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The Barbeque

“Mom, I’m late! Have you seen my windbreaker?”

Kelly opened the mudroom door and pointed. “Hanging up – where it should be.” She took it off the hook and handed it to her anxious daughter.

“Thanks.” Esther wrapped the jacket around her waist and tied the sleeves together.

“Honey, it’s nice out. Why do you need a jacket, anyway?”

“Sometimes we ride near the beaver pond – there’s always mosquitoes and horseflies down there.”

“You have your boots?”

“In the car.” Esther checked in her purse. “Can I have money for gas?”

“I gave you my card the other day!”

“Mom, that was last week. I’m down to less than a quarter of a tank.”

Roger came in from the garage, interrupting the mother-daughter discussion. He looked at his watch. “I thought you were going horseback riding today?”

“Yup. Then Jami’s dad is grilling. I won’t be home ‘til this evening. Um... Dad, do you have any cash on you?”

Kelly twisted her mouth and gave her daughter the evil eye. “Esther, you just asked me for money.”

“I’ve got this...” Roger took his wallet from his back pocket. “How much do you need? Will a twenty be enough?”

“Yes! Thanks!” She took the crisp bill and stuffed it in her jeans pocket. “Okay, I’m gone!” She hugged her dad and kissed her mom on the cheek. As she walked out the door, she called over her shoulder, “Tally-Ho!”

Kelly stood at the doorway and watched their daughter get into her car. Roger came up behind his wife and placed his hands on her shoulders.

“She likes her car.” She leaned into him. “It’s... her!”

Roger questioned the bewildering statement. “It’s *her*?”

“Yes. It fits her. You even said...”

“Yeah. When she saw it, she didn’t want to keep looking.”

Kelly shrugged one shoulder and pressed her cheek on his hand. “She always knew what she wanted.”

Esther started the engine of her sporty Nissan Juke and waved to her parents through the open sunroof. She put the car in gear and drove off.

“I would have gotten her a newer car, but...”

“I know. But like I said, it’s *her*.”

Roger leaned down and hugged his wife. “So...”

Kelly turned her head and cuddled into his chest. “So... what?”

“Really?” With one hand, he pushed the tangle of auburn waves behind one ear and kissed her cheek. Then, making her turn around, he leaned into her and, tipping her head back, made love to his wife with his tongue.

Kelly pushed him away with one hand pressing on his chest – then, putting both hands around his waist, pulled him close and returned his passionate kiss.

Without saying another word, Roger locked the door and, taking her hand, pulled her through the mudroom and into the kitchen. He lifted his wife, carried her up the stairs to their bedroom and, setting her on the bed, announced, “Woman, we are without children... for the afternoon!”

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Esther’s compact car kicked up plumes of dust as she drove too fast down the long gravel road. She was eager to ride her horse. Okay, it wasn’t really her horse, but since she and Jami had become friends, Sonney was the only horse she rode.

She pulled up to the house. Her friend’s mom was out on the porch and waved at her. Esther got out of her car and waved back.

“Jim brought the horses in from the pasture. I think Jami’s still in the barn.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Mitchell.” Esther felt like this was her second home ever since she started spending so much time at the ranch. She reached in the back seat and retrieved her riding boots and, sitting on the raised garden brick, quickly changed out of her sneakers and into the custom cowboy boots her dad bought her. She took a minute to say *hi* to Bailey, their small collie mix dog, and giving him one final tummy rub, left for the barn.

Jami spotted her friend. “Hey, Annie Oakley!”

Esther entered the small barn. “Hey, Calamity Jane!”

Jami put down the brush she was using on her horse, then led him out of the barn. Esther picked up the stiff brush and, grabbing a mane comb, followed her friend out the door to the paddock. Her horse was waiting by the fence.

“Hi Sonney...” Esther pulled apple pieces from her shirt pocket and held them out to the bay gelding. The horse’s soft muzzle tickled her hand as he ate the sweet treats. “Good boy, Sonney...” With her other hand, she drew her fingers through his forelock, rubbed his ears, and pulled bits of straw from his thick black mane. “There you go, Sonney.”

“He sure loves you.” Jami put the bridle on her horse and was preparing to saddle him.

Esther kissed the crooked star on his broad forehead. “I love him, too.” As she brushed her horse, clouds of dust rose from his hide. “He’s always dusty like this when I come out here. I’m just glad it hasn’t rained lately.”

“I know.” Jami mounted her horse and was waiting patiently for her friend. “That sand pit would be a muddy hole and we’d never get out of here.”

Esther continued brushing, flicking loose hair from his flank. She smiled up at her friend. “I love brushing him. He’s so soft.” Then, speaking to the horse in soft tones, she combed through his mane, and moving behind him, tackled his long black tail.

Jami’s horse was getting anxious, pawing at the ground and bobbing his head. “You almost ready?” “Yup. All done.” Esther set the brush down, and taking the blanket from the fence, lay it on the horse’s back. She lifted the heavy western-style saddle and placed it on the colorful Navajo-patterned blanket. “Where are we going today? I told my mom we might be riding down by the beaver dam.”

