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# *Grounded*

*a Hayle Raven Story*

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Grounded: A Hayle Raven Story

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*The Scottish border, 1823*

Ward Hayle, the newest patriarch in the bloodlines, the third Lord of Guisford Manor, couldn't fly. Stark naked, shivering in the fog, he stood at the top of the cliff, the breakers crashing beneath. His skin stung with the force of the sand carried in the strong winds. If he should jump, would his wings come to him, or would he end the despair of banishment? He yearned for it to end, one way or another.

With only himself to blame for the Guisford branch of Hayle House now grounded, he fell to his knees. The scrape of the stones not nearly fitting punishment, he curled into himself, not for warmth, but to seek the spark of magic.

A deep, guttural bellow ripped from him, the first he'd heard such a sound since previously in moments of agitation, he'd always succumbed to his Raven. Not now. Not for some weeks. He couldn't reach that core of himself. Salty tears filled his mouth but he didn't care.

"My lord, come away from the edge." The stoic plea came evenly, without emotion.

"I must try again, Charles. Leave me be." His weak reply, barely a whisper, must not have reached his valet for the man came forward and put a blanket around him.

"You have been here for hours. Come away."

Charles knew the family secret—the Hayles were Raven shifters, passed male to male for centuries. The household staff, groundskeepers, and tenants all guarded the secret that gave them a comfortable livelihood and security.

Until now, when the world had turned askew for Ward's mistakes, the magic had kept this niche of land on the edge of Scotland in a peaceful state. If he could no longer maintain the peace for his people, no longer guard the borders as a Raven hunter, then the security of Guisford lay in jeopardy. He flung off the blanket and fisted his hands. The only other remaining Guisford Raven, his younger brother, could no longer change to Raven either but had not blamed Ward as he should.

"Raven, where are you?" He surged to his feet and nearly toppled over when his muscles spasmed in protest. "If I cannot fly, I will ride."

"Yes, my lord. Your horse awaits."

For days, this ritual had replayed. His valet helped him to dress, the chill bleakness making Ward stiff and clumsy. His less than lordly motions, here on display to anyone who watched from the back gardens of the manor, did not bring him shame. No, only his inability to fly did so. Today, something was different. It rippled along his skin in an unpleasant raw sensation. Not magic but foreboding. Change.

"No. No more change. This is enough." Ward forced his stiff body through the motions of mounting his horse, Thunder, the only stallion in the stable who would allow a Raven to mount. It did not bear thinking upon that now the other horses no longer skittered away when he entered the stables.

The pity in Charles' upturned face blazed a new fury through Ward. His gut churned as he yanked on the reins and turned Thunder westward. Along the face of the cliffs. To fly.

The wind sifted through his hair and tugged on his overcoat, his cravat flapping behind him. The sea stirred angrily as if it reflected his mood as well as the overcast sky. After long moments, the clap of the Thunder's hooves on the stone and packed earth lulled him. In his weariness, after days of pacing sleeplessness, he let the motion of the saddle soothe him, lead him, as his sight lost focus on his surroundings.

He turned inside himself, reliving the last moments before he'd been cast out. His friend, the Alpha of the Ravens, had married. And Ward had kidnapped Isabel, Rukh's new wife, to force their union and keep them together until she bore an heir. Friendship torn asunder when Ward helped keep the Alpha-mate prisoner in Hayle Manor, Ward had tried to make amends. Rukh kept him around for a while, as a sparring partner, but after beating Ward to the ground repeatedly, he'd sent him back to Guisford, never to return.

Ward came home and found his magic lost.

If he could not be Raven, then how would he ever take a mate, as he'd longed to do once he'd reached majority. What could he offer a wife if he could not give her the immortality of the Raven mating?

He had nothing.

Not quite true. He had Guisford, unless Rukh decided to strip him of his lordship as well. The instability of his position should have been his primary concern, as lord, but he couldn't help but wonder what he could offer a woman like Clara, the schoolmistress.

Clara. He shouldn't think on her.

He shook his head to dispel the image of rich, thick brown hair that escaped its plaits