and he was grateful when she rushed on, getting them both past the moment.

“I tried medicine first, but she was upset and spat most of it out, and when I tried the tepid bath, she clung and cried, so it made sense to take her into the shower. I had to get her temperature down.”

She finished on another shrug, this time holding the gown close, staring up at him with eyes so wide and clear he felt he could drown in them; wanted to drown in them.

Leo cleared his throat. “Thank you, Ella. I mean that... Of course, I always mean it but tonight, what you did for Mia... I’m very grateful.”

“It’s what anyone would do, Leo.” Their eyes held for a moment longer before she broke the hold. “I’ll get that bottle.”

“No. I’ll get it. You go and try to get some rest. I’ll take Mia back with me, that way I’ll be on it in case the fever takes hold again.”

He blamed everything for what came next.

The warm, dimly lit room, their whispered conversation, her perfume, their combined relief that Mia was okay...

Wouldn’t any man reach for the woman sharing such an ordeal with him?

He reached for her; held her tight against him, inhaled the essence of her—felt her soften into him.

He was reaching for her chin, about to lift her face to his when sanity returned in the form of a grizzle.

Mia.

And his hand fell away.

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Much to her dismay, Ella's prediction had played out just as she'd hoped it wouldn't. Mia had been hit by the rolling fevers, the same as Ruby, and unfortunately Benny didn't miss out either. Both of them finally succumbing to several bouts of throwing up.

Ella had managed about an hour's rest—her body too wired for sleep—before Benny's hoarse cry had woken her. Thankfully, he'd been slightly easier to reason with and had at least accepted the medicine without too much protest.

She'd just been changing him when Leo came to her door.

He'd knocked lightly first, calling to her softly before his head appeared in the sliver of light from the corridor, one hand waving the monitor that had obviously picked up Benny's cry.

"How's Benny? Are you okay? Need anything? I can race downstairs for you—"

"Thank you, but we're okay. He's had medication and some water. The fever should drop soon. I'll just sit and hold him for a while. Mia?"

"Asleep for now." He seemed to be lost for a moment before simply shrugging. "Call me if you need me. Okay?"

In the end, it had been a night of tag-teaming.

Both children went down to the virus, and one adult was often with the two children while the other ran and fetched.

And then switching roles. There'd been no plan, and they'd needed little communication.

They each just seemed to seamlessly work together to get through a rough night.

What had touched her most during the early hours had been Leo's consideration of both Benny and herself, in addition to his concern for Mia.

One of her nannies had called those hours the witching hours, a time for bewitching and bewitchment—and part of her was bewitched not only by Leo's total dedication to his daughter, but his kindness and compassion to Benny—and to her.

Comparisons were something Ella tried to avoid; they rarely helped, and this was no exception, but she couldn't help but wonder how Emile would have handled a night such as she and Leo had endured.

He wouldn't have been completely cavalier, but he certainly wouldn't have had Leo's patience.

Both children had had to be nursed and consoled at different times, and Leo had all but worn indents on the corridor carpet, walking and rocking one child after the other.

Bathing them, changing them, worrying about them alongside her...

Cleaning up when both children at different times suffered bouts of fever-induced vomiting.

As they cared for the children, for the first time in her entire life, Ella knew that she was where she should have been, doing what she was supposed to do. She'd never felt so strongly that she belonged as she did working alongside Leo.

Now in the late afternoon of another day, with both children over the worst— they hoped —they sat side-by-side at the kitchen island, blearily staring into their coffee.

Several family members had offered to come and help out but she'd happily supported Leo when he'd firmly refused their generous offers.

The last thing any of them wanted or needed was for Evie to come down with this, or for Ruby to be unlucky enough to pick it up again.

And Leo was adamant his mom should not risk taking anything home to his father who was slightly immune compromised since his heart attack.

So, it had been the two of them; and at times during the long night, it had felt like the two of them against the world. And yet it had felt right...

Still felt right —cocooned here together—even as the thought terrified her as much as it thrilled her.

Leo stretched, leaning across to tuck the stray strands of her hair that had fallen across her face, grinning as he pulled back. “Hungry? Think I’ll make a sandwich. You want one?” His voice was little more than a whisper, adding to the sense of being separated from the rest of the world.

She nodded and wearily rose to retrieve the piece of roast beef and other fixings from the refrigerator while he grabbed the bread.

The beef had been left from a meal just two nights earlier and yet it now seemed like a lifetime ago.

“At least I think I do.” The yawn she was unable to control almost swallowed the words, but she plowed on.

“Though, on second thought I’m not sure my jaw will have the energy to chew. ”

Chuckling he gently gripped her shoulders from behind, and turned her, guiding her back to the stool she’d just vacated. “Sit. This one’s on me.”

With no energy to argue she sat and watched him build the sandwiches, and build was the operative word.

They were towering blocks; layers of all the things she’d retrieved from the fridge and more he’d scrounged.

She stared in wonder, doubting she’d be able to open her mouth wide enough to eat it!

Still, it was poetry to watch—those hands, so capable, strong, long tanned fingers deftly wielding a knife.

“Great hands... I mean, great knife skills . You could be a chef.” Her shoulders still tingling from the warmth of those hands, and determinedly she refused to think about other even more interesting things he could do with them.

Her faced warmed, and she shook her head to clear away the dangerous thoughts.

Stick to thinking about the food. It was that or risk spitting out something entirely inappropriate.

But then she thought about food and all the things they could do with food...

That prompted even more heat, and she fairly snatched the giant sandwich from him when he passed it over, grateful for anything to shove into her mouth and keep it occupied.

Oblivious, Leo accepted her comment in its most literal sense. “Some college buddies and I spent a couple of months trekking through Europe after we graduated. Got work wherever we could. I was working in a bar in Spain and this chef there gave me a few tips about how to handle a knife.”

“You’ve been to Europe?” That surprised her.

“What? You think I’m not cultured enough?”

There’d been only wry amusement in his tone, so she shrugged off the comment. “You just seem so at home here in Montana. On this ranch.”

“I am. This place is in my blood.” He bit into the sandwich and chewed for a minute. “This is going to sound a bit sappy I guess, but it’s kind of more than my home—it’s where my heart is and will always be.”

Sentimental words delivered in that low rippling voice?

Yes please. Not wanting to reveal her own sappy feelings she initially kept her response light.

“Definitely sappy.” Then she sobered. “But quite beautiful. I’m not sure I’ve ever experienced anything like that, and it makes me quite envious, really. ”

“There’s nowhere? Not even where you lived with your husband. Emile , was it?”

She nodded. “Yes, Emile. But no. We’d not long moved into the house before he was killed, so, I’d formed no big, deep attachment.

I suppose I love my childhood home, but to be honest I spent most of my time elsewhere, so again, I have memories but no sense that I truly belong there.

” She caught the next errant yawn, wondering about the fact that last night she’d felt something close to what he’d described.

Not the same intensity but something . However, telling him her closest attachment was to a place she’d been a part of for mere weeks, was not only ludicrous—but far too revealing.

“As for me?” she finally added. “Benny. He’s my place. Wherever he is, is where I would need to be. Want to be. Have to be.”

Leo said nothing for a while, just nodded, his eyes flicking across to her as he chewed. Nibbling through her meal, she waited, knowing something was cooking in that gorgeous head. It didn’t surprise her when it came.

“Your husband—Emile. Do you mind if I ask how you two met?”

“At summer camp. I was thirteen, he was fourteen.” She looked across at him, reading more questions in sinfully rich chocolate eyes.

“I was taking a walk by the river and heard someone calling out. Emile was good at everything but back then he wasn’t the strongest swimmer.

He was in trouble and I dove in to help him. ”

Admiration and maybe a tinge of disbelief shone back at her. “You saved him?”

“Are you suggesting I couldn’t?”

“No, I just... wow. You were just a kid. That was a big effort. Huge. So, what then? You just—”

“Became friends. Best friends. Discovered we had some things in common. Came to rely on each other. After that we contrived to meet up at the same vacation camps until we each graduated school. Went to university together; stayed friends.”

He was shaking his head. “And then married?” His eyebrows disappeared into the mess of hair he hadn’t straightened since their ordeal with the children.

“Not right away. I went back to London. My degree is in art history and I was managing an art gallery in Mayfair. Emile stayed in Paris. But we spoke every day. Saw each other most other weekends.”

“Ah, you were like, soulmates?” His face pulled into a got it expression. He hadn’t. Not by a long shot. “Had you always planned to marry?”

Her mouth pinched in of its own volition; they were getting into tricky territory now. “Not really... Oh, you know—the usual adolescent promises. Like if we hadn’t met someone by the time we were a certain age we’d get together. Rubbish stuff like that.”

That time he almost choked. “And yet you got married! What was the age limit on that oh so romantic life plan? Nineteen? ”

“Ha!” Tired as she was, Ella couldn’t help but laugh at his ridiculous expression. “No! Thirty-two for me, thirty-three for him. Obviously, I’d been thinking of feasible embryonic potential—fertility—when those ages were set. But, you know, things happened. His father died...” She shrugged.

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Sobered by her reply, Leo kept his eyes on her for what seemed to be an age—right up until she began to squirm under the intensity. “Leo, unless you have x-ray vision, I’d prefer you to ask whatever question is eating you up than you trying to bore through my skull to decipher the answer.”

His lips twitched. “Do you always say what’s on your mind?”

No. There are some things I can never say. “When it’s appropriate. It saves time. Why, does it bother you?”

His answer surprised her; words that seemed to fall from his mouth before he’d had time to think about them. “Not nearly as much as it should. Just the opposite in fact.” His shoulders had dropped, along with his voice, leaving her to have to lean in to hear those last trailing words.

“Leo?”

He shrugged. “Sorry. My brain’s fried.” He fiddled with the crumbs on his plate, pushing them from one side to the other. “Did you love him?”

That one came from out of the blue and she took her time replying. “I will always love Emile. He was my friend. He’s my son’s father.” Was I in love with him? No... Time to deflect. “What about you and Hope?”

She may not have bothered him with her occasional directness, but her question obviously had bothered him.

She felt it in the subtle change in the air around them; saw it in his face.

Almost like he was shutting down and suddenly the silence around them seemed deafening.

She watched, waiting. Should she retract the question?

She watched those powerful hands, watched those crumbs receive even more intense concentration, tracked his deepening frown.

Finally, he cleared his throat. “Honest answer? I think I thought I was. I know I thought I was.” He pulled in air, long and slow.

“And if she’d lived? We’d have married and she’d be here living with Mia and me.

But we had so little time together. And most of our relationship consisted of phone calls.

And even those eventually stopped. I realize now it was when she must have found out she was having Mia.

I don’t know why she didn’t tell me. I was devastated when she died, but—”

He paused and once more; his face wreathed in a mix of confusion and regret.

Ella stilled, knowing instinctively that he hadn’t ever spoken to anyone else about his feelings.

Her heart ached, and she wanted nothing more than to reach out and console him, but she knew she had to let him find his own way.

The long sigh he emitted seemed to release some of the tension that had built up over the last several minutes when, voice ragged, he finally continued.

“But, some of that is guilt. Guilt that I hadn’t known about her plight; that I hadn’t been there for her and Mia.

That I’d let her down—in the worst way. And questions—like would she have survived if I’d come back sooner?

Got her better treatment? And then there was...

the other thing . My heart broke for Mia, it broke for the life Hope was denied...

But I realized in those moments that I wasn’t sure that I loved Hope in the way I should have.

I wondered if our attraction would have faded eventually.

She ah... had some, um, problems, stuff left from her childhood.

In retrospect it should have been obvious she’d never been treated well; at least not the way she deserved to be loved.

I hope that given time we might have found that place again; that I’d find that feeling that had bowled me over when we first met.

But I’ll never know because we were denied the chance, and there are too many questions left unanswered. ”

“Oh Leo.” Tears pricked the backs of her eyes, and her throat ached from the pressure of trying to contain those tears. Certainly, lack of sleep played a part as well; and

maybe her own guilt, didn't help.

She'd slid past his question about loving Emile, whereas he had laid all his truth at her feet; trusted her.

Combined with their shared worry over the children; their lack of sleep; in the intimacy of the moment and soul baring—she finally gave in to impulse and slid from her stool to stand before him.

It was only supposed to be a hug, something to console him when words would sound trite; a connection to reassure him that she understood. But the moment his arms slid around her, when she was crushed up against that chest; inhaled the essence of him—something changed.

Everything changed.

“Ella...” It was broken whisper.

He'd pulled her into the space between his knees, enclosing her, wrapping himself around her.

His head at first rested against her shoulder, his breath teased the sensitive skin of her neck, his lips so tantalizingly close.

His heart beat against hers, so fast, so hard, it told her what she wanted to know.

His hands moved up over back, sending out a ripple of delicious vibrations, pebbling every inch of her skin.

She heard his groan as his lips brushed a spot just below her ear: a sound so compelling it stripped her of all rational thought.

She lost all sense of what was right and what was wrong.

Powerless to do anything but fall into the vortex of swirling sensations as a million delicious sparkling arrows shot through her, each one igniting another nerve end that exploded in a shower of liquid warmth.

And that was before his lips even found hers.

His kiss was gentle but sure, moving with certainty, compelling her to move closer and wind her arms around his neck—hold him to her like she would never let him go.

Responding to her invitation, he deepened the kiss, slid forward on his stool, pressed himself into her, showing without any doubt that he felt just as she did.

Emboldened, she rubbed herself against the long hard length of him, felt the sharp intake of his breath.

He moaned and pulled back enough to whisper, his breath fluttered against her mouth, “Ella?”

It was a question. She knew that, just as she knew what he was asking; what he wanted—what they both wanted.

What did she want? Through the fog of passion, rational thought strove to be heard; a thin thread of lucidity strengthened until it gained a foothold.

Questions that needed to be answered, and to answer, one must be able to think. As if an invisible switch had been flicked, her brain finally kicked back in to gear.

What was she doing?

What were they doing?

No! This couldn't happen. She'd instigated it!

Surely the fires of hell could not burn with more intensity than the fire suddenly raging through her.

Not the lascivious heat of physical passion; but the heavy burn of mortification.

Barely able to draw breath, Ella stepped away, allowed her arms to fall heavily to her sides as she dragged in life-preserving oxygen.

She could not face him. "Leo, I'm sorry... I should never..."

"Ella—"

"No, I need to go. Have a shower. Be r-ready for when the children wake."

The only victory she could claim was that she walked away, back straight, head held high—and didn't once look back. She'd congratulate herself for that miraculous feat later.

Much, much later when she could face herself in a mirror.

*

For long moments Leo just sat there, willing his body to calm.

He lost the argument more than once when both head and body insisted on reliving those mad moments.

The way her slender body fitted into his when he'd wrapped himself around her.

Her lips: so soft, yet so willing to match his every challenge.

The way he'd instantly hardened—all it had taken was her touch to light a fire that raged through him so fast it had literally stolen his breath.

One all-too-brief kiss.

And it had lived up to every fantasy; been everything and more. But it wasn't enough.

He pushed away the plate, shoved it with such force it almost slid right across to fall off the far side of the counter.

Damn it to hell. This was the very thing he'd feared would happen. And damn it more to hell: He had no idea what to do about it.

He'd learned one thing from his mother and sister, and that was not to let things dwell; to talk about them.

Talking with Ella had been one of the unexpected joys of having her in the house with him, but right then, it was the last thing he wanted to do with Ella Staunton Hawes. But it had to be done.

He cleared away the kitchen mess, giving them both a moment before he made his way upstairs.

He caught her tiptoeing out of Mia's room. Offering a tight smile, she made to pass him, but he snagged her arm, dropping it the minute she looked pointedly at his hand and then arched an eyebrow as her eyes lifted to him. "Ella, please—I think we should talk."

“Nothing to talk about Leo,” she said in the prim English accent. “We’re both exhausted after a very emotional and physically draining time. We had a moment of madness. And I suggest we put it behind us and pretend it never happened.”

He’d probably been going to say something similar, but it irked him that she got in first and could sound so rational.

How was she so in control when his own body was clamoring for even just a smile from her?

“Yeah, well, you know I’ve had a few moments of madness in my lifetime, but none of them ever felt like that. ”

What was he doing? He intended to put this behind them, not encourage it!

“Well, congratulations,” she returned. “I fear I don’t have all that experience to fall back on, so my ability to compare is rather lacking.”

He shook his head. “I didn’t mean to cheapen our experience, Ella. Just the opposite, but I guess we do need to talk about how we move forward. It’s obvious there’s an attraction there between us, that you and I—”

“Is there, Leo? That’s quite a presumption.”

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She may have looked in control—her lovely hazel eyes, with their shards of blue, brown, and green didn't waver as she stared him down.

And she sounded coolly in control, but the pink suddenly staining her cheeks told a different story.

“You're saying you're not attracted to me, Ella?”

” His mouth curved upward, and he moved ever so slowly closer to her.

“Is that a challenge? Because you know I could test that out right now... I could reach out and do this.” And he ran a single finger down her cheek. “Or this—”

As though coming out of a daze she batted his hand away.

But it was the glisten of building tears in her eyes that snapped him back to reality.

Freaking hell. What was he doing! Her words, broken and raspy, added the final layer of cold water.

“Leo, stop. D-do you even know what you're doing?”

Are you thinking about this? Really thinking? ”

Of course he wasn't. Groaning, he scraped a hand through his hair, and started to turn away.

Spun back. “You’re right. I’m not thinking.

I’m sorry, I...” What could he say? The words were a jumble in his lust-addled brain, and trying to make sense of them was suddenly beyond him.

“I’m really sorry, Ella. I’ve got no excuse...

Get your shower. The kids will be awake before we know it. ”

He didn’t wait to see her response, didn’t deserve another of her passes, just strode the length of the corridor to his room. And it felt like the longest walk of his life.