“I’d like to explore that gravel pit – we talked about it last time.”

“Yeah, good idea.” Esther stooped down and, reaching under the horse’s belly, took hold of the strand rayon cinch and pulled it up, securing it with the latigo cinch tie strap. She looped it through the girth buckle, pulling it tight. But the horse had other ideas.

“Okay, Sonney, quit holding your breath.” Esther brought her knee up under the horse and gently pushed, then pulled the cinch strap tighter.

“He knows you. Other people had to kick him hard before he let out his breath.”

“Well, I couldn’t do that to him.” She reached under the horse’s thick mane and caressed Sonney’s neck. “No, I couldn’t do that to you.”

“All set?”

“Just have to buckle the back cinch... there.” Having already put the hackamore on his head, Esther held the reins as she mounted the horse. “Ready!”

As the friends rode out of the paddock, Esther asked, “Who else rode Sonney?”

“When we lived in Iowa, my friend Lynsey used to come over a lot. We had so much fun. But... I don’t know, she just quit coming over.”

“She never gave you any reason?”

“No. That’s the funny thing. I mean, we were friends. When I didn’t see her for a few weeks, I tried calling her, but her mom said she couldn’t come over anymore. I felt really sad, but my dad said she probably found other friends and to forget about it.” She reached down and patted the blue roan’s shoulder, brushing away bothersome flies. “I didn’t understand it for a long time – I mean, Lynsey and I were good friends, and her folks were nice. But like I said, it wasn’t much later that my dad’s company transferred him again.”

“Is that why your family moved up here?”

“Yeah, I guess he’s an important guy cuz he’s transferred a lot. But we never stay anywhere long enough. I know my mom wasn’t happy when we moved this last time. We had a really nice house. My mom wanted to stay, too. She had friends, you know. And starting new schools... that was always hard.” She glanced at her friend. “Well, it just kind of sucks.”

“I’m glad you moved here. And I’m glad you brought the horses.”

“We almost didn’t, but I raised such a fuss.”

“Your dad’s nice. He’s a lot like my dad.”

“Yeah, he’s a great guy.”

The friends rode side by side until they entered the large gravel pit. Jami leaned forward in the saddle and, turning to Esther, challenged her. “Race ya!”

The girls gave their mounts quick kicks and the horses responded, galloping across the hard ground. Esther leaned into the pommel, urging her steed on. Sonney gathered his feet under him and raced ahead of the blue roan. With his long mane slapping in her face, she imagined herself riding Marguerite Henry’s Godolphin Arabian across the sands.

“That was so much fun!” Esther dismounted and, removing the saddle and blanket, set them on the top fence rail. She rubbed Sonney’s neck under his heavy mane. “I love you...” In an attempt to draw him away from the sand pit, she led him to the open gate before taking off the hackamore.

Jami had already turned her horse out into the pasture, but as Esther watched in dismay, Sonney trotted over to the sand pit – his favorite play area to roll, or as she called it, to take his dust bath. Slowly bending all four legs, he collapsed on his side and rolled, but couldn’t roll over. He tried again and, with legs thrashing in the air, eventually rolled to his other side. After momentarily lying in the soft sand, he stiffly rose up and stood. He stretched out his long neck, then beginning with his head, began shaking, his whole body quaking down to his tail – dust exploding around him. For a moment, he seemed to contemplate the humans watching him. Then he nonchalantly trotted out of the paddock and joined his stable mate.

Carrying the blankets and heavy saddles, the girls brought the tack into the barn and placed them on the wooden saddle racks. “It’s getting late, and we still have to wash up,” Jami reminded her friend. “My mom will have a fit if we come into the house smelling like horses!”

Esther put the palms of her hands to her face and inhaled. “I don’t ever want to wash my hands again.”

“Don’t forget. My mom’s making her special potato salad.”

“Love your mom’s potato salad!”

They walked back to the house and climbed the steep steps to the porch. From in the kitchen, they heard her mom call, “Take off your boots, girls!”

“Yes, Mama.”

Esther winked at her friend. “But I’m not washing my hands, Mrs. Mitchell!”

She laughed. “Funny girl. After you’ve washed up, would you bring the hamburger patties out to Jim?”

“Sure, Mrs. Mitchell!” Esther went into the powder room off from the kitchen. When she returned, she picked up the platter of hamburger patties and walked out through the sliding glass door and onto the wraparound deck behind the house. Her best friend’s dad was getting the grill ready.

“Here’s the platter, Mr. Mitchell.”

“Thanks, hon.” He took the large plate and rested it on the side tray, then looked back at his daughter’s best friend. “My goodness, Esther... you are growing into a beautiful young woman...”

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“We were due...” Kelly looked up at her husband. His eyes were closed, and she was sure he was snoring. She rubbed her face on his shoulder. “Are you sleeping?”

Roger pulled her closer to his chest and kissed her forehead. “Mmmm... You wore me out.”

Kelly snuggled against his warm body, her hand gliding over his smooth chest, her fingertips tracing along the thick scar. The scar from Stevie’s bullet had long ago faded. “What if I want more...”

“Woman, you are insatiable... and you *will* be the death of me!”

“Yeah,” she whispered, “*but what a way to go...*”

Roger rolled on his side, facing his wife. “What do you want?”

“You. Always and forever, I want you!”

“You have me...”

“Then, take me! Ravish me!”

“Ravish you?” Roger laughed, then rolling over on her, kissed her hard. “I’ll ravish you...”

Kelly wrapped her legs around his thick waist and allowed this big man to once again make her crazy. “*God...*” her words came out as a harsh whisper. “*You still got it, mister...*”

And he pushed into his wife, making her body slide on the sheets, her fingers pressing into his arms – holding on for dear life...

He stopped – and listened... “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“Sounded like someone came in the house.”

“Bubby?”

“He’s up in the Boundary Waters with his scout troop, isn’t he?”

“I thought so... Esther?”

“She’s at Mitchell’s.” Roger left the bed and quickly pulled on his sweats. “Stay here. I’ll check.”

Kelly sat up, pulling the sheet around her naked body. “Be careful...”

He looked down at his wife. “Where’s my big stick?”

“That’s not funny. Be careful.”

Roger left the bedroom, pulling the door closed, and crept down the stairs – and was met by a very distraught Esther. He stopped her.

“Honey, what’s wrong?”

“Where’s mom?”

“In the bedroom. What’s wrong?”

“I want to talk to mom.” She stood on the wooden stair, avoiding her father’s eyes while her eyes were swimming with tears.

Again, he asked, “Honey, what’s wrong?”

Still not looking at her dad. “... Please...”

Roger held her shoulders, rubbing her arms... then stood aside and let his daughter continue up the stairs to the second floor. He turned and continued down to the kitchen, giving his daughter the time she needed to talk with her mother.

Esther softly knocked on her parents’ bedroom door, then slowly pushed it open – and found her mom sitting up in bed. “Geeze, Mom! You and dad were at it again?”

Kelly rose from the bed and hurriedly pulled on pants and a t-shirt. “You and your brother were both out.”

Esther slumped down on the bed and looked up at her mom.

“What’s wrong?” Kelly sat next to her and smoothed back her daughter’s auburn curls. “Honey, talk to me.”

Esther looked sideways at her mom. “It’s just so fucked...”

“What? I thought you liked horseback riding with Jami.”

“I do...”

“So?”

“We came back from riding, and then her dad...”

“Her dad what?”

Esther looked again at her mom. “Her dad was going to barbeque.”

“I know that. What happened with her dad?”

Esther lay back on the bed and, looking up through the skylight, blankly stared at the accumulating cumulous clouds. “So, her mom asked me to bring out the platter of hamburger patties... out on the back deck. He was getting the grill ready. I brought out the hamburgers. He wanted me to keep him company while he grilled... talking and stuff...”

“So?”

“Mom, he hit on me!” Esther closed her eyes and put one arm across her eyes. “He hit on me...”

“Are you sure?” She and Roger had been friends with Jim and Bonnie since the family had moved here three years earlier. Kelly tried playing devil’s advocate. “Maybe you misunderstood...”

Esther put her arm down and glared at her mom. “You don’t believe me!”

“I believe you...”

“Then why don’t you *believe me!*”

“I’m just...” Kelly looked down at her beautiful daughter. “What did he do?”

Esther sat up. “He said I was growing into a beautiful young woman – and he kissed me!” She looked down, slowly shaking her head – not believing what she was saying. “He said he’d like to do more... when I came out next time... He held my arms and pulled me against him... And he kissed me again. He was sweating... it felt.... God, I wanted to vomit on him.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “Then he said it could be so special with me... But if I told anyone, he’d break my legs!”

“Oh my God...”

Esther flashed a solemn grimace at her mom. “He’s my best friend’s *dad!*”

“I know...”

“So, I went back into the house and Jami and her mom were making the potato salad and getting the buns ready. I love her potato salad... It looked so normal... so surreal, you know?” She exhaled. “I told them I wasn’t feeling good and that I had to go home.” Again, Esther cried. “She’s my best friend... and I can never see her again... I can’t ride my horse anymore.” She fell back onto the bed. “And my boots are still at her house! God, Mom... It’s all so fucked!”

Roger knocked on the door and pushed it open a crack. “Can I come in?”

Esther scrambled up and urgently whispered, “*Don’t tell dad...*”

Kelly put her face close to her daughter’s head. “Why not?”

“*Because...*”

“Honey, he has to know.”

“*No!*”

“Why not?”

Closing her eyes, Esther leaned into her mom, “*Because...*”