*

After her shower, Ella lay on the bed staring up at the ceiling. The warm water sluicing her body, streaming through her hair, hadn’t washed away the memory of Leo’s face as he’d challenged her to admit her attraction to him. His eyes seeing beyond the cool facade she tried so hard to maintain.

Had he expected she’d just fall at his feet? Admit she was a blithering mess every time he was within touching distance? Even when he wasn’t? And if she had, it didn’t mean they could hurtle into a torrid affair.

She almost laughed out loud. Though there was nothing funny about any of it.

On the one hand it could be— would be —glorious; of that she had no doubt.

On the other? It was probably the most disastrous decision she could ever make, and not just because she’d eventually walk away with a broken heart.

Her reasons went much deeper than she could ever admit to Leo Halligan.

Yet, despite her muddled feelings, this time pondering made one thing very clear.

It was time she and Leo talked. Really talked.

Cleared the air. And they needed to lay some ground rules.

Otherwise, as perfect as this position was, and no matter how crushing it would be to walk away from Mia and Leo, she'd have to do just that.

Decision made, she took the few steps to her walk-in closet, eschewing the jeans she'd been wearing for practicality with the kids, and choosing the Burberry mini, pleated at hip level, and dragged out a fitted red knit top and black tights to go with it.

Another of Abbie's contributions to her wardrobe, and while she hadn't had much use for it on the ranch, she was counting on it to give her a layer of confidence; because the conversation wouldn't be easy.

Emboldened by her outfit, she added an extra layer of courage with some makeup: mostly accentuating her eyes.

Though, once she'd made it back downstairs and found Leo, also showered, and hunched over a coffee at the kitchen island, she realized that maybe the outfit hadn't been the right choice.

Alerted to her approach he looked across at her, his eyes still heavy with exhaustion as they traveled the length of her legs, before he lifted his gaze to her face.

Her choice of clothing and makeup had been chosen to bolster her confidence, but when his eyes lit with appreciation, all her determination melted.

And it took every ounce of her strength not to turn and run back upstairs.

“Ella—”

“Leo—”

He fell silent, waving her to continue.

“I think we need to talk. Set some ground rules.”

He nodded, and once more waved, this time toward the two-seater sofa by the fire.

Hesitating she asked, “I, er, do you think maybe we could go downstairs? There’s more room and um...”

“Sure. Yeah, good idea.”

Down in the games room she took one corner of the sectional, placing the baby monitors alongside her so as to ensure he couldn’t sit too close. Nodding his understanding, he sat, stretching out those long denim-clad legs out in front of him, jumping in before she could begin.

“Ella, again, I apologize. I had no right—”

“Stop, it’s not all your fault.” She sighed.

“I um... Well, there’s no way to begin without admitting what we both know anyway.

” She swallowed, crossed her legs, uncrossed them when his eyes followed the movement.

“You asked, challenged , me to admit that I find you attractive. And yes, I do. Very

much so, but I...”

“Don’t want to get involved?”

“Can’t get involved is closer to the truth,” she corrected.

“Because of Benny?”

That was the crux of it, but it was more complicated than just needing to give her son her complete focus.

“Yes, but there’s more to it than that. And I would beg you not to ask me to elaborate at this stage.

My point is that I am not in a position to get into any kind of relationship, especially one where I am living under your roof and in your employ.

And most especially not a casual fling.”

Concern underscored his response. “Are you in some kind of trouble, Ella? Because if you are, I could—”

“I’m not in trouble, well, not in any way you might imagine or could help with; but thank you. I’m assuming you were about to offer help?”

“So,” even as he nodded, Leo continued slowly, cautiously, “there is some kind of issue?”

“Please, Leo. I’d like to let it go if you don’t mind.”

He frowned, huffed out a half laugh that held no humor, cocked an eyebrow. “Those

secrets I guessed at when we were at Java the other day?”

Ella shrugged. “Perhaps.”

“You don’t trust me?” There was hurt in his voice, and she understood. She was there to care for his child. How much more trust could he have shown in her? She got that he might expect some trust in return.

Sighing, she tried to explain. “It’s like the diamond versus the village analogy.

Some secrets are just not worth digging for, or sharing, if they’re going to undermine and threaten the collapse of the village.

The risk of exposing that diamond sometimes far outweighs any of the rewards of unearthing it. ”

She’d probably made it worse by using that analogy. It was evident he was still curious, probably even more so now, but he simply nodded, remained quiet for a minute before taking them back to the reason for their discussion.

“So, what do you propose we do? I’m asking because I’ve been beating my head against a brick wall.”

She relaxed back into the sofa. “I think we have to come to an agreement that we remain professional, that we try to contain any feelings or... I mean, surely that’s what you want as well?”

His sigh blew all the way over to her. “That’s the ridiculous part. I’d vowed since Hope died that I would put Mia first; that I’d never let her down like I did her mother. Which partially is why,” he added on a low growl, “my behavior earlier was so out of line.”

He was only supporting her view on how a relationship between them could be disastrous, if for different reasons.

Still, it stung to hear him put it so baldly.

“You didn’t fail Hope, Leo. The circumstances were out of your control, but I’d be being hypocritical to question your resolve.

Though, if you wanted my opinion, I think you’re being unnecessarily harsh on yourself. ”

“Yeah, well,” he began on a grim note, “the truth is I don’t have a great track record with women, so I’m not prepared to take that chance.”

“Because of Hope?” Even she heard the frown in her voice.

He pursed his lips, the ones she’d fantasized about but now knew firsthand that those fantasies hadn’t even come close to the glorious reality. Even calling on every ounce of self-control she possessed, she struggled to pull her eyes away.

After a long moment he responded, “She wasn’t the first.”

Oh. His words shocked her, but it felt wrong to prompt him.

“Her name was Kristina,” he finally said. “We were in college together. She was a trust fund kid, a bit wild, and at first, I was dazzled by her. Surprised even when she agreed to go out with me.” He blew out a long sigh. ‘She was wild and had no sense of self-preservation at all.’

In the next pause, Ella asked quietly, “She died?”

“No, but she could have. We were at a party. Her people, not mine, and I was ready to check out. Lots of alcohol and we were all underage. There was other stuff. Not my scene. That was bad enough; but these kids had money to burn and fast cars—very fast cars.”

“Ah, an accident?”

“Yep. Kristina wanted me to go joyriding with her and her friends in her sports car. They were going to buy drugs. I refused. I should have gone, they were all tanked. I told her it was dangerous, too many in the car. We had a fight, I guess you’d call it.

She stormed off, yelling that I was no fun and had ruined her night.

Said it would be my fault if they all crashed because I refused to drive them. ”

“Oh Leo.” He didn’t have to paint any more pictures.

“Her injuries were horrific. Loads of operations. She eventually recovered. I tried to keep in touch with her, but her parents blamed me and wouldn’t let me near her. Rationally I knew it wasn’t my fault, but still, the guilt of it ate at me for years. Then when Hope...”

“This is going to sound like tough love, but you weren’t responsible for either of those situations. People make their own choices, Leo. Did you ever talk to anyone about the Kristina thing? A professional?”

He huffed out another half laugh; one that lifted his chest. “Nah. Actually I’ve never spoken to anybody about it.

You’re the first—lucky you. Figured it was best just to move on.

There was nothing I could do, blocked at every juncture by her family, so...

” He shrugged. “Rodeo helped. And I gotta say, I’m not as eaten up now as I might sound.

I’ve pretty much made my peace with what happened in those situations, but they left a mark, a reminder if you like, that life is tenuous, and we have to stay alert.

” He paused. “And Mia is way too precious for me to lose focus, to take any risks.”

She sat quietly, honored he’d trusted her enough to share this experience in his life, but mostly just letting him process what he’d revealed.

Admiring him even more that he’d cared about those women, still cared and wished he’d done more.

Ella hurt for the unnecessary pain and guilt he’d endured, and his intention to deny himself a full life.

And deny Mia the chance to have a mother because he doubted himself.

All the while feeling guilty that she didn’t dare share her own secrets.

It hurt that she, who loved Mia as much as any mother could, was unable to challenge him to take that chance with her. With Benny. To build a family...

All fantasy. But who wouldn’t want that dream? What mother wouldn’t want that kind of security and love for her child? What woman wouldn’t want someone as caring as Leo Halligan by her side?

Lost in the cruelly tantalizing what-ifs , his voice, stark and raw, startled her. “But we

haven't actually solved our problem, have we? Where do we go from here?"

"Perhaps we have to limit the time we have together. That would be a starting place."

The sudden flash in his eyes was contrary to what came out of his mouth, she was sure of it. "Sounds like a plan."

Really what else could they do? Considering this, Ella stood to make her retreat. What was that saying? Begin as you plan to continue?

But when Leo reached out, white heat shot through her, laughing at all her good intentions.

She wasn't sure what he read in her face, but he removed his hand just as quickly as he'd reached out to her.

Instead, he stood, faced her full-on—all that strength, virility, gorgeousness—all just a hand-stretch away. His expression stole her breath.

Leo... Don't do this...

He didn't say the words she sensed simmered below the surface, and when he did speak, she wondered if his request was what he'd actually intended, had it not been for the sincerity in his tone.

"I just wanted to clarify one thing; can we still do some stuff together?" He shrugged. "The kids seem to get a kick out of it, and it's probably good for them... Healthy?"

She crossed her arms, tried to brush away the goosebumps that his touch had feathered across her skin, even through her sleeves—worried the peaking of her nipples would be evident through the tight knit sweater, worried he'd see and...

No! Just, no!

Drawing in as much air as her lungs could accommodate, she straightened, strove for calm, aware she might be coming across a bit clinical, but needing that to anchor herself.

“I suppose certain situations could be considered.”

“Like furniture shopping?” He frowned. “Before—all this—I was going to suggest we head to Bozeman in a day or so to choose furniture. I’d appreciate your suggestions but if you don’t feel comfortable, I’ll just take advice from the staff. Either way is okay.”

“Furniture?” He badly needed it; they all did. And she’d basically promised. “Yes, that would be an, um, well, fine. Benny and I would love to accompany you and Mia.”

It seemed a perfect moment to escape but his voice reached her as she began mounting the carpeted stairs.

“Ella?”

She turned.

“Thank you.”

She would have been fine with a mere thank-you . It would have sufficed. But he added a smile. A full-blown, eyes-crinkled smile.

And a wink.

Thank goodness she hadn't ascended very high, or she'd have tumbled right back to the bottom. As it was, she was saved only by clinging to the banister for a moment before she nodded and shakily made her way upwards.

Sure, you can do this , an evil inner voice scoffed. Sure! Easy as pie. Just as long as he doesn't smile at you, or speak to you in that deep rumbling voice that skitters so lightly across your nerve ends, or laughs... Or breathes...

Yet, somehow, she had to. It was that or leave.

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The thing about children, especially younger children, is that they bounce back quickly.

So it only was two days before they were able to make the trip to look for furniture.

She and Leo had handled the intervening days as well as they could.

It helped that she'd reverted to their original system of simply passing Mia over when Leo returned from work, and had managed to mostly stay out of his orbit.

It wasn't easy, but it was working as well as a difficult situation ever could. Had it eased any of her longing? Brought an end to the fantasies that plagued her day and night? Stopped her constantly thinking about him? Worrying if he was late or if the weather was foul?

The answer to all those was a resounding no. And she'd realized with much chagrin that she didn't need the man right there in front of her to keep him alive in her head. He was always there, entrenched to the extent that she wondered if he would ever not be there.

Yet another thing to worry about.

On the morning of their trip though, there was little time for such concerns.

While she readied the children Leo prepared pancakes for them all, topping them with syrup and blueberries—though the results were that Mia had to be completely redressed and Benny required a wash down—they were delicious.

For which Ella was grateful: she didn't want there to be any tension, and the meal kind of set the tone for the day. Fun and lighthearted.

"Do you have a list?" she asked when they were finally on the road. "And you realize you'll probably have to wait a few weeks for delivery? Have you settled on theme or color scheme?"

Shooting her a confused look, he shrugged. "Don't you just pick what you like? What's comfortable?"

"If that were the case Leo, why do you need me? Just go in and flop all over sofas and chairs until you find one that meets your comfort standards."

"Okay, you're saying you expect me to make a whole lot of decisions based on stuff that doesn't relate to comfort for stuff that's supposed to be comfortable?"

Ella choked back a laugh. "Well, when put like that..." She shook her head. "Of course, comfort has to be paramount, but matching styles also helps. And colors that don't clash."

For the next several miles, she quizzed him with various design questions, enjoying herself way too much, but grateful for the distraction.

It had been barely two days since their conversation, and yet everything inside her was acting as though she hadn't seen him for months, so interior design chat kept her head from wandering to other things—like those thighs, encased once more in his trim-fitting Wranglers and resting so close to her own.

"Are you intimating I have no style?" The question was carried on amused exasperation.

“Not at all,” she replied crisply, “I’m just struggling to collate rustic mountain cabin, private men’s club, and bawdy brothel into one discernable style so as to communicate your preferences to the salespeople.

” Ella paused and shook her head. “So, no, I am not saying you have no style. I’m saying you have an appalling sense of style. Hideous. ”

His eyes were sparkling as he glanced across at her. “Seems like it’s a good thing I have you here then, isn’t it?”

Indignation bubbled as truth dawned. “You’re playing me?”

“Easy pickings...”

He was trying to contain his laughter, she could see that, but he was also failing, meanwhile she, while trying to maintain her indignation; and also failing.

“So, no buttoned purple leather sofas, purple walls, furniture, carpet, and drapes? With gold trim and ruby red accents in your glorious light-filled living room? All picked out with brown-and-cream plaid throws and your grandmother’s floral covered rocking chair? ”

“Hey, you were the one that swallowed all that. I just played along.”

Thankfully in the store, which incidentally almost blew Ella’s mind, he was much more controlled, even making sensible choices.

That in itself was something, given the vast range he had to choose from.

The store was probably as big as a football field that not only, offered quality brands, but also promised immediate delivery from their even bigger warehouse.

So, all her warnings about not having furniture in time for the combined birthday party fell by the wayside.

Between them, they chose furniture for the living and dining rooms, Leo's study, the family room, plus the casual eating area and the room he'd designated as a home theater.

When they were almost done, he insisted she choose furniture and furnishings for her own room, and knowing she was doing him a favor, she immediately began searching.

She and Benny would leave one day, and perhaps that day wasn't as far away as she'd like, but by furnishing the room, she knew he'd have a stylish guest room. For another nanny?

The thought twisted so fiercely she lost the ability to breathe for just a moment. Someone else with her baby Mia? Loving her? Holding her when she was sad or unwell? Giggling with her?

Someone else there with Leo? Would they joke with him? Coax out his delicious cheeky smiles? Would he bite back? Make the new nanny laugh?

Would he look at that new nanny like he looked at her? Would he stir the same fires?

It was almost enough to make her ill. Swallowing the sudden nausea, she forced her head back into the game; determinedly eyed each piece, studying the soft furnishings critically, and biting back the sudden childish desire to make it ugly for the person she would leave it for.

She couldn't do that and when she spotted a padded and buttoned pearl-gray headboard, one with fluted rim, she knew she had the scheme and style she wanted.

The bed coverings were luxurious and classy, and with the soft yellow and pure white accents she picked out, it would look stunning.

Happy with their choices, Ella relaxed. It had taken an age, but the children had been brilliant, all things considered, but enough was enough.

Leo carried Benny on his shoulders, much to the toddler's delight, while she pushed Mia's stroller.

By the time they were done, both little ones had crashed, and while Leo held a sleeping Benny as he paid and organized delivery, she wandered through the store with the stroller.

The store was busy, lots of people browsed, and the aisles between the displays weren't overly wide, so progress was slow.

Coincidentally, she found herself by a display of beds for children and slowed to a complete stop.

It wouldn't be long before Benny would need one, and she took the time to see what was on offer.

Checking the softness of a display mattress, she stepped away from the stroller in order to lean in and feel the quality. That was all she'd done; nothing more and it took her barely a moment; yet, when she looked back up, the stroller was being pushed away. A strange man was taking Mia!

It was every nightmare she'd ever had. It was every fear she'd harbored since the day Emile died and left alone her with Benny: his precious child.

Yet her mind was blank. She didn't really think; had only one objective.

Her scream surely must have alerted every single person in the store and beyond, but it was her flying leap that most would probably remember.

Mindless of everything around her, she brought that man down, screaming at him...

Reality seeped back and Ella blinked into the face partially turned to her.

Middle aged; a stranger—looked back at her with a combination of astonishment and fear, which was what any person suddenly attacked by a mad woman would probably feel.

*

The return journey to the Lazy H was mostly silent. Even the children seemed to know this wasn't the time for a dissection of events and eventually drifted off to sleep.

Having apologized to the store managers and the man she'd attacked , assuring the latter was okay and largely unharmed and getting Ella treated for her own shock, Leo had simply taken care of both children's needs, and then opted for an immediate return to the ranch.

His concern evident in the parade of glances speared her way as they drove. He'd made her eat chocolate. Told her the sugar was good for shock. Denied her coffee and instead procured hot tea. Even wrapping a blanket around her in spite of the car's more than adequate heating.

Once home, he carried the still sleeping children to their rooms and ushered her inside before stoking the fires to life. Finally, he made sweet hot chocolate, with extra marshmallows and then joined her on the sofa where he'd suggested she wait.

She hadn't had to wait there. He didn't own her; she could have just gone to her room—they both knew that. But he was owed an explanation. Her problem was deciding just how much to tell him.

Now with him beside her, so close she could feel the warmth of his body, the only sound the soothing crackle of the fire, she knew her time was up. He looked across, his expression grave. "You okay?"

She nodded.

"You want to talk about it? Because while everybody else just accepted the actions of what they assumed was a shocked and terrified young mother, I don't think I'm wrong in assuming that it was something else entirely."

"There was an element of shocked mother."

"Yep, I get that. I know how protective you are of both the kids. Still—Ella, the guy only moved the stroller a couple of feet so he could pass by." He paused. "But you and I know that wasn't the worst of it; that came from what you screamed at him."

"Screamed?" She knew she'd bellowed at the guy. But in her shock, she wasn't completely cognizant of what she'd actually said.

"Something along the lines of, I knew you bastards would come, but you're not getting him, not ever! Not even over my dead body. "

Horror swept through her. "I said that in front of Mia ?"

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“Mia slept blissfully through the whole thing. It’s not that you said it, Ella, it’s what you said. Who are you expecting to come. And why?”

Words gathered, realigned themselves and she tried to navigate her way around them; determine how much to share with him.

“Ella?” He’d misunderstood the slowness of her response, obviously assuming reluctance over confusion. “Ella if you or Benny are in danger this is something I need to know, because that can directly affect Mia...”

“It won’t...” Her words sounded stark even to her own ears.

Holding up a hand to request a moment more, she drew in a deep breath.

“I overreacted, and I apologize again. It wasn’t that—” She paused, tried again.

“The thing is, I’ve always feared the worst, and yes, I do have concerns someone will come for Benny, but deep down I don’t really think it will be anything like I imagined had happened today.

Know it won’t. That would be contrary to their objective.

So, today I guess I was acting on instinct. ”

“I don’t understand... They? Who are they? And how will they come for him?”

“Through the court system, I imagine. Legally. In their minds, at least.”

“Ella, you’re Benny’s mother, how or why would anyone try to take him?”

“For love of the root of all evil, Leo. Money.” Her tone was glum as she continued. “This is information I would prefer be kept between us. It’s hardly a secret, but for the moment we’re way out of the limelight, and the less people who know where we are, the safer Benny will be.”

“Safer? He’s in danger?”

“Not danger exactly, but there’s a risk he could be used in order for others to access his money.”

“You’re saying Benny has money? The kid upstairs sleeping in his crib? The almost two-year-old?” Leo shook his head, disbelief rolling off him in waves. “Man, I was obviously a slow learner.”

She smiled, albeit it wasn’t a full-strength version. “Not just money; we’re talking money with a capital M . He inherited a fortune from the sale of a global pharmaceutical company, and his annual return alone would possibly fund an entire third-world country. A small one, but still...”

Ella sighed, feeling the weight of responsibility grow even heavier as she outlined the extent of Benny’s fortune.

“Yes, my little Benny—my adorable, kind, joyful little man—is heir to a very expansive fortune. And there are people who would like control of him, and in turn, then, they get to control all that money. It’s my job to protect him, to protect his heritage and his inheritance so that he can make his own decisions when he is old enough to manage his fortune himself.

Apart from the fact that it’s Benny’s right, it is also what Emile would have wanted

me to do. ”

A soft whistle hit the air. “Still getting my head around that. Benny? Our Benny? That goofy little teddy bear upstairs is loaded?”

“One and the same.” Outwardly she remained calm, but his use of the word our had caused a worrying flutter in her chest, and it thrilled her a little too much.

She hastened to remind herself that indulging in fantasies can only sustain one for so long, only until the heartbreak of reality once more broke through.

Hurrying on with her explanation she added, “Correct. My sweet little Benjamin Francoise Emile Alphonse Guyon is very wealthy—both a gift and a curse, in my opinion. It began with Benny’s great-great-grandfather, also named Benjamin.

” For the full effect she gave the name its French pronunciation.

“He founded what became one of the most successful pharmaceutical companies in the world. It was sold for multiple billions, and the fortune passed down to his son, Emile’s grandfather.

He , in turn, chose to bypass his own son, Emile’s father, Jean-Luc, and left that fortune to be divided between his only two grandsons and their heirs.

But Emile and Alphie— Alphonse —were both killed on the same day, leaving Benny the sole heir. ”

“That’s why you were singing to him in French...

” She heard the murmured words for what they were—nothing more than a loose fact sliding around in a mind overwhelmed with information that must sound absurd.

“But if Emile and Alphonse are dead, and their father as well, then who could try to claim Benny and control of the fortune?”

“This is the weirdest part. It’s Emile’s last pseudo stepmother, Jean-Luc’s last lover, his de facto, Celine Dupuis. She had intended to be wife number seven; only Emile’s father eventually got smart and stopped marrying them—his words. Not mine.” She shook her head.

“And she’s the one you fear will take Benny? That doesn’t make sense.”

“She’s bitter. And greedy, as is her lazy son who’s pushing her all the way; convincing her she’s owed .

Jean-Luc and Celine had lived together just long enough for Celine to claim part of Jean-Luc’s estate and wasn’t happy to discover there wasn’t much to claim; that he’d been largely living off an allowance supplied by his father’s lawyers that ceased with his death, and all properties were tied to the estate that Emile and Alphie inherited.

Jean-Luc basically had nothing of his own.

As an aside to help you understand, neither Emile’s father nor my own were known for their fiscal responsibility.

Both lived for the moment, never concerning themselves with the future, which is why Jean-Luc’s father bypassed him in his will. ”

Leo whistled. “How the other half live, huh? But I still don’t understand. You’re Benny’s mother—someone who’s not even related can’t take a child from its mother unless that child is some kind of physical or moral danger. Benny is in neither, and I’d testify to that!”

That was the catch right there. Someone who's not related.

Her darling little Benny was fair game. None of this left her mouth, instead she simply followed his lead.

"Thank you and I appreciate that. And yes, I know, it sounds bizarre, but stranger things have happened. All they have to do is prove that I'm a bad mother, or unstable—or financially unable to provide for him—and then apply for custody. "

"Surely, they need more than hearsay? They'd need solid evidence."

She nodded. "I know." Speaking slowly, she expanded. "The thing is, I fell apart a bit when Emile and Alphonse were killed."

"Understandable," he cut in vehemently, and she loved that he was so on her side. But would he always be? If he knew it all?

"It was awful," she continued, letting her head fall back against the sofa, trying not to be drawn into a swamp of memories.

"Benny was so tiny. I was numb for days. I was fortunate that we had brilliant staff, staff who'd loved Emile and Alphie, many of whom had been with them since they were children.

They stepped up to help me with Benny. I was operating on some kind of autopilot, but he was never out of my sight, beside me night and day.

In fact, he was the only thing that kept me putting one foot in front of the other.

But for those first weeks, I struggled."

Deep creases marred his usually smooth tanned brow.

“I’m not really one for throwing anyone’s advice back at them, but I remember you telling me not to beat myself up over things that are done and in the past that were not of my making.

It all must have been a helluva shock. I kinda think you were entitled to fall apart. ”

“Maybe, but in fairness to Emile and Alphie, it may have been more than that. Not sure if I’ve already mentioned that Benny and I were supposed to be on that boat that day?

We didn’t go because Benny was unwell. All I remember thinking that night, the night after it had all happened, was that his dear little life could have ended that day, too, and that was what brought me undone.

What had happened was unfathomable. What might have happened to Benny was unbearable. ”

Leo didn’t toss out any more advice, her own or otherwise; just sat listening, frowning, processing.

Ella continued, “A doctor was brought in, someone we didn’t know and who was completely unsympathetic.

I think the staff assumed it was to get me a sedative so I could rest, but the doctor recommended I go into care, into an institution, which was ridiculous.

Even in my distressed state, that was patently clear.

” She shrugged. “I refused; pulled myself together; and somehow got through. Then,

fortunately, word got back to me through those same wonderful staff members, that Celine had been mooching around, trying to push for me to be hospitalized for mental health reasons, and declaring loudly that she would take Benny. Call it madness, but that day I packed him up and we left.” Memories swirled and tightened inside her, renewing the panic she’d felt that day.

“You have to understand, Leo—they don’t care for Benny, wouldn’t love him...

He’d be packed off to boarding school like his father—and I—had been.

Out of sight. All they want is control of the money. ”

He swore quietly, his mouth a tight line, his eyes bleak. “That’s when you came to America?”

“I was somewhat familiar; my mother and I visited America, and I have dual citizenship. I decided it was better than staying in Europe at the time. I am in contact with Emile and Benny’s lawyers, and some of their senior staff, and they advise me of what’s happening, and how best to proceed.”

“This is why you’re so adamant about not having a casual fling? Because you’re worried that it would harm your reputation and affect your right to keep Benny? Hell, Ella! Why didn’t you tell me? I mean, not that I was proposing a fling—well, not deliberately.”

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She sat forward, willing him to understand.

“It’s not been easy, Leo. At the moment I am living my life as openly as I can.

As I’ve been advised; I’m not in hiding or doing anything that could be construed as secretive, immoral, underhanded, or illegal, but I also choose not to advertise my situation for reasons that should be obvious, and that is my right. ”

Her heart raced and her face and neck felt like they were burning. Usually, the moral high ground felt more comfortable, but right then it just felt lonely and isolating.

Unsure of where his head would go after that declaration she watched him.

Saw his mouth twist and roll, like he was turning over word selections—choosing some, discarding others.

Did he think she didn’t trust him? That was as far from the truth as it could be, but surely, he could see this was bigger than just her casually sharing her backstory?

He’d leaned forward, elbows braced on his thighs, his hands, smoothly tanned, but still worker’s hands, dangled between his knees.

Side-eyeing her, he finally nodded. “You’re right.

That’s entirely your business. And I can’t even begin to tell you how rotten I think this whole situation is, and how sorry I am that you’re living it.

It's every kind of moral injustice. But running right alongside that is the safety of my daughter, and any threat to her safety is my business.

” He chewed on the inside of his cheek. “So, in light of all that I’ve got two things I have to say.

One is, that if there is anything I, or the Halligans as a whole, can do to help you, then you gotta know it’s there.

You just have to say, and we will put every resource we have at your disposal.

And I know you have legal teams working for you, but don’t forget Evie is a lawyer.
”

She hadn’t known exactly what to expect, but it hadn’t been such generosity. Grateful, she nodded. “Thank you, that’s incredibly kind, and I thank you for your understanding.”

“Yeah, well I didn’t get to the second thing yet.”

“Okay...” Ella braced herself, reasonably sure she knew what was coming.

“I guess I need to know if there’s anything else. Is there anything else that you think might be necessary for me to know?”

There’d been no surprise for her in his request, but still everything inside her froze.

It was a direct question. Her mind scrambled for a way to circumvent having to give a direct reply.

Perhaps if she analyzed his wording, she could find a way to respond without actually

being untruthful?

Perhaps if she focused on the word necessary ?

There could be an argument made for answering out of respect, but sharing her secrets due to being of any necessity for him to know?

But this was Leo. Their acquaintance might have been short but never had she felt such innate trust in another person as she had in this man.

Attraction aside, there was a solidness about him that she'd never seen in Emile.

With Leo she felt safe—that he had her back, which was quite a wondrous thing to experience.

She'd never really had that before, despite all the trappings of a life of so-called privilege.

Tommy , the woman who'd practically raised her, had come the closest, but being in her father's employ she'd had to act with caution.

Her father was never around long enough to offer her that kind of support, and Emile?

He'd always been there to talk to, but Emile's life had revolved around Emile.

In their relationship, right from their early teens, she'd taken the role of supporter rather than the other way around.

Which all meant? That maybe she could tell him?

Confide in him? It would be a risk, but Leo Halligan was a good man—and he'd trusted her; shared with her things he'd never shared with others.

So, maybe it wasn't necessary for him to know everything, but what was necessary was for her to return his trust and respect.

And if he rejected her because of it, a little voice posed. Severed their friendship, her employ? Distanced himself and Mia from her and Benny?

The very thought twisted her heart in way that it hadn't hurt so much since the day she'd learned of Celine's plan to get custody of her baby boy.

It wasn't the first time she'd acknowledged the possibility, but each time it hurt more to think of not being part of Leo and Mia's lives. To not see them every day...

However, telling him would remove weight she'd carried from the beginning of their relationship.

Was the risk too high a price to pay for a clear conscience?

But then again, was there any way to move forward with him if she didn't tell him everything?

Their relationship, even simply as nanny and employee and deep down she knew they had way more than that, would continue to be built on untruths.

And untruths had a habit of crumbling—destroying everything in their wake.

She could wait no longer. It was time.

Girding herself, she drew in a steadying breath. “Necessary? I can't think of anything

that—”

A noise stopped her. A sudden intrusion that prompted both to turn toward the front foyer, specifically to the sound of knocking. She went to rise but he held out an arm, eased her back into place. “I’ll get it.”

She heard his frustration; heard it in his muttering as he made to check out who was responsible for the untimely interruption.

The deep growl of another man’s voice filtered into the silence as she waited, thought she heard Melanie’s name mentioned, however, Leo returned alone.

It might have been a relief to see that his expression was no longer merely irritated.

Except that now his face was shrouded in... What? Disbelief? Shock?

It took her a moment to notice he carried a box; specifically, a large parcel.

“I believe you were saying something about there being nothing else you thought I should know?” His eyes never left hers as he handed over the parcel.

And with only a glance she understood his glare. Naturally it was from Abigail, and if she’d been able, she might have laughed at the timing. Timing had never been one of Abbie’s strengths.

Nor was listening. Ella had asked her friend not to address mail to her in this fashion, but generous as the woman was, she also mostly operated with her head in the clouds.

So, one more secret revealed... She’d be lying if she said it hadn’t brought a modicum of relief, and would help for what was to come, though she’d have preferred to choose a different method of delivery and ignored her own pun.

Still, her intentions were sound, and as such, she refused to be embarrassed or cowed by him. Lifting her chin, she replied coolly. “Well, yes... There’s this ... I was about to t—”

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He didn't allow her to finish. "Lady Gabriella Staunton Hawes? Lady Gabriella? " He didn't resume his position on the sofa. Instead, he leaned back against the island counter, arms folded over his chest, legs crossed at the ankle—making a mockery of indolent calm.

"It means very little, Leo. Obviously, you think it makes a difference? That I'm hiding who I am?"

"Well, aren't you?"

"I'm not obliged to use it, and more often than not, I choose not to.

Titles can be as much a nuisance as they can be useful.

Often more so. Great if I want to get into a private nightclub or want a job managing an art gallery in Mayfair.

" She paused to insert a self-deprecating scoff.

"But it also creates barriers, raises expectations, invites judgment, resentment, and assumptions. The added pressure of applying for jobs that multitudes of untitled people apply for every day? Like a nanny position? I'd be laughed at; not taken seriously. "

He made to interject but she needed to make her point; make him see it hadn't been a casual misrepresentation, so she held up one hand.

That there were reasons behind it, solid reasons.

“Would you have employed me if you’d known?”

Many people outside that world are put off by it or presume unrealistically, that I would think I was too good for the position.

” She didn’t add, like you are now , but she was tempted.

He shook his head, but she saw exasperation, not a direct answer to her question. “So, speaking of nannying—and all that experience you claimed to have had?”

“Was exactly the truth. I was indirectly trained by one of the best in the business—the woman who practically raised me, and who nannied my father before me. Nanny Tommsett. Tommy. I had nineteen years of experience, Leo. Right up until my nineteenth birthday when she retired.”

“But—”

“But nothing . I expressly remember telling you that I’d learned day by day with Benny. You agreed it was the best experience. If you’re now questioning anything I have done with Mia, then it’s time for Benny and I to move on.”

He held up both hands, as though trying to calm her. “I wasn’t suggesting that. But geeze, Ella! Lady Gabriella? Are you royal or something?”

“Hardly,” she responded on another scoff.

“The title does allow for invitations to certain events and social occasions where royals may be present, but unless some ancient randy ancestor had a dalliance with someone of royalty— which actually isn’t as farfetched as it might sound —I am not

in any danger of being pressed to take the throne. ”

“Right...”

“My father is Lord Thorvane. Most are merely courtesy titles now, often attached to land holdings. His title dates back several hundred years.”

He was nodding, his mouth still a tight line. “Grow up in a castle?”

Ella frowned, guessing that the questions he was a reaction to having all this dumped on him.

“No, however, when I wasn’t away at school, I was raised for the most part in a somewhat updated eighteenth-century stately home.

Sixteen bedrooms. Stables. A butler. Leaky roof.

Terrible plumbing. Horrendously expensive to heat, and weighed down by the constant upkeep and exorbitant taxes.

The usual for such an estate.” She paused before adding, “Is all this helping, Leo? I know this can’t be easy. ”

“You got that right. You can’t blame me for wondering who you really are. I mean you came in here pretending to be—”

“I need to stop you there. I came as myself, Leo. Someone in need of work that would also enable her to keep her child close to her, anything more are presumed pretensions, and that is on you. Yes, it’s true I didn’t reveal everything about myself, but what you saw and got from the start was me .

Me, the same person who sits before you now. Nothing has changed.”

When he didn’t respond, she continued, hearing the tinge of desperation in her tone.

Strangely, it wasn’t desperation regarding her position with him as Mia’s nanny, but for Leo to see her for who she truly was.

For him not to be blinded by a ridiculous title and guided by cliched assumptions.

“Yes, I grew up in a huge rambling house. Yes, we had a cook—who by the way taught me to play cards. Very well. And yes, we had a butler—who sat with me for hours during term break and helped me understand algebra. Yes, I had a nanny—who was my substitute parent, and loved me, and to whom I shall always be grateful because there were times when it seemed like she was the only one. And yes, I had a privileged education at one of the most exclusive boarding schools in the UK—a cold drafty place that perpetuated stifling, narrow-minded ideals, and is proud to be a dedicated emotion-free zone.”

The look in his eyes gentled, morphing into something closer to sympathy than mistrust.

She cringed. “Leo, I’m not telling you this to elicit sympathy.

Even at its worst, I am very aware my life was still so much better than many others.

I survived and thrived in my own way, and had every material thing I could wish for.

So, yes, our upbringings have been different, and I’m sharing a potted version”—she stopped at his frown—“a quick-and-dirty version of mine so you can see that despite those differences, surely over these past weeks we’ve proved that we are basically just two people who love our children and want what is best for them?

They are what matters, and little else.”

Head tilted back, he peered at her from beneath those long lashes; watched her from across the room—a space of feet that now felt like miles; hundreds of them.

In the life of her fantasies, she’d cross to him, take hold of those folded arms and wind them around her.

She’d lay her head against his magnificent chest and feel his warmth and strength envelop her.

She’d experienced that just once with him and she knew it would stay with her forever.

She would never unknow that feeling; fail to yearn for it, even though she knew it could never happen again.

In her fantasy she’d tell him it all, bare all before him. But an untimely interruption had taken the moment, and the delivery had killed her opportunity for further explanation, and now the mood was all wrong.

She could only hope, that unlike being held in his arms, maybe the right time would come again. Or not. Or maybe she was just a coward.

Irrespective, it was that thought that dumped her on her fantasy like a wave dumps a struggling swimmer. Tossing her right onto the cold sand of reality. Reality that doubled-down in the form of the plaintive cry from above that also echoed through the baby monitor. “Mama...”

That one word... Frozen, she dared not breathe, her eyes never leaving his face, watched his mouth tighten while inside she died a thousand deaths.

Not Benny.

Mia. Mia was awake.

Rising with as much dignity as she could muster, she said quietly, “I’ll go to her. Unless you...?”

She’d half expected him to metaphorically move her aside, surprised when he simply shrugged. “I need to get down to see what progress the boys have made.”

He said nothing more. Just snatched up the hat that had been tossed on the counter and headed for the mudroom. Nothing at all...

*

Chopping wood that’s partially frozen can be easily achieved with the right tools.

A warmed and oiled chainsaw, for example, might do it.

A razor-sharp ax. But it splinters sometimes flies in any direction.

Leo had seen more than one bloodied head injury, and according to his late grandfather doing so was best avoided.

After deciding against checking on the ranch hands in lieu of bit of time alone with his thoughts, his grandfather’s warning didn’t play into his decision to burn some built-up energy. He chose to tackle the logs stacked beside the feed barn. Built-up energy? Or was it frustration? Anger?

Hell, he didn’t even know what he felt. Cheated?

Blindsided? The ax came down at the wrong angle, bounced, and the ensuing shudder ran right up his arm, jarring every muscle, leaving them trampled in its wake until the burn pooled in his shoulder.

It didn't stop him, and he brought the ax down again, this time hitting that sweet spot, throwing himself into this unnecessary task with even more vigor.

Again, his aim was out with the next swing and again he felt the burn, blamed being out of practice as much as being distracted. He hadn't chopped wood since before his rodeo injury and while it had been months, there was bound to be a repercussion or two.

But... Lady Gabriella? Lady? She was titled.

She mixed with royalty. What the hell? His cuss was roared into the ether as he swung down hard again, so distracted by his rioting thoughts, he failed to hear the approach of a vehicle because the first he knew he had company was when a shadow fell across his work area.

"I can get a load of cut firewood hauled down here if you're short?"

Leo didn't look up, merely grunted as the ax came down once more. "I think we're good. Thanks."

JD moved closer, put himself too close to the swinging implement, too close to possible wayward timber missiles—forcing his youngest brother to stop what he was doing.

On a sigh, Leo tossed the ax to the side, and JD clucked his tongue. "The old man'd have your hide for doing that. So, you wanna tell me what's eating you, or should I guess?"

JD knew something. Leo's head shot up, but he gave nothing away. He hoped. "Guess what?"

JD widened his stance, crossed his arms across his chest. "Word's got around about what happened in Bozeman this morning. Ella really took out some guy? For attempting to take Mia?" He shook his head. "That male ego of yours take a beating because she showed you up?"

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Relief swept through him as he eyed his older brother.

That was all he knew? It somehow would have made it worse if the others had known Ella's background while he was just now discovering it himself.

That thought almost gave him pause, something he'd examine more closely later.

Maybe. "Not quite like that, but yeah, she was pretty awesome, even if she has left some poor guy permanently terrified of cute, rampaging brunettes with crystal sharp diction."

"Cute, huh?"

That comment aside, one he ignored, it felt good to talk to JD, and Leo happily corrected the story his brother had heard via a convoluted grapevine that had begun with someone's cousin's husband's son from a previous marriage who worked at the store, all the while sidestepping the other revelations.

"So, she's a super nanny? Gotta be happy with that."

Leo was aware that JD was watching him carefully. They were a close bunch, all four siblings, and they knew each other probably even better than their parents did. "Evie said things looked pretty good between you and Ella. Said you were getting on well. Very well. Everything still okay?"

"A few bumps." Leo ignored his brother's rather obvious hint. "To be expected, but we're working on it."

“Yeah, well you know we all think she’s pretty special, and Benny’s a great little kid.

She was doing it pretty tough before Melanie met her and took her under her wing, so to speak.

Though Melanie keeps telling us that Ella wouldn’t accept any charity, insisted she work for whatever help Melanie offered.

And you gotta admire that. And after today’s effort, it’s even more clear there’s nothing she wouldn’t do for Benny or for Mia.

Considering what family means to us Halligans, that goes a long way in our book. ”

If he didn’t know better, Leo might have believed someone had been in JD’s ear and told him to come down and put a case forward for Ella; to smooth things over between them.

But JD was unaware of his and Ella’s current situation, and so it had simply been divine providence that he’d shared those thoughts today.

Divine , because they’d actually helped.

Helped clear the mist and allowed him to see more clearly.

“I don’t want to interfere, but you sure there’s not something you want to talk about?”

Leo scowled, “Like what?”

“Like having feelings for a pretty little nanny and her baby.”

“JD—”

“Or maybe you just want to rescue her...

“I’m not trying to rescue anyone.” Except maybe myself.

Still watching him, JD sighed. “Okay. Just thought I’d check in on you, but if you’re all okay, then I s’pose I’d better head on back.

By the way I called in on the folks when I was in town.

Told me they were sorry they missed you and Ella the other day.

Dad’s chest cold has finally cleared away and Mom’s itching to get back into the family dinners and to get out to see all these little ones.

Told me she’s missed all three, which was kinda cute that she included Benny, but not surprising. ”

“Knowing Mom? Not surprising at all. So, she’s good for the kids’ birthday party?”

“Yep, can’t wait, but of course she wants to help.

I think she intends to contact Ella for that.

Said she’s been away from everybody for too long, but the best thing for me was seeing the relief in her eyes.

They were staying away so as not to infect the kids or Evie, but with Dad’s low immunity, Mom panics every time he picks up anything. ”

Leo simply nodded, walking the few steps back to JD’s truck as his brother readied to leave. They all worried since their father had suffered his heart attack. And somehow

that reminder brought even more perspective.

JD glanced back over his shoulder. “Sure you don’t need a load of firewood?”

“Nah, we’re good. Thanks for dropping by, bro.”

“Yeah, right. You take care and take care of that lady and those kids. She’s pretty special.”

As JD drove away, Leo stood and watched until the truck turned out of sight.

Yep, Ella Staunton Hawes, was special. One in a million.

And special in more ways than his family could even guess.

Lady Gabriella Staunton Hawes. The revelation was still trying to work its way into his psyche.

But just maybe after that nebulous chat with his brother, it wasn’t as hard to negotiate.

JD was right. Ella was special, and she was special in all the same ways she was special before he learned about her name.

The title meant nothing to her; he was beginning to get that.

But he was man enough to realize what had thrown him so far off kilter.

Was she completely out of his league? That he’d never fit into a life like she’d experienced?

He could give her a comfortable life, more than comfortable, but living like that in that lofty echelon?

It would never be for him and the thought of her going back to that life, to the life Benny's heritage promised—living without him?

That burned and he felt the sour taste of loss.

But why?

They'd both committed to a cooperative friendship. No more... So, why the all the beetles in his belly over the chasm between their social statuses?

And the other issue? Keeping her child safe, having that threat hang over her? It was something he couldn't contemplate. If it had been Mia? Rage began to bubble at even the thought of it, a rage he'd struggle to control if he was in her position.

That was what he should be focusing on; not some breach of trust in a relationship that was so difficult to define even a judge would be hard-pressed to decipher what had actually been breached.

Which begged the question, what were he and Ella, really?

Friends? Employer and employee? Partners in the sense they shared the same goal: to see that the children were safe and cared for?

Two people who should have met at another time and place?

Or just plainly two people hot for each other but who could never act on it?

The thought incited a surge of white heat of a different kind, and he returned to the

firewood. Needed or not, he was going to smash his way through this whole pile. Decimate it.

And he did. Though by the time he'd stacked the last chunk of ashwood, and covered the pile, his right shoulder was screaming. Possibly cussing as well. He'd overdone it, but pain aside, the physical exertion had calmed him and allowed him to view the situation more clearly.

Back at the house, both kids were awake, sitting in their highchairs with a fruit snack, and he fussed with them for a few minutes, warmed by their innocent, exuberant responses before finally meeting Ella's gaze.

As always, she appeared to be in control, but her usual softly golden complexion was now a much paler version, and those beguiling eyes were clouded—and guilt rocked through him.

None of her situation was of her own making.

She'd responded as best she could when forced to make some tough decisions, and only time would tell if they'd been the correct ones.

But for the moment she was doing what she thought best, and it was hardly his place to judge her.

Or make life any more difficult than it was.

He wished the circumstances had allowed her to tell him, but really, what difference did it make?

It wasn't like they were planning a future together.

But if they were? The notion immediately obliterated all else in his head, replacing it with images of them all as a family.

Ella, in his life, in his bed, alongside him as a real partner.

Benny growing up as his son, as a brother to Mia whom he already clearly adored.

The four of them together. Maybe more? The realization had his heart plummeting, was that scenario the one he secretly longed for?

“Leo? Are you okay? You look—” She appeared to be unable to complete the sentence and he understood—because he too would be hard-pressed to name the flood of emotion that had washed through him; stunned him. So many mixed feelings; all suddenly churning inside him...

Would it work? Could they work as a family?

Definitely.

But only in some fantasy world where he was free to make those decisions. And Ella?

Yeah... If Ella wasn't Lady Gabriella whose other life was so different to his own; a life that had the potential to lure her back.

And if her son wasn't heir to a fortune.

Even if he hadn't had his own issues to contend with those were enough curveballs he'd never have expected to see coming at him. As gamechangers went, they were doozies.

Pulling himself together, he offered a grim smile. “Yeah, fine—just overdid it with

the firewood. You okay here if I go have a shower?”

Minutes later, the hot water pummeling his sore muscles offered temporary relief, but it alone wouldn't be enough for any lasting effect, and after holding out until he started to prune, he stepped out of the shower, wrapped a towel around his lower half and reached for the liniment, a brand he'd used through all his rodeo days.

Back then though, there'd mostly been someone, female usually, happy to help him apply it, and it took only a few attempts to realize he was going to have problems reaching the sorest part of his back and shoulder.

An image of Ella flicked into his head, but even if things hadn't been strained between them, he doubted he could have handled her soft hands on his naked flesh, not and keep any kind of control.

Especially knowing she felt the same way.

Huffing back an expletive, he stretched again as far as he could manage, assuming he was imagining things when her voice, soft and pretty—almost a whisper—reached him. Cocking an ear toward his bedroom, he listened again.

“Mia? Are you in here, baby? Benny? Are you pair playing cheeky games?” A low chuckle accompanied the last words, negating any irritation. “I'm coming to find you...”

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Swinging the door open, liniment still in his hand, he smiled at her. “You’ve lost my daughter?”

Her little gasp was cute, and her eyes widened, and continued to grow wider as, whether intended or not, they quickly effected a complete vertical inspection of what stood before her.

Him. And she certainly wasn’t unaffected.

If he’d doubted it, he only had to look at the pink flush staining her cheeks.

“Oh... I... I’m sorry. I thought you’d still be showering. I—”

He grinned, a partial response to the flash of desire he’d seen in her eyes, and held up his empty hand, the work-hardened palm uncharacteristically wrinkled. “Figured I’d been there long enough. But Mia? You’ve, um lost her?”

Her shoulders were taut. Was there a problem or was this a holdover from their earlier discussion?

He hoped it was the latter, though wished it was neither.

“Not lost exactly,” she began, her words choppy, seeming to arrive on erratic clumps of air.

“I... Ah, we’ve been playing hide-and-seek lately and she’s getting the hang of it—as much as an almost one-year-old can.

I changed her diaper and put her on the floor and she crawled off in this direction, with Benny hot on her heels.

He's taken to speed-crawling with her instead of walking or running and they look so cute.

Honestly, it was less than a minute ago.

Thirty seconds!" She shook her head, pushed a strand of hair back behind her ear.

"I'm sorry—you didn't need that lengthy explanation...

I... I'm just pretty sure they came this way. Th... they couldn't have gotten far."

*

What was happening?

He was basically naked. That's what was happening! He was less than an arm-stretch away; well within easy touching distance. And naked.

And she was spluttering. She, who prided herself on her control. What was he doing? Did he think she was made of steel? That towel rode low. All it would take was one flick of her wrist...

What was she doing? Yes, she'd had an emotional morning; experienced all the feelings. Things were still weird between them, unsettled, and yet she was reacting like this?

And goodness, was she reacting... Her face wasn't the only part of her on fire; her whole body was crackling, spitting little sparks, igniting brush fires at every juncture.

Children present! The warning was timely and inching ever so subtly, she widened the distance between them.

She had no choice. With her body heating at this rate she was fearful her fevered state would require removal of her own garments.

Joining him. She ordered her mind to get itself together.

Made a mental list. It's okay. Nakedness is not catching.

Just breathe. This is not a group participation event.

But it so easily could have been.

Despite the greater distance between them, she could still feel the heat generated by his body, feel it reaching across to her and she dared not look back at him.

Whether by silent agreement or cowardice, they both turned to look further into his bedroom.

The sun was almost gone, and the huge space grew gloomier by the second, and she was grateful to have her curiosity sated as she took in this new area of the house she'd not seen before and grabbed that distraction with both hands.

Curiosity, however, quickly became shock.

She was used to lofty, spacious rooms, but one of the things she'd discovered in America was the comparative disparity of house and room sizes between this country and the country of her birth.

Here, they were generally much bigger. This room— suite —however, was enormous

and possibly looked even bigger due to the lack of furniture.

Like so much of the house, his room was basically empty, boasting just a bed and side table.

No easy chairs, no reading lamp or coffee table, no bureau. And it definitely hadn't been styled.

Which made for very few hiding places. Forcing her mind back to the reason for her presence, she was surprised her two tiny charges had remained so quiet.

Placing her finger on her lips she tipped her head toward the bed, then beckoned him to follow.

Better than having him in front of her where she could see every rippling muscle as he moved...

Tiptoeing across, Ella poked her head around the corner of the bed, gently, whispering boo , so as not to startle the two tiny people huddled together like puppies, looking as cute as buttons.

Of course there were screeches of delight. Benny jumped up immediately to hurl himself into her arms, and Mia, right on his heels pulled herself to a wobbly standing position. She'd been doing that for ages, and as always Ella watched her carefully, waiting...

And then she did it!

"Leo, look!" Ella's whispered gasp this time was totally different and heart in her mouth, she held her breath, her eyes never leaving those teeny feet as first one unaided step became two then three and then four before she flopped onto her

bottom. “She’s walking!”

Swooping around Ella, Leo scooped up his daughter, swinging her high. “Hey little one! You did it! Wanna have another go?”

Setting his daughter down, taking the time to settle her before letting go, all three watched on with pride as she took even more wobbling steps.

They were all so excited, all clapping their encouragement, but what brought tears to Ella’s eyes was the fact Mia took those next faltering steps to Benny, her arms outstretched, landing on him when she finally lost balance, giving him a big cuddle that he responded to by wrapping his arms around her.

Tight with emotion, Ella’s chest literally hurt, and she wished she’d had her phone ready to capture the moment, but knew, too, that it was one she’d never forget. Turning to Leo, she wasn’t overly surprised to see the big burly cowboy’s eyes glittering.

Catching her glance, he reached out and slung an arm around her shoulder, and while she knew she should pull away, she didn’t.

Staying there was heaven and hell, his almost naked body right there loosely pressed against hers and taking them right back to that swampy land of mixed messages, of yearning and self-denial.

Yet, pulling away and denying him in such a momentous occasion was unthinkable.

His baby girl would only take her first steps once—as with many milestones throughout life.

This was a big one. And it was because of that she guessed he was momentarily

oblivious to his state of undress, and perhaps also to the tension that had earlier marred their day.

Happy as she was about that, she was under no delusion that everything was resolved, that they'd left it all in the past.

Still on her bottom, Mia was clapping along with Benny, looking very proud of herself, and while they all shared the moment, Ella knew from firsthand experience that the achievement of these developmental stages incited a diverse cocktail of responses.

She cleared her throat, swallowed back an annoying lump.

"It all comes with a price, doesn't it?" she said softly as the two on the floor began to rumble.

"Relief that they're hitting their markers for each stage, excitement and pride—and yet with all that comes the sadness that they're growing up, that our babies are becoming more and more independent; the reminder that one day, they won't need us. "

He blinked, swallowed. "Yep. All that."

"Are you thinking of Hope?"

"Impossible not to," he said softly. "Every time something like this happens, there's this reminder of what she missed, but it's Hope the mother I always see in my head; not Hope my partner.

That used to eat at me, fuel my guilt, but it's getting easier, especially when I see how happy Mia is, and when I see moments like this: with Benny—see this joyful, loving

little being—and I figure wherever Hope is, if she's seeing all this, then she'd have to be happy too. Wouldn't she?"

Ella smiled her agreement. "All those things help. Help us get through each day, especially in the beginning." She cocked her head to the side.

"I like to think Emile is watching over Benny, but while I hope he approves of the decisions I've made, I know I'm on my own with them.

Even if he was still alive, I'd be the one keeping us on a straight road. "

"You were the strong one? Maybe that's what he needed; what he saw in you, one of the things he fell in love with..."

"Emile didn't... I mean..." She shook her head, noted his narrow-gazed interest, and bent to scoop Mia into her arms. "What we should be discussing is how to celebrate this clever girl!"

Leo watched Ella closely, no doubt noting that she'd shut down that topic, and no doubt the reason his smile faded as he removed his arm. However, while she worried that she'd added to his doubts, it was the twist of pain that shot across his face that retained her focus.

"Still hurting?"

Gently flexing those impressive shoulder muscles, he shrugged away her concern. "It'll be fine."

She ducked her head in the direction of the liniment still held in his other hand. "I can help with that." She set Mia back on the floor.

She saw his chest fill, hold, and then slowly exhale, his pupils dilated, and Ella immediately regretted her offer. She'd not been thinking clearly when she'd made the suggestion. Well, her conscious mind hadn't been thinking clearly. Her subconscious? Something else entirely.

Sensibly, he was about to refuse, she read it in his suddenly flat expression, and might have voiced it if Mia hadn't made her way to him and indicated she wanted up .

And if his daughter hadn't used the precariously tied towel for leverage; hadn't accidentally pulled it from his narrow hips.

That, in turn, caused him to spin away from Ella to hold it in place and to reach for his daughter to steady her all at the one time—and that was the cause of the howl of pain.

It was a moment of poetic perfection; a farcical ballet of movement that deserved her appreciation, and she showed that by howling herself—with laughter.

Towel secured firmly by both hands, he turned back to face her. His expression momentarily revealing his astonishment that she found his predicament amusing, before he joined her.

It was just what they'd needed, and a silly slip that brought them both crashing back. And with it came the optimistic hope for Ella that all could be well with them again.

With the little ones joining in, laughing again simply because their elders laughed, she pointed to his dressing room. "Go get some clothes on, bottom half at least and I'll apply that liniment."

"You think we could handle that?"

She didn't need him to expand; knew what he was thinking. And agreed with him. But she'd seen his discomfort. "I could try to do it blindfolded, but that would only solve part of the problem. Wear mittens? You know? No flesh on flesh."

He groaned. "Did we have to use the F word?"

Her giggle felt good. Better than good. "Option three is that I paint it on with the floor mop? No skin-on-skin contact at all. And I'd be at least four feet away?"

"Hilarious." He shook his head. "Nah... Thanks anyway. It's self-inflicted. Maybe I'm supposed to suffer." Shot a lingering look her way, his smile rueful. "More. Suffer more. "

The softly growled words accompanying a look that feathered across her skin; pebbling it, beading her nipples, her entire body aching to be touched.

A pulse began down low and that delicious heat incessantly flooded her body of late, started its rounds again, once more making her face as a beacon.

He noticed... And reached out to gently run one finger down her overheated cheek.

Her breath caught, her eyes closed, just letting herself be in that swirling moment of need and his sweet, simple touch.

"Ella—?"

His voice dragged her back, and she opened her eyes, saw him, remembered all the reasons they couldn't do this. Voice pleading, she whispered, "Leo, don't. I—"

His hand dropped immediately. "I know." His voice was gruff, broken. "I'm sorry. You take the kids down. I'll get dressed. Maybe have another shower. Cold..."

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The evening was painful; exacerbated by the swirl of emotions that the day had brought. Fear, remorse, guilt, relief, elation, and that was without the attraction simmering between them. When it almost boiled out of control again in his room, it only heightened the attraction between them.

Ella expected that they'd both still be in their corners licking wounds after the surprise revelations of earlier, instead they were in their respective corners for something completely different.

All through the meal preparations, feeding and bathing the children, it had been like they didn't even dare bump into each other for fear of combusting.

It was intense. Weird. Wonderful, and painful.

Now with the children asleep, Ella escaped to her own room and as she readied for bed, she resigned herself to what she knew would be another long sleepless night. However, when Mia stirred in her sleep and it came through the monitor on her bedside table, she knew she had a dilemma on her hands.

Leo would want his daughter's monitor. It was something he was insistent on, especially after the night the children had been unwell.

But to get it to him meant going to his room.

Perhaps she could text him and tell him it was on the floor outside his room?

She could, but that would be petty and childish. And sensible.

But still petty and childish. Besides, all she had to do was knock and hand over the monitor, and she'd be safely back in her own bed in mere seconds.

Determined to get it done she jumped up and padded barefoot down the hall.

Despite the door being slightly ajar she raised her hand to knock, but heard something that shoved her very sensible plan out of her head.

Leo was groaning. Her head went straight back to the painful grimaces she'd glimpsed through the evening.

Pushing the door gently she poked her head inside the dimly lit room.

"Leo? You okay?" The sound came from the bathroom, and she instantly she wondered if the groaning could have a more carnal basis, and while her face flamed at the idea, her gut told her it wasn't that kind of groan. But one of physical pain.

Knocking lightly, she heralded her entry. "Leo? What can I do to help? Have you had some pain relief?"

Thankfully, and thus saving her additional embarrassment, her instincts had been correct, and clad in just a pair of soft black boxer shorts, he was twisted up desperately trying to apply liniment to his back.

Without thinking her hand reached for the bottle. "Come out here where there's more room and I'll help you."

"Ella, you don't need..." His protestations were feeble, and he allowed himself to be led, pausing just once to turn to look her right in the eyes. "This is crazy, you know that, right?"

“Sshhh... I’m just going to help ease your pain and then I’ll go.”

“And right there is the problem...”

She ignored him and just kept him moving on.

Though, of course, out here , proved to be a slight problem because the only place for him to sit was on his bed, and once more, pulling on all her inner reserves, and reminding herself that he was in pain and this was an errand of mercy, she guided him there and gently pushed him down, climbing up behind him and began applying the lotion.

All of which, in her head, she’d imagined would be much more clinical. However, once her hand touched him, glided across this smooth, firm flesh: clinical flew out the window, and instinct driven by her own need, took over.

Lost in the moment, mesmerized by the repetitive motion, she realized he was all the things she knew he would be. All the things she’d dreamed in her fantasies. Warm, supple, strong... She heard his indrawn breath, felt his muscles tighten under her touch. Power surged through her.

Saying nothing, she widened the arc of her work area, felt him flinch when she hit more sensitive areas, wickedly coming back to them. Stroking, over and over...

“Ella...” The growl took a second to penetrate, so lost was she in the sensations of running her hands across his naked body, so lost in the desire to turn him and stroke all of him, every inch.

But then there he was facing her, his hands gently circling her wrists, drawing her to him, cupping her face as he brought his lips down on hers: hard and masterful. Possessing her; owning her.

This wasn't like their last kiss, this one spoke to all the frustration, all the fear; the hope; the joy and the denial.

It was passion filled; his lips gliding across hers, his tongue probing, demanding entrance.

It spoke to desperation, and raw need, and she met him there, and poured out all of her own sadness, frustration and regret, purging them from herself for just this one mad moment in time that she would take it and hold near the wonders of Leo Halligan.

He shuffled, stretched his legs around her, pulled her into the V, and she answered by wrapping her legs around him, feeling his hardness against her, and instinctively she pressed herself closer; needing to feel all of him.

His hands roamed over her skin, his touch feather-like, sending sensations jolting through her, pebbling her skin, building heat.

He teased and swallowed her resultant groan of need.

She pressed herself against his bare chest, losing herself in the sensation of his beautiful solidness against her softness.

Her action gave the signal Leo must have been waiting for. With hands under her arms, he lifted them both, rolling them until she was under him. "Your shoulder?" she managed to rasp.

"What shoulder?"

Then his mouth captured hers once more, softer, coaxing, until he obviously needed more. She whimpered when his lips released hers and he gazed into her eyes.

Her heart raced, this man threw shade all over every experience she'd ever had, previous encounters had barely scratched the surface. A sense of rightness came over her that she hadn't felt in a long time. Maybe never.

Definitely never...

*

If Ella thought finally satisfying the longing—that Leo-sized longing—would give her some peace, she was quickly dissuaded of the notion.

She couldn't have been more wrong. Their night—and yes, it had been the whole night—had been amazing, more than amazing; and seemingly all day long she found addition superlatives to describe their experience.

She'd glided into the next day, despite little sleep, and found it impossible to wipe the smile off her face, even when the entire flour container spilled all over the floor while she was baking with the children on the counter helping.

Leo was no better. He'd greeted her with his lazy smile that had been playing havoc with her senses since the first day they'd met, before leaning in for a long slow kiss.

“Good morning.” He'd grinned again. “Now if I was some crass, self-satisfied kind of guy, I'd add something cheesy like, good night, too .

Or great night .” Eyes soft, his voice low, in almost a whisper, he'd added, “But not only am I not crass, neither of those words come close to describing what we experienced.” Lifting her hand to his lips, he pressed a kiss against her skin. “Thank you.”

Words clogged her throat, and she'd closed her eyes, simply let the joy of the

moment surge through her; basking in the afterglow.

And what an afterglow. It felt like so much more, almost like.

... No, it couldn't be and she would not allow herself to entertain such fantasies.

It was just afterglow. She could not be in love with Leo Halligan.

Couldn't and wouldn't allow it, because that would just make everything more difficult.

Especially as she still hadn't confided her biggest secret.

She'd scooped the children up and raced upstairs, claiming to have a busy day ahead.

Anything but stand there and have him see something that she couldn't give, misinterpret their encounter.

Because she couldn't hide her soppy expression, and if he saw it, it might surmise she felt more for him than she dared to admit.

And that would be wrong, she had to remember that.

Regardless, she wasn't up to arguing the point.

If he argued. Maybe he just wouldn't care.

Of course, she'd barely been able to think about anything else all day but them together; she and Leo and their one night. Even now, hours later, the truth continued to nag at her. It couldn't continue. It was madness. They were playing with matches that would eventually burn them both.

Tonight, she'd tell him. Tell him they couldn't go on this way, that once was all they could have; tell him everything. Surely that would be the ultimate lust-quencher. And once the children were asleep for the night, they would have that exact conversation.

Maybe he had the same intention, who knew?

But ridiculously, there was no conversation.

They'd barely sat down, squashed together on that ridiculously tiny sofa, before they were again in each other's arms. Kissing and then sliding onto the floor, sinking into plush carpet, both somehow naked or almost, unable to keep their hands off each other.

And it was just as thrilling, wonderful, and headline grabbing as the previous night.

As they lay panting and spent, Ella attempted a note of sanity. "Leo, we really need to talk. This is... It's incredible but—"

His mouth swallowed the rest of her words. "I know. But tomorrow. Okay? You can barely keep your eyes open, and the kids will be full-on as usual."

Was it cowardly to give in so easily? As her eyelids fluttered closed she figured she'd worry about being a coward tomorrow and accept his offer.

Though, she did refuse to be carried upstairs, not only to avoid aggravating his sore shoulder.

This time though exhaustion drove them—reluctantly—to their own beds.

Sleeping together wasn't an option if they wanted to get any sleep. They had responsibilities.

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And furniture arriving! But then they would talk. And she wouldn't permit anything to put her off.

*

Alone in his room, Leo was suddenly as far from sleep as he could ever be. He wanted, no needed Ella beside him. Not to make love, but to hold her, to let her know how special she was...

He wanted to inhale the sweet perfume that enveloped her like a cloud, wanted to see her smile, to hear one of her sharp comebacks.

Wanted her with him.

Always.

The word came from nowhere, startling him. But maybe not as much as it should have. Not as much as it would have weeks ago when she'd first arrived. Now it wasn't nearly as scary, but he still wasn't sure what it meant, for him, for Mia.

His choice to devote his life to his daughter hadn't ever been a cavalier decision.

He'd thought about it long and hard; talked it over with his sister, Joey.

Of course, she hadn't known about Kristina, there hadn't seemed to be the need to reveal himself quite as pathetic as all that.

He'd come to terms with that incident long ago, but he couldn't deny he'd allowed it to batter him again when Hope had died.

Joey had been adamant that he wasn't thinking clearly: that cutting himself off to potential happiness was foolish.

But he'd been so certain it was the only option open to him if he wanted to give Mia the best life; protect her.

To dedicate himself to proving himself a good father for Mia. That and only that had to be his focus.

Was he still so sure?

Last night and again tonight had been mind-blowing. Like nothing he'd ever experienced. But it hadn't just been that. The sex was a culmination of everything else—like the final cog in a gear designed to make everything run smoothly, the last missing piece.

These past weeks had been without doubt the happiest of his adult life.

He'd imagined himself in love with Hope and beat himself up when he realized he wasn't.

Not truly in love. Not deeply: they hadn't had enough time for it to grow.

The feelings he'd had for Hope, were nothing compared to how he felt when he was with Ella.

Hell, when he wasn't with Ella. She was constantly with him—in his head and in his soul—all the time. Which meant what? That this was love?

True love?

If love was that feeling that you can't breathe properly, that you can't settle until you've seen that person, that you can't stop thinking about them, that you overlook their flaws, that you find them endlessly fascinating— that you'd walk away if that was what made them happy?

The questions hovered...

Like a specter they were just there. Insistent and intangible but present in every other way.

He knew the answer... His chest tightened.

Then yes, godammit, he was in love with Ella Staunton Hawes. Lady Gabriella Staunton Hawes. And he wanted forever with her.

He closed his eyes. He should be jumping up and down with joy. How many people find true love? Someone they're compatible with in so many ways?

He wasn't jumping for joy. He was confused.

Because it still didn't solve his problem. He'd made a promise to himself, to Mia.

He shook his head. And he hadn't even added in the issue of her other life; Benny's birthright. The money.

Shucking clothes as he went, he headed for the shower. This was why he didn't do relationships; why he'd sworn off them. But try as he might, he couldn't ignore the little inner voice, whispering coward .

*

Having lived her life in homes furnished with period or antique pieces handed down through generations, even in her London flat that had once been her mother's, Ella hadn't had a whole lot of experience buying furniture.

However, even she knew that choosing, ordering, and delivery rarely occurred this quickly.

Still, she wasn't going to argue. It would be wonderful to see Leo's house become a comfortable home, one that he could utilize to the fullest extent—and she was honored that he'd left it to her to do quite a bit of the choosing and then also placement.

Thankfully Melanie and Evie had arrived to take the children so as to make the process simpler. Leo remained in the background, cracking jokes and generally enjoying himself while she pondered the best positioning for almost every item.

The timing was perfect. The day after tomorrow was the birthday party, and they'd actually have places for their guests to sit.

Leo had insisted on an outside caterer, even though she'd tried to assure him how much she'd love to prepare the food herself.

Given that there'd be less than thirty guests, she hadn't felt it would be a chore.

In her old life, thirty was an intimate gathering, but she held her tongue. Her old life was something she guessed he might still be sensitive about, and until they'd had the opportunity to talk, she didn't feel the need to wave any red flags.

And as the delivery trucks finally drove away, the opportunity and the time to talk,

finally arrived.

“Um, feel like something to eat? We could try out your new dining table. I know it looks big, but you have a huge space to fill, and with the extension leaf it will pull out to fit your entire family and then some.”

He grinned. “I know, I was there when we picked it. Remember?” He bobbed his head to look into her eyes. “Elle? Are you nervous?”

She shrugged. “No. Yes. Maybe...” She grabbed his arm, tugged him along. “Let’s just go eat, sustain ourselves, and then we can maybe—”

“Try out the new furniture in my bedroom?”

“You want to have sex on your new bureau? Easy chairs? Or maybe your coffee table? Because I’m pretty sure we’ve ascertained the bed is quite adequate, and that was already in place.”

“I was so sure you were more adventurous than that... Gotta say, disappointed here.”

She spun to him, placed her hand on his chest, her tone imploring. “Leo...”

His sigh was so deep her hand lifted under the pressure; the teasing in his eyes and tone immediately gone. “You want me to be serious, I get that.” His hand came up to cover hers. “But you know, maybe I don’t want to have that talk... Maybe I know what’s coming. What we’re both going to say.”

He’d had to ask her to repeat her response because it had been pitched so low she wasn’t even sure she’d voiced the thought. “I doubt that...”

*

The interruptions were becoming farcical.

Ella had heated soup while he made sandwiches, all the while guessing little of either would be eaten.

They'd begun easy, slow—chatting about the furniture, imagining what the kid's reactions would be.

Both nibbling, both knowing one of them had to get the ball rolling and both reluctant.

Leo had thought he'd known what was coming from Ella, but her last comment had thrown him. Surely it hadn't been his imagination that she'd sounded ominous. But then again, none of their chats had been particularly simple, so what the hell?

One thing was sure, after the other day he doubted anything could shock him. Maybe, then, that was the place to begin.

“You said something about—”

The doorbell rang.

His eyes darted toward the foyer—taking in the colorful artworks propped ready to be hung and flash new hall tables—and wondered who it could be.

No one around here on the Lazy H bothered, usually just banged on the door, and if it was family, he'd give them less than three minutes before they let themselves in.

When no one appeared he sighed, and made his way to the door, surprised to see a well-dressed man standing there, until the man spoke and he heard the same clipped accent he'd been living with for the past several weeks.

“Good afternoon, my name is Nicholas Staunton Hawes, Lord Thorvane. I believe Gabriella is here. I’ve been advised that this is where she currently resides.”

Perhaps Ella had heard the voice, but Leo wasn’t surprised to hear her behind him. However, even in her haughtiest moments, he had never heard that icy tone. “Father? What are you doing here?”

He was surprised, though, to see someone else step into view.

Someone who’d remained hidden, deliberately or not, but who addressed them with that same crystal-cut accent.

A woman, middle aged, and oozing wealth—and his heart sank.

It appeared the life he feared would lure Ella away, had come looking for her instead.

“Gabriella dear, I implore you not to turn your father away. He’s been heartbroken over the rift between you, and while he accepts full responsibility, he would like the opportunity to explain.”

Leo turned, Ella’s expression was set, giving nothing away, yet he wondered if he was the only one who saw the glitter of tears in her eyes? It wasn’t a deluge, but he knew her well enough to see she was rocked by her father’s surprise visit, just like he knew that she’d fight hard not to show it.

“I’m sorry, but you have me at a disadvantage. My father seems to have omitted to introduce you.”

And bingo, there it was. Polite, but leaving no one in doubt that Ella wasn’t about to be pushed around—and it was difficult to try and hide his grin.

The woman's mouth twitched. "You sound exactly like your mother," she said softly.

Pulling her fur coat, real if he was guessing correctly , a bit tighter, she turned her attention to Leo.

"It's quite cold out here. I'd forgotten just how chilly these mountains can get.

Do you think it would be possible to continue this conversation somewhere warmer?
"

He cocked an eyebrow toward Ella. It was her call, and her business not his. He opened the doors wide when she responded with a shrug and a nod.

Ella led the way, not to the new formal living area as he'd half expected but out to the informal family room with its scattered children's paraphernalia—but also with a blazing fire and brand-new sofa seating.

Ridiculously, he momentarily mourned that two-seat sofa now off to the side, the one that had allowed them to sit close together.

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Leo formally introduced himself, with the woman returning the favor, declaring herself to be Alicia Wallace, and he noted the quick look she darted toward Ella, maybe checking for any sign of recognition?

Ms. Wallace pronounced Alicia with a sibilant c , not the common sh sound, seeming to give it a higher status, but that might have just been in his own head.

She also insisted they use her first name, and he wished Lord Thorvane would do something similar.

What that what he was supposed to call the man?

In an effort to give Ella time to compose herself he explained about the furniture and the children being away right then, surprised to see the look of disappointment cross the faces of both guests. Following that, the ensuing silence was deafening.

Shrugging he offered, “Coffee?” In the face of everything else it seemed the right thing to do.

Alicia smiled, and he had to admit she was pretty attractive for an older woman. And though ashamed of the typically male thought that followed— that she must have been a knockout when she was younger —he pulled up short mid-self-berating. Just like Ella. Actually, a lot like Ella.

“That would be wonderful, thank you,” Alicia replied, looking across to Ella’s dad.

Ella’s dad, or Lord Thorvane—Leo couldn’t think of him any in other way—nodded

his acceptance as well and they gave him their preferences.

All the while Ella remained silent, simply watching.

The man then leaned forward, “Gabriella darling, why didn’t you come to me when Emile died?” He lowered his voice. “If you’d rather speak somewhere privately, we have a room at the hotel in town. The Graff, is it?”

Leo didn’t lift his head, just kept on with his task, but his breath held as he waited for her answer.

*

Her father looked older, and yet considerably less stressed than she remembered.

Perhaps the woman by his side was responsible for that?

Had he not learned by Emile’s father’s example, and followed Jean-Luc into a sixth marriage?

Her heart hardened. Was his unannounced visit about money?

Or about her hasty marriage, to which he hadn’t been invited?

She lifted her chin. “I have no secrets from Leo.”

She hadn’t meant to look his way, but Ella caught Leo’s smile and wink waiting for her when she did.

And guilt settled a bit deeper. However, she was feeling reasonably confident as the one thing her father could not have picked up via the European society gossip mill

was anything about Benny—except of course his birth.

“No secrets? Oh well, that’s excellent. So, we may talk about Benjamin?”

Ella froze. No, secrets bar that one. That one wasn’t up for discussion. That was something she wanted to share with Leo when they were alone, should have already shared.

Drawing on every shred of dignity she possessed, Ella straightened, crossed one jean-clad leg over the other.

“I’d rather talk about why you’re here and what Ms. Wallace meant by her comment about my mother.

” She looked across to Alicia, unnerved by something like a memory, yet not quite.

“No, I didn’t miss it. But I would rather begin with you, Father. If you’re after money—”

Alicia cut in. “Your father does not want or need your money, nor Benjamin’s.” She’d noted both newcomers had given her son’s name the French pronunciation.

Unfazed, Ella raised both eyebrows, trained her gaze on her father. “And this would be because...? What? You won a lottery? Had a win at Monte Carlo?”

“Because I have purchased Thorvane Manor, and your father is a rich man in his own right, once more.”

That stopped her. Ella knew that place was a weight on her father’s shoulders, but it had been her home. Well, her sometimes home, when she wasn’t away at school. It was where she’d been born, where her mother... She swallowed. Where her mother

was buried.

Oblivious to her shock, her father cut through her thoughts.

“Gabriella, about what happened. I assure you with everything in me I had no idea what Cynthia was doing when she went after your inheritance, and tried to overthrow the terms of the trust. I hope you know that no matter how low I have sunk—and I’m the first to admit that at times I have been down in the sludge—that I would never violate your mother’s wishes.

That money was left to you, in trust, and I would never allow anyone to touch it. ”

“Hm, then how did she learn about it?” Ella knew she was sounding cold, distant, but did nothing to soften her tone.

Her father spluttered, but she recognized genuine confusion on his face and almost against her will she felt herself softening toward him. The perplexed manner was real, even if it was one of the charmingly innocent traits that had women flocking to him.

“I have no idea! Perhaps an employee of our legal firm?” His voice dropped, his eyes tracing a non-existent pattern on the carpet.

“I discovered way too late what lengths she would go to get her own way.” Lifting his head, he held his hands out to her.

“Darling, I divorced her as soon as I discovered what she’d tried to do, and I was hurt that you would think me so heartless as to do that to you. ”

She sighed. “Daddy,” she said her voice partially defrosted, “if you needed money for anything other than keeping yet another spoiled wife in ever more designer clothes, I would have tried to help you.” She saw his face fall, but his foolish decisions and the

results were of his own making.

Timely or not, Leo arrived with a tray of coffees made to order and he'd added a plate of cookies she'd baked with the children.

Chocolate chip probably wasn't on her father and Ms. Wallace's usual afternoon tea menu, but that's what they had—and she smiled her gratitude at Leo, who grinned at her as he took a seat beside her, opposite the other two.

Ella wanted to reach out and take his hand but something held her back.

Her father accepted a cookie and a napkin and returned to Ella's response.

“Well, thank you—and yes, I accept your criticisms. I made several choices I am not proud of, and now I have to pay the consequences of them.” He frowned, “I never really got over your mother. Well, until...” He flicked a glance toward Alicia.

“However, I am proud that when your inheritance comes through, it will all be intact.”

Ella placed her coffee cup carefully on the table, mindful of the fact that Leo had momentarily frozen at her father's pronouncement.

That was another thing they hadn't discussed.

Her own inheritance. Nothing like Benny's but enough.

Her focus, though, was on her father. “I need you to understand that I could not, and would not, just let you fritter the money away. I knew I'd need it for Benny.

So, I could prove I had the means to provide for him. ”

Alicia, Ms. Wallace, frowned and Ella hoped it wasn't due to the cookie. "You received nothing from Emile's will?"

She shook her head. "It was at my own insistence. I guess none of us expected that Emile would be dead before he was even twenty-six, me especially, and I assumed I'd have my own money in due time.

So, it was at my insistence that everything be left to Benny, and I'm not sorry.

I have no right to Emile's family's money. "

The other woman raised her eyebrows. "Very honorable of you, though many would argue you had more moral right than the snake trying to get control of it."

Ella felt suddenly clammy. "You know about that?"

Alicia Wallace kept her eyes firmly on Ella. "We know a great deal more than you'd imagine." She took a genteel sip of her coffee. "But first let me reintroduce myself to you."

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Shaken by their visitor's hints that they knew everything about her situation with Benny, Ella had trouble processing the woman's words, and it took two nudges from Leo and an apparent repetition by Alicia Wallace for her to gather herself.

"Re... reintroduce?"

The older woman smiled. "I wouldn't expect you to remember, you were quite young.

I am your mother's cousin, quite removed biologically—third cousin—but as girls we were rather close.

Like sisters. Until we had a falling out.

"Her voice dropped. "And then of course, there was the terrible accident."

It took everything ounce of self-control Ella possessed to remain focused but to retain her wits enough to follow the conversation. "Yet you didn't think to make contact with me—us—until now?"

She sighed. "It was difficult, which is probably not an excuse. My husband was very unwell..."

"Alicia's life has not been easy, Ella." Her father placed a hand on Alicia's knee as he'd defended her, which answered at least one of Ella's questions.

Alicia and her father were together. More importantly, he was happy—judging by

how much more relaxed he looked—and that made her happy, because despite all his marriages and amours she hadn't really seen him happy for years.

Alicia folded her hand over his. "Nicholas has been very open with me about the—the other women—and the effect that may have had on you, and I agree those were not his finest years." Suddenly wistful, she added, "Perhaps if he and I had reconnected sooner... I wasn't able to have children; I would have loved a daughter..."

Ella swallowed the lump that had threatened to choke her, almost hearing the shattering of her defenses as they crumbled around her—and as though he knew, Leo's arm slid around her, offering his strength, his comfort.

It was the final glance at her father that brought her completely undone. His eyes... Actually, seeing his face, hearing his voice after years of separation... She'd missed him. He'd not been the most attentive father, but he'd always been kind, loved her. Despite his faults, she knew that.

As if sensing the change in Ella, Nicholas rose and moved tentatively toward her, his eyes never leaving hers, his arms outstretched.

So much rolled through her head in the moment, but the overwhelmingly loudest one was that she wanted that hug. Longed to be gathered into him once more and just for the teeniest minute, be his little princess.

Rising she went to him, let herself be wrapped in a lifetime of memories.

It was her father who broke away first, holding her at arm's length.

"Darling, we'd like you to come home—back to Thornvane—we can care for you and Benjamin.

You have no need to work. Benjamin would be able to attend the right schools and—”

Ella shot from him embrace as though propelled backward, His words hit her like a punch to her solar plexus and felt so real it almost doubled her over. “Leave—”

Her eyes went straight to Leo, but his face told her nothing. His expression set, he simply stared at her, his eyes flat, waiting for her response.

But what response would she give? Could she give?

Return to the home she’d known? To the only place she’d felt any connection to her mother?

To the life she knew well? In a weird way it made sense.

Yet, to do so would mean having to walk away from Leo and Mia?

Leave what had been, without doubt, the happiest time of her life? Take Benny away? From Mia? From Leo?

Her heart fluttered, banged, and stalled in turn. Obviously it was as confused as her head. She didn’t want to leave, but what would become of her if she stayed? And worse, what if Leo finally did find true love? Where would that leave her and Benny?

One thing she knew to be true. She could not, and would not , stand by and see another woman in Leo’s life. It would destroy her, it would—it would... All the despicable, painful, destructive things it would do suddenly all blurred and faded...

It would do them all, because she loved him.

Ella Staunton Hawes loved Leo Halligan.

Oh my giddy aunt...

She loved him? Yes, she loved him. Passionately. Every bit of him. His smile, his laugh, his humor, his wit, his honor, his loyalty, his ethics, his trust... And his shoulders, Oh, how she loved those shoulders. His thighs. His face, and the way his eyes twinkled. And the damned hat.

“Gabriella?” Her father’s voice reached her as though it were projected down a long tunnel, barely penetrating.

At the same time, she vaguely thought she heard a phone ping a message. Heard Alicia say, “The lawyer has arrived.”

Heard her father add, “Darling, I know we’ve taken liberties—”

“Pardon?”

“Gabriella, sweetheart,” Alicia began, “as soon as we learned the truth we put things in motion. Yes, we may have overstepped, but now you will be out from beneath the pain and fear you must have been living with these past two years. You should never have been placed in this situation.”

“S-situation?” Her eyes flew to Leo as Alicia’s earlier words crashed through the fog, obliterating it, blowing it away like a bitter north wind. We know a great deal more than you’d imagine... Surely, they didn’t know? How? And if they did? Not now, not now. Not now!

Fear threatened to cut off her air supply, her heart was pumping too fast. Turning back to her father she struggled to get out her words, wanting to swallow them back,

wanting to stop time.

“Dadd... Father, what have you done?” Her whispered question carried all the fear and dread surging through her.

Her father smiled. “Don’t look so panicked, darling, it’s all going to be all right now. Emile had started proceedings, and we’ve located Benjamin’s mother and she’s signed the papers. It’s all been taken care of. No one can take him away.”

“What the—? Benjamin’s mother?”

Leo. At first, she couldn’t bear the incredulity in his voice. Terrified of what she might see in his face, but that had never really been her way.

She sensed he’d risen to his feet and bracing herself she turned, for the first time feeling dwarfed by his towering presence. “Leo, I was going to t—” Her words died. “I can expl—”

But he was shaking his head, his eyes bleak.

“Save it, Lady Gabriella.” Tilting his head back, he scanned the ceiling, huffed out a self-deprecating laugh that broke her heart.

Finally, he returned her gaze. “Just one question. Was anything true? What we had? You and me? Was any of that true? Or have you just been playing a role this whole time? Mia? Was she a pawn in some game you’re playing too?

Are we just a stopgap until your inheritance came through, and then you’d cut out?

” Once more he shook his head. “Well done. I almost feel like I should applaud you. You sure had me suckered.”

He didn't give her a chance to respond, just turned and strode toward the mud room, where she knew he'd grab his coat and boots. And that hat.

In the silence that followed she wanted to run after him, but Alicia snagged her arm. "Let him cool down, sweetheart."

"Oh my dear daughter... When you said there were no secrets, I—we, assumed he knew it all. Darling, we're so sorry. I had no idea you and he—"

Taking charge, Alicia cut him off. "Time for that later, Nicolas. Right now, we have a mission to complete, so go let the lawyer into the house before she freezes—and hopefully something can be salvaged from all this."

*

Only one thing could take Leo back to the house that night—his daughter.

If not for her, he wasn't sure where he'd have gone, but it wouldn't have been back to the place that had finally started to feel like a home.

He could not put himself through even more torture.

Looking into Ella Staunton Hewes's face would only reopen the wound of her duplicity all over again.

He wouldn't do it to himself if he'd had a choice.

The sucker punch to that resolve was that he didn't have a choice.

He had responsibilities—but even knowing he was only delaying the inevitable, he'd checked if Evie could give them some extra time.

He'd then saddled up and ridden as hard, and fast as was possible on tricky, partially frozen terrain.

Not outrunning all that pent-up emotion; burning it up.

But it appeared that nothing was going to blow the last hour out of his head. What had happened?

It almost felt like he'd fallen butt-first into an alternate universe.

Ella was not Benny's mother. The truth burned so deep and hot he swore he could taste the ash of her lies on his tongue.

The knot in his gut tightened. Visions of Ella's face swam before his eyes and he shut them tight, grateful that horses, smarter than their riders, knew where to go.

Dammit all! He didn't want her in his head; didn't want to care, hating that her betrayal cut so deep.

Hating more the questions that lined up, taunted him.

How could she have lied like that? And been so convincing?

And how did something like that even happen?

How does someone just assume parenthood? Had Ella abducted Benny?

The thought started a sick churning that threatened to empty his stomach, and he slowed Boomer to a trot.

He'd thought he knew her. Hell, just the day before he'd been questioning his hard-

held resolve to not allow any woman into his life.

Even wondered if they could make a life together.

Him and Ella. She, Gabriella Staunton Hawes, had broken through his shields as if they were made of nothing more than gossamer.

Though maybe that said more about himself than about her.

Maybe he wasn't as strong-willed as he'd believed he was.

No. As quickly as it appeared he doused the thought.

This wasn't about him , it was about her .

He'd trusted her. Put his daughter in her care! Shared things he hadn't shared with anybody.

Thoughts of his daughter brought yet another swift kick to his gut.

Mia adored Ella and Benny. How was she supposed to cope with them gone from their lives?

His head went to the recent struggle he'd had when Mia had kept refusing to allow him to put on her outside boots, insisting on the fairy slippers Ella had bought her.

Hell, she wasn't even one! The kid couldn't even differentiate between the right and wrong shoes, how was she supposed to cope with the emotional loss of Ella and Benny not being there every day with her?

Because that's where this was heading, to Ella and Benny leaving.

He'd been patient; he'd tried to understand—rationalized her fear of revealing Benny's status; her fear of losing him. Tried to understand her decision not to share her own station in life.

But where did he draw the line?

When was enough, enough?

What else had she lied about?

He swiped a hand over his face, felt the moisture and glanced up.

Snow. It had been clear for days, and it wouldn't be much, but it was enough to make

him turn back.

Funnily enough he hadn't for one moment expected that Ella would be gone when he returned, and he didn't want to examine that too closely because it almost smacked of trust. But the truth was, he knew in his gut that even if she'd decided to leave without his input, she wouldn't go without saying good-bye.

And that in itself didn't gel with what he'd learned about Ella.

From the beginning he'd known she was strong, not in a pushy or manipulative way...

So, in what way? Morally? He'd have definitely said that before today, but now he didn't know what to think.

She certainly wasn't a woman to be pushed around and maybe that's why he knew she'd be there when he returned.

He'd taken his time in the post-ride care of Boomer, timing his arrival back at the house for the exact time Mia was scheduled to arrive, irritated to stride into the kitchen to find her already happily perched on Ella's hip as the woman prepared their meal; Benny playing at her feet with a toy horse they'd bought him in town a few days back.

A few days back when the woman before him was just Ella, his trusted friend and nanny to his daughter, mother to the little dude who was rarely too far away from her—and the first woman ever to make him feel more deeply than he'd ever thought he could. The memory stung, but he leaned into it.

Reaching out, he went to take Mia. "I'll take care her."

Mia, however, had other ideas. Pulling away from her father to snuggle deeper into Ella. “Mama!”

Shaking, her eyes full of horror, Ella tried to disengage Mia, trying to force her into Leo’s arms. But she was having none of it, wrapping her legs around Ella and clinging to the soft pink, fuzzy wool sweater she wore. Mia’s little face turned red as she cried and called for her mama .

In the end it was easier to leave her with Ella, and while he knew none of this was Ella’s fault, it hurt, and he couldn’t help blaming her.

It might be plain petty, but Mia was his child!

Since he’d taken her into his care, he’d been her main person.

And now she preferred someone else? Someone who was about to walk away from her?

“She’s just picking up the tension, Leo. It’s not that she prefers me. She’s been away from both of us all day and now she’s come back to... to this.”

“I thought you’d nipped that Mama stuff in the bud.” Yes, his voice and tone were cold. Accusatory. And yes, he knew it was a stupid, unfair remark.

“She’s a baby, and as I’ve said, she’s simply following Benny’s lead. Would you like me to stop him calling me Mama as well?”

She blanched, realizing what she’d said as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

He could tell by her expectant expression she was waiting for him to ride right in with a scathing response.

How could she not? She'd inadvertently brought up the very thing that had driven the wedge between them, and invited him right in.

But he couldn't.

Instead, he turned away, but not before he saw the relief on her face, in her eyes and he knew that nothing he could say would hurt her more than what she'd told herself to expect.

And that took some of the wind out of his sails.

He was gutted, mad, and rightfully so in his opinion—but he wasn't a monster. "I'm going for a shower. You seem to have this under control—as usual."

*

Dinner and bath time for the children was quiet, even the little ones were wary, and her heart broke when Leo carried Benny upstairs and his little face, confused, searching for his friend in the face of the silent man who would normally be ticking his tummy or carrying him high on his shoulders.

There was the expected fuss from Mia when they swapped children, but Ella knew it would take only minutes for the baby to be giggling again with her father. She'd endeavor to do the same with Benny.

Obviously, their ploys worked, and both children eventually settled to sleep, Ella was pleased that she was the first to make it back to the corridor where she waited for Leo.

He hadn't wanted to hear her earlier, but even if he ignored her and strode back to his room and she had to yell her story through the heavy timber door, he'd hear it tonight.

The sight of her leaning against the wall opposite pulled him up short as he quietly closed Mia's door. His eyes opened wide before narrowing, but to his credit he didn't walk away.

"I owe you an explanation."

"You think?"

"Leo, I know you're hurt, and you can choose to believe me or not, but I was intending to tell you earlier today. Tell you everything. I tried once before as well, and yes, I could have tried harder, and yes, you'd be correct in calling me a coward."

He was the first to pull away from their locked gaze, his eyes straying to the stairs, his voice low, eyes bleak when he turned back to her. "Well, there you go being all wrong," he said finally, "because the last thing I'd call you is a coward."

Despite the depth of her feelings, or maybe because of them, when she felt the sardonic smile form, she let it stand.

Love hurts. "Intimating that there are other things you'd call me?"

"She drew in a long calming breath and began again.

"I'm hardly in a position to argue. Just as I am in no position to expect to continue with our current arrangement; I'm well aware it will no longer work.

"She hadn't meant to pause there, but his eyes had flashed with something she didn't quite understand, but enough to stall her speech and thoughts.

He thought otherwise? No, of course he didn't.

That was just hope making a last desperate call; letting her see what she wanted rather than what was there.

Leo said nothing, his full lovely lips were set, pursed tight, and again she had to shake herself, free herself from the silken bindings of memories of those same lips on her skin.

“But please, before I leave, I’d at least like you to hear the entire story.

Believe it or not, you know most of it but still, I’d like to put it into context.”

Indecision or wariness? She wasn’t sure exactly, but initially it wasn’t immediate acquiescence. After a long moment, he sighed and indicated she precede him downstairs.

They didn’t bother with coffee or any other refreshment, simply chose opposing sofas, facing each other, the fire crackling at their side.

And never the twain shall meet... The quote came from nowhere and something inside her cracked.

If only this had happened when there’d been no furniture...

When they might have been forced into sharing that cozy two-seater, body to body, when she would have taken courage from his warmth, felt him against her one last time.

But there was none of that. Instead, a mere three feet that couldn’t have felt farther away if it had been miles.

“Perhaps I should start at the beginning. I—”

“They tell me that’s usually how stories begin.”

He wasn’t going to make this easy. Strangely, that didn’t daunt her as much as it strengthened her resolve. “Precisely. And do feel free to ask questions; it may make this ordeal less painful for us both.”

She noted that one eyebrow rose, acknowledging her hit, and she drew in air, settled back.

“You already know how Emile and I met, and that we were best friends. To be clear, in an answer to a question you once asked if I loved him. I did, and I still do. However, I was never in love with him nor he with me.”

“But you married him?”

“Leo, you were also prepared to make a life with Hope had she lived, and yet you have admitted you weren’t really in love with her.”

His eyes narrowed. “The circumstances were slightly different.”

“Were they? Wasn’t your own motivation made for the sake of a child? My decision was not all that different, as I hope you’ll see. Admittedly, it was slightly more bizarre. Unconventional. It was the terms of succession that drove us, Emile and me , to do what we did.”

He frowned but he was still with her, still listening.

“Often times in large wealthy families, antiquated conditions placed on inheritance issues are passed down and can’t be broken.

Without going into the legalities, if Emile had acknowledged Benny as his

illegitimate son, both he and Benny would have been disinherited.

And to his credit, from the first, Emile had no intention of abandoning his child.

It's complicated, but his grandfather's lawyers insisted he marry immediately. ”

“Surely they meant that he was to marry the mother?”

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“Obviously, but she wasn’t interested in either the child nor marrying.

She was trying to make it in the music industry and at that time a husband and a child weren’t part of the wild image she was perpetrating.

If Emile wasn’t prepared to take the child she threatened to dump it in a home.

Her words. She was paid exorbitantly by Emile and that satisfied her.

” Ella shrugged. “Of course there were other solutions, solutions Emile couldn’t condone, but fortunately for all of us, despite her lifestyle Vivianne had been raised with strict religious beliefs and continued with the pregnancy.

Anyway, to answer your question, the lawyers had found a way to circumvent the conditions of the will, but only if Emile was married prior to the birth. ”

He was shaking his head. “But why you and why did you agree?”

Her head rocked back at the ill-timed irony of what she was about to say.

“ Trust. We knew each other so well. Emile knew he could trust me with the truth, and I’d never hold it against Benny.

Emile and I had bonded over our having lost mothers and being raised in dysfunctional family situations.

We’d both decreed that if ever we had children, their upbringing would be so

different.

He also knew that one of the things I longed for was a child, children of my own—one day—knew I regularly volunteered for charitable groups who cared for abandoned children.

He had me the minute he told me about the mother's threat.

I'd never really ever been able to say no to Emile, and on top of tapping into something so close to my heart, he'd also caught me at a very vulnerable time.

My relationship with my father had broken down, my only remaining family member, and yes, I was feeling very alone.

The thought of building a family with Emile, my best friend, felt like a lifeline at the time. ”

“So...?”

“Emile and I married, quickly and quietly. What might have been a society wedding of the year was the best kept secret of the year. Not that it concerned me. We went on an extended honeymoon to cover the fact that I wasn't pregnant as Emile was determined that Benny never be afforded the term bastard ; and we hoped we'd be able to pull it off.

Not easy when you're the heir to a huge fortune, but amazingly there are still some places in the world that the rest of the population hasn't yet bothered with.

Vivianne, Benny's birth mother, came with us.

I was the one who helped her navigate her pregnancy, helped her keep it quiet,

organized press releases about her going into seclusion to finish her latest album to cover for her public absence in the last months. ”

His face muscles worked in accord, eyebrows up, mouth down, as he considered her revelations. “Emile helped? He was— involved ?”

It was her turn to offer a wry smile. “I had no delusions nor expectations where Emile was concerned, though I did have hope that with time and maturity he’d become the man I knew he could be.

He was spoiled, as was Alphie. Don’t get me wrong, they were both lovely men, kind and gentle—generous.

But basically selfish, a selfishness born out of thoughtlessness rather than anything nasty. ”

“Feels like you’re giving him a pass, Ella.”

She felt a tiny bit like that herself at that moment. It was the first time he’d called her by name since this had begun earlier that day, and it felt like a crack of sunshine had squeezed its way through a solid bank of clouds.

“Probably. But this is really about Benny now,” she continued, “and my need for you to know how I feel about him, and maybe why...” She sighed, continued.

“From the very beginning I thought of him as my child. I was in the birthing suite with Vivianne. Emile said it wasn’t his scene, couldn’t handle it.

” She ignored the irritated shuffle across from her; she knew Leo would have been at Hope’s side without hesitation.

“And I was the first one to ever hold Benny.” Her voice broke as those memories flooded back.

His little eyes, so dark and searching, screwed up and not overly impressed with his new environment.

The fierce surge of protection that flooded her heart.

The gratitude. And the stabbing pain for this tiny vulnerable being who, at that moment, had only one person who truly cared for him.

“It was the most amazing feeling,” she continued, not hiding the tears rolling freely down her face.

She stopped fighting the well of emotion that needed to be set free, felt the tight band across her chest loosen its grip.

Clearing her throat, she added, “I made Benny a promise that day; I promised that no matter what, I would be with him always, I would keep him safe, love him... Give him all the love he deserved and more. And I’ve k-kept that promise.

” She eyed him directly, not allowing him to pull away.

“And no matter what it takes, I’ll continue to do that, Leo.

” She held his gaze. “I may have regrets about how I have handled the situation here with you, but make no mistake, I have no regrets about what I have done, or what I will continue to do, with regards to Benny’s welfare. ”

Maybe his organs were being difficult as well, because an obviously pent-up breath arrived on a noisy whoosh. “So, let me get this straight. You have no legal claim to

Benny? Yet you just took him? I'm not even going to ask how you got him into a foreign country—”

“There may have been a sleight of hand involved. Emile’s lawyers—now Benny’s—stand to lose a considerable fortune if they lost the right to stand trust over his affairs until he is twenty-five. They know I have no interest or claim to the money and are very squarely on our side.”

He shook his head. “Emile didn’t make any move to have you appointed Benny’s guardian or—?”

“He did, as a matter of fact. Had the lawyers draw up adoption papers, but Emile being Emile, I thought he didn’t get around to signing them. There was always tomorrow with Emile.” Her voice dropped. “Until there wasn’t. Quite literally.”

“You thought ?”

“My father came to share that Emile had signed them. For some reason, he used different lawyers, who knows why.”

“Sounds like a bit of an idiot.”

“Emile was far from an idiot.” She saw Leo building to argue the point and got in first. “Emile loved life and hated missing a moment of it. Alphie was the same and together they were the other’s worst enemy when it came to taking responsibility.

Businesswise they were fine, it was the things they considered to be the minutiae that suffered.

They both shunned responsibility unless it was work related.

That's why I was surprised and thrilled when he stepped up to claim Benny. ”

“I figure I could probably fill in the next bit, and I'm not going to like it, but I need you to tell me the rest anyway.”

“I won't speak badly of him, Leo, and I know deep down he would have eventually settled down and been a proper father—and he was always gentle with Benny when he was around, and he was very proud.”

“I'm reading between the lines here, but I'm guessing the novelty wore off. Maybe at first but...”

“At first?” She tried not to sound exasperated as more memories flooded back. “I suppose, I really, unofficially, became Benny's mother at birth, and loved it, but—”

“Let me guess, you had no choice? It was you or no one?”

She refrained from agreeing, explained instead.

“We took Benny home when he was two days old.” Home to the nursery she'd so lovingly prepared.

“When Benny was three days old , Alphie excitedly told me about the three-week multiple country golf trip he'd planned for Emile—to celebrate fatherhood.

” She shook her head, even now all this time later and after all that had happened, she was still unable to believe how clueless Emile and Alphie had been, but of course they'd had no real role model.

“Naturally, Emile thought it was a wonderful idea, and they left immediately.”

“They... He what? ” Leo sat forward, and she was pretty sure she heard the word jerk fall out of the muttered jumble that accompanied the movement.

“He left you with a newborn baby? His child? To play golf? ” His incredulity rose with each rhetorical question before reaching some invisible apex.

“And yet he messed around about the adoption papers!”

“There were staff to help, and you have to understand they came from a very different world—”

She appreciated that the cuss heralding his interruption was hushed.

“For crying out loud, Ella! You’re giving those jerks a pass and yet you couldn’t trust me with the truth?

” He raked a hand through his already mussed hair, hair she wanted to reach out and smooth, trying to stem the pain of knowing she’d forfeited the right.

“So, what happens now? You’re still at the mercy of these vultures who want control of Benny and his money? ”

“No, actually I’m not. Benny is mine. Officially, or will be as soon as the papers are filed, which the lawyer will do tomorrow.”

Once more his eyes narrowed, maybe suspecting she wasn’t being truthful, so she forged on.

“That was the main purpose of my father’s visit.

To make amends by presenting me with a gift.

His usual modus operandi, though this gift held more thought and value than anything he'd ever given me before.

” It was on a par with having time with Leo Halligan.

Gain one precious gift, lose one. The acceptance came with a twist to her insides so hard and fast it truly stole her breath, but she really only had herself to blame.

Fate needed a good swift kick in the rear end sometimes.

“You need to explain.”

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She strove to pull herself together. The elation of seeing the signatures on those papers buoyed her.

“The lawyers Emile used to take care of the adoption had tracked down Benny’s mother.

Signing adoption papers to make me Benny’s legal guardian was a no-brainer for her.

” Ella’s voice cracked once more. “S-she didn’t even want to...

to...” She struggled to complete the sentence. “To s-see him.”

She couldn’t permit herself to think too much about Vivianne not wanting to see Benny; instead, she tried to stay objective.

But it was the one thing she couldn’t understand, even though she was grateful the woman would and could never make a claim on her son— the lawyers had wrapped that up tighter than the King’s security detail would manage .

Vivianne’s disregard for Benny left a bruise.

She could justify that it was for the best, less opportunity for regrets, but Vivianne’s attitude completely baffled Ella.

It was as though Benny’s legal guardianship was just one of those nuisance things that had to be dealt with. Like filing a tax return.

Wiping away her tears with her bare hand, she shouldn't have been surprised to be handed the tissue box, but more surprised when Leo lingered for just that minute too long—like he was debating whether to offer more comfort than just a box of unscented absorbent paper—but the side of him that was still unsure of her obviously won, and he moved back to his place on the opposite sofa.

Eventually he would find another nanny. Move on. But could she?

Ella couldn't think of anything she'd left out, and as she'd said, he'd already known most of it.

It was an age before he spoke, breaking the heavy silence, finally clearing his throat, the sound loud in the where the only sound was the crackle of the fire.

His voice though, was low carrying more pain than reproach.

“I'm still trying to get my head around why you lied to me.

All those weeks... You know how I feel about Mia; how I feel about all kids—Benny included.

” He shook his head, corrected that thought.

“ Especially Benny. He's such a great little kid, and I-I—” Her eyes lifted to his face as he stumbled over the next word, and she waited.

Had he been going to say he loved Benny?

And why not? She loved Mia. Whatever his thought, he didn't elaborate.

“You know what I mean. Kids are special; they need our protection. I would have

understood. Hell, I'd fight for the little guy myself! ”

She offered a half smile of gratitude, but knew he wasn't done.

The weariness of the day was beginning to take its toll, and her own voice was soft, low, when she replied.

“It was so messed up. So complicated. You have to remember I'd had to guard this secret with not just my life but Benny's.

Other than two senior lawyers, not one other soul knew the extent I'd had to go to ensure his safety.

Not even their assistants. The words had never passed my lips.

Doing so had the potential to put Benny in danger.

In fairness though, if the position you'd offered me was one running a cash register in your general store, would you have still expected me to open up about all this? ”

His gaze speared her. “I guess that would depend on whether you were also living under my roof; whether you were beside me in my bed.”

Her face heated. “That's not fair and you know it. This thing, you, me—us—is new; it developed. It wasn't there right at the beginning.”

“Believe that if you want, sweetheart,” he growled lightly, sending her body into a swirl of rippled sensation that pebbled her skin, hardened her nipples, brushed featherlight imaginary caresses across her body. “It was there, we just didn't act on it until now.”

What could she say to that? When his piercing gaze finally released her, she felt like she was falling, and she gripped the arm of the sofa.

Both alarmed and grateful when he stood and went to the kitchen only to return with two bottles of water.

Closing her eyes she took a moment to gather herself once more.

Would being with Leo always be this roller coaster? Sadly, she'd never know.

What she did know with everything in her was that before she left him for good, she needed to know she had regained his respect. Even a small amount.

Accepting the water, she waited until he was reseated.

“Leo, I have to say this, and I know I have no control or expectation of how you should respond, but it's vital for me to say this.

At no time did I intentionally set out to deceive you, I never wanted to break the trust you had placed in me.

As time moved on, and we became... closer, I knew I owed you the truth.

Not because you were owed it for any other reason than because of the respect I have for the relationship we'd built. ”

“I think I need time.”

Ella's heart plummeted. Now what?

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Leo strode toward the stables, his head reeling with everything that had happened in the last few hours. The last few months! Ever since he'd heard about Hope and Mia, and now there was Ella and Benny, and enough feelings pressing in on him to start an avalanche.

Not sure his shoulder could take much more punishment, he decided to check on Boomer and maybe give him another rub down. He'd ridden his horse pretty hard.

The truth wasn't something he wanted to examine too closely, but how else could he get to the bottom of his feelings for Ella?

Sure, he was hurt, and he wished she'd trusted him, and at the same time, he wondered what he'd have done in similar circumstances.

But another annoying part of his brain insisted on pointing out that she wasn't who he thought she was.

That the woman he was falling for wasn't the woman he'd thought he'd thought her to be.

Falling for? Boomer sensed his mood and shifted restlessly.

"You in here, brother?" Jack called from the stable door.

"Yeah." Leo really didn't want to talk with Jack right then, but he figured there wasn't much choice. "What are you doing here at this hour?"

“Just taking a minute to escape the wedding preparations. Those women!” Jack shook his head, but his brother was grinning. “What’s up? You’ve got a face as long as a wet week.”

“Nothing.” He sure wasn’t going to talk to his brother about this. Not this brother. Maybe he could talk to JD. Giving up on grooming the fidgety horse, he left the stall and put the brush back where he’d found it.

“Yeah, right.” Jack paused and peered at him. “Is everything alright with Mia? Ella and Benny?”

“Yeah, everyone is fine. Too fine.”

Jack’s smile expanded into a knowing grin. “So, you’re finally willing to admit that Miss Ella has gotten under your skin.”

Before he knew it, he found himself confessing. “Yeah, but it will never work. She’s from a rich English family. She’s a Lady .”

“So what? If you’re into her, and she’s into you...” Jack paused, “And I’ve never seen anyone take to a kid as if it were her own like Ella has with Mia.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

Jack frowned at Leo’s muttered words. “Sounds like there’s more to that story.”

“Yeah, there is, but it isn’t my story to tell.” Leo let out a long sigh, “Let’s just say she’s way out of my league.”

“Oh, and Liberty isn’t out of mine?”

Leo stared at his brother. His confident devil-may-care brother whose fiancée was an A-List actor. “Does it bother you?”

“What, that my intended is a movie star?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Not anymore.” Jack sighed, “It did at first. Then it didn’t. And now it definitely doesn’t.”

Deep down Leo was hurt and not sure he was ready to just forgive, or maybe it was he didn’t know if he could forget .

He didn’t even know if she’d shared all the puzzle pieces.

His swirling thoughts were driving him mad, and he really didn’t want to talk about it.

Leo thrust past his brother, “Gotta get back.” Leo left Jack standing in the walkway of the stables and headed back toward the house and his empty bed.

*

Ella felt like she’d not had a wink of sleep, but as the sun was shining in through the window she realized she must have dozed off at some point. Jarred out of her exhaustion, she jack-knifed up to peer into the crib.

“Benny?” She was out of the room and racing down the stairs before she’d uttered the last syllable of his name. The house was utterly empty, and panic had Ella’s throat in a vice-like grip.

“Oh my god, please, please.” She raced back up the stairs and straight into Mia’s room.

Bent double Ella sucked in air, trying to get hold of herself.

How could this happen? Spinning, she ran, barely registering her state of undress and lack of footwear as she raced back down the stairs and out into the freshly fallen snow until she reached the spot where her car was parked.

And Leo’s was not. Chest aching, she forced herself to stop.

Of course, Leo had the kids.

It was fine.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted one of the ranch hands leaving the stables. She waved him down and called out. “Is Leo over there?”

Even from a distance she could see the shocked look on his face, and she recalled she was dressed only in sleep shorts and a tee. “Ah no, I think he’s over at JD’s. I saw his truck there earlier.”

“Thanks,” Ella called even as she turned and made her way barefoot through the thin layer of snow covering the path, shivering with both cold and reaction.

She spent next to no time on her morning bathroom routine, and reached for yesterday’s clothes, dragging them on over her shivering body. Back at the front door, she shoved her freezing feet into socks and boots before snatching up her keys and running out to her car.

Thankfully the snowfall wasn’t enough to make driving dangerous, but she resisted

the urgency racing through her and drove carefully to Evie and JD's.

Her erratic heart beat plummeted when she saw no sign of Leo's vehicle.

Hopefully Evie or JD would know where he was, and where the children were. Where Benny was.

She shut off the engine and raced up the front steps to knock on the old homestead door. Her pulse was fluttery as she listened to the footsteps approaching.

"Ella." JD's expression was blank.

"Is B-Benny here?"

"He sure is, both he and Mia are helping Evie with seating plans. No idea how that's gonna work, but I decided my input was not required."

Ella's legs turned to jelly, and she started to sink; only JD's quick reflexes stalled her downward trajectory.

"Ella? Are you okay?"

"Yeah." She forcibly locked her knees. "Ah, can I come in?" She just needed to see Benny.

"Of course. Come on through."

JD didn't let go of her arm, instead he guided her along the hall, the sound of Benny chattering and Mia's garbled imitation brought tears to her eyes.

Evie, Benny, and Mia all looked around at her.

“Mama,” Benny was the first to speak, his smile wide and totally normal. He was fine, Benny was fine.

“Mama,” Mia copied Benny, grinning first at Ella, then at Evie, obviously delighted with herself.

“JD, can you watch the kids for a bit?” Evie got up from her seat, and Ella absently took in the large sheet of paper on the table with a scattering of pink, purple, and mauve squares arranged in patterns. Patterns that Benny began distributing to his own liking.

“Sure can.” JD immediately took Evie’s vacated seat. “Right, Benny, what do you think, shall we put...”

Ella didn’t hear the rest as Evie guided her out of the room and into a cozy sitting room. “Sit, now can I get you a hot drink?” Evie’s eyes scanned her face, “You look like you’re in shock.”

Ella lowered herself down onto the settee. “I—I’m okay, I just woke up and everyone was gone. I sort of panicked.”

“Leo said you needed to sleep in. So, he dropped the kids off.”

Ella’s jaw ached as tempest of emotions threatened to erupt inside her.

Relief, anger, resentment, fear, and doubt swirled in an ever-strengthening vortex that wanted to pull her under.

Why hadn’t he left her a note? Not that she’d even thought to look for one, but couldn’t he have pinned one to Benny’s crib?

Or Mia's? Or the bathroom door for that matter.

"Ella?"

Ella sprung up, she had to find him, to explain. She might have to leave the Lazy H, but not before she laid everything out for Leo. Made him understand.

"Ella, what's going on?"

"Can you look after the kids a little longer? I need to find Leo."

"Yeah, sure, but Leo's gone to his other property."

The news of Leo having left the ranch deflated Ella, and she sunk back down, folding over until her forehead rested on her knees.

"I'll make coffee."

By the time Evie returned with two steaming mugs, Ella had decided she had to confide in someone, and level-headed, lawyer Evie was likely the best person for the job.

"Everything has fallen apart." Even as she uttered the words, she heard the melodramatic tone and wasn't surprised at Evie's wide-eyed questioning gaze. "My life has been in turmoil for the last few years."

"Dealing with the death of someone you love is never easy." Evie's words held a note of pain, and Ella remembered she'd been a friend of Hope, Mia's mother.

"Oh, it went down the toilet before Emile died." Ella couldn't help her maudlin tone.

No, she needed to stick to the facts. “Benny is not my biological son. I married Emile so he could meet the terms of his grandfather’s will.

Any illegitimate offspring could not benefit under the terms of the estate.

So we, Emile and I married, and I was to adopt Benny.

His birth mother wanted no part of having a child.

Emile and his half-brother, Alphonse both died in an accident, leaving Benny the beneficiary of the family fortune, and the adoption incomplete.

At least that’s what I believed. My father turned up yesterday with the lawyer Emile engaged to handle the adoption, and it only needed my signature.

So, I’m now officially Benny’s adoptive parent.

” Ella stared down into the fast-cooling coffee as she spoke, but on the last, she looked up to see Evie digesting all the information she’d just dumped on her.

“I see, and you kept all this a secret because...”

“Because there are people who wanted to control the money, and I dared not give them any opportunity to get Benny. Emile’s lawyers were working on finding a way forward, and I brought Benny to America while they did so.

Unbeknown to us all, Emile had used a different law firm for the adoption, and they couldn’t find me.

Everyone suspected everyone else of underhanded behavior and no one trusted anyone else. I only wanted to keep Benny safe.”

Evie shook her head slowly. “And Leo?”

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“I wanted to tell him, I was about to when my father and his latest paramour, who is a distant cousin or something, and seems quite decent, turned up and revealed that Benny wasn’t my birth son. Leo is understandably upset by being blindsided.” To her dismay a tear trickled down her cheek.

“Oh, Ella.” Evie rounded the coffee table and sat beside her, dragging her into a sideways hug. “Leo is a good man, give him time to digest it and he’ll understand.”

“I think it’s too late. There’s been too much I held back. I should have trusted him. I do trust him. I was just afraid.”

“You know you need to be telling him all this, don’t you?”

“Yes, and I intend to, but he’s not here.”

“He’ll be back this afternoon. Why don’t you let me look after Benny and Mia you go upstairs for a sleep. You look as if you haven’t slept in a week.”

Ella hesitated. She was utterly bone-weary. “I can take them home.”

“No, you look exhausted, the kids are having fun, and you’re not driving until you’ve had at least an hour-long nap.”

“Are you sure?”

*

It was late by the time Leo stepped into the kitchen to find the entire island counter covered in papers. He moved closer and realized they were some kind of official documents.

“What the heck is all this?” Though he muttered the question aloud, he didn’t expect anyone to answer.

“That’s everything pertaining to Emile, Benny, and me.”

“Why is it all over the kitchen?” A part of him wanted to just ignore the entire Ella-and-Benny situation and head upstairs, kiss his daughter, and get some sleep.

He hadn’t slept at all the night before, and a day spent inspecting his cattle and discussing plans with the manager of his other property as well as driving an hour and a half each way, had worn him out.

And that was without the mental gymnastics his brain had forced upon him; he was plum tuckered out and not in the mood for a verbal sparring match with Ella.

“Because I want you to know everything.”

Leo sighed and leaned a hip against the counter. “There’s more?”

Ella froze, her eyes huge in her pale face. “No, not more, just total transparency.”

“Bit late for that.” Leo didn’t even try to keep the bitterness from his tone.

“It may be too late, but it’s all here, in all its complicated entirety.

I wish I’d confided in you. I have no excuse and I’m not trying to justify my decision.

I don't expect you to forgive me, but before I go, I want you to have the opportunity to know everything. It's up to you if you read it or not."

The only sound to follow her words was the receding pad of her feet as she left him with the array of paperwork. His eyes went to the sheet directly in front of him.

If Leo thought his head was spinning before he'd started in on the convoluted legalese spread out before him, he now knew that was just an appetizer.

It was complicated and it was simple. Benny was the sole beneficiary of both his father and his uncle's estates, and the end result was the two-year-old controlled a family fortune beyond even Leo's comprehension.

And Leo wasn't sure what to do with the information, or where it left him and Ella.

Did he even want there to be a him and Ella ?

Deep down, he still feared he didn't know her, but she'd laid not only her soul bare to him, but she'd also given him access to all the legal wrangling she'd been forced to endure.

And she'd done it all for Benny. A child she'd sworn to love and protect.

He got that. What right did he have to judge her decisions?

Would he have done something similar if he'd been in the same circumstances as Emile?

Married the one woman he could trust to keep his secrets and care for his son?

Without a doubt he knew he could trust Ella with Mia's life, but could he trust her

with his heart?

He began to put the scattered paperwork into a pile, his mind swamped with information. When the countertop was clear of all of Ella and Benny's legal documents, he grabbed a beer from the fridge and propped a hip against the sink and stared unseeing at the stack of papers.

"Do you mind if I have one of those?"

Leo jerked his head up to see Ella standing in the doorway. "Sure." He turned and grabbed her a bottle and opened it before handing it to her. Their fingers brushed and a tingle ran up his arm, straight to his heart.

"I'm sorrier than you can ever know Leo. I know I should have told you, but in the beginning, I didn't know how my feelings for you would grow."

His gaze flew to meet her beautiful hazel eyes, saw something in their depths that sent his pulse racing.

"Look, I get it. I understand why you had to protect Benny, but we were... something, weren't we?"

"Yes, of course w-we were. I still am." Ella sucked in a deep breath.

"If I could go back, would I do things differently?" She nodded and then shook her head.

Which only served to confuse him even more.

"I would still do everything within my power to keep Benny safe, but I'd have trusted my instincts and told you.

Because you're everything I wish Emile could have been.

Because in a few short weeks, you have been more Benny's father than Emile ever was.

You're the man I wish I had met before I agreed to Emile's arrangement.

But then I wouldn't have Benny, and I'll never give him up. ”

Leo's pulse sped up as he took in her words. Where was she headed with this?

“Leo, you are everything any mother would want in a man to guide her son in life. You are caring, trustworthy, hardworking, honest, and loving.” Her voice hitched on the last, “And I know I've blown it, but I have to tell you that I love you, and I'm so, so, so sorry for not trusting you.

” Their gazes held, and then her lip trembled and she set the untasted beer on the counter, and picked up the stack of papers.

“I'll, ah, leave in the morning if that's okay. Benny is already asl—”

Leo placed his own beer on the bench and was around it before he even realized he was intending to move. He pulled Ella into his arms, squashing the documents she held between them.

He leaned back, plucked the papers from her fingers, and put them down beside her discarded bottle. “This stuff is never going to come between us again. And you are not going anywhere. Not tomorrow, or any other day. You and Benny belong here with Mia and me.”

Ella's eyes swam with tears even as a tremulous smile curved her luscious lips.

“You want us, me , to stay.”

“That’s right. I ain’t ever lettin’ you go.” Then he lowered his mouth to hers and pulled her close. After a moment, he drew back. “Um, that is unless you have more secrets we need to get out of the way?”

Her eyes twinkled. “Nope, not a one.”

“Good, ’cause I do. But I don’t think it’s much of a secret.” His face softened. “I love you Gabriella Staunton Hawes, and I love Benjamin Guyon. And I want you both to stay here with me, forever.”

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Ella tied the bows on Mia's sundress, lifted the newly walking toddler down from the changing table, and took her tiny upstretched hand. But before Ella could nab Mia's hat from the bureau, the little girl was off, gorgeous curls bobbing, headed for the door and back to the party.

"Whoa there." Leo blocked his daughter's way. "What's your hurry?"

"Dada." Mia greeted him, but intent on rejoining the fun she'd been forced to leave temporarily in order to have her diaper changed, she kept her desired trajectory.

"She's in a hurry," Ella told Leo needlessly.

"I can see." He took Mia's other hand and together the three of them started down the stairs and outside to join the entire Halligan family and most of the crew from the Lazy H along with a few extras who were quickly becoming part of the same.

Doreen and Liberty were seated side-by-side and chatting with Melanie and Evie.

Several other small clutches of replete people sat sipping on beers or non-alcoholic beverages and chatting.

The group that drew her attention consisted of JD, Nash, her father, and Alicia.

The impromptu party had been arranged to celebrate Ella's legal adoption of Benny.

As well as a little something the guests didn't yet know about.

Mia pulled free and giving up her slow progress, she race-crawled across the grass to join Benny and Ruby, who was sitting in the lee of her mother's legs, giggling as Mia almost faceplanted into Joey's shins. Thankfully Joey's reflexes were well honed and she caught her niece before she connected.

"Whoops." Joey laughed, as she lifted Mia upright to stand on her pretty white shoes.

"She's still reverts to crawling when she's in hurry, and she's not used to walking in shoes." Leo explained to his sister.

"Well Miss Mia, you'd best get used to it, shoes are a girl's biggest weakness." Nash wandered over to join his fiancée and his own baby girl.

"Mia isn't going to be worried about shoes, or fashion. She's going to be a cowgirl, aren't you, my cherub?" Leo swooped in and picked up a delighted Mia who squealed as he tossed her up and caught her again.

Before he'd lowered her to the ground, Benny was tugging at his denim-clad leg. "My turn, Dada."

Leo didn't hesitate, he just made sure Mia was steady before he turned, lifted a much bigger Benny, and tossed him up.

Ella's heart ached with a bittersweet mix of happiness and sorrow.

Neither Benny nor Mia would ever know their respective missing parents, but they would know love and acceptance in this big Halligan family.

They would grow up secure in the knowledge that those missing parents had entrusted their welfare to the people who they knew would love and protect them with the very lives.

And she and Leo had learned that they could trust everything to each other.

And, that their new secret was one they wanted to share with everyone.

Ella shook her head, talking to her friend and Nash's mother, "I can't believe you and Doreen pulled this together so quickly."

Melanie just shrugged, "We all love a good party."

When Leo had given both Benny and then Mia another turn at the new game, much to a watching Ruby's delight, he shot a quick questioning glance at Ella, who nodded. With a wide smile, he turned to face his friends and family.

"Ah, listen up folks..." He paused to beckon her closer. "Ella and I have an announcement."

"Let me guess," Jack called out. "You're having a baby?"

"No!" Ella sounded shocked.

"Give them a minute brother," JD spoke over her.

"No." Leo grinned, then he paused and peered at Ella's pink face. "At least I don't think so..."

"Of course we aren't." Ella rushed to rectify the derailment of their announcement, "We're getting married."

Leo laughed, "Only this family could turn our engagement announcement into a crazy, totally off-track, conversation." With a wry shake of his head, amidst the cheers and catcalls, he pulled a small box from his pocket and went down on one knee.

“Gabriella Staunton Hawes, I know you’ve already said yes , but I’ll give you one more chance to escape, will you do me the honor of becoming a legal part of the Halligan family?”

She caught her breath at the sight of the beautiful diamond solitaire.

“You said we’d get one together, but this moment is so perfect and so is the ring, and, yes .

” She wondered if her smile was as brilliant as the diamond he slid on her finger.

With their future beckoning so brightly, surely it had to be. “Yes, Leo. I’d love to.”

THE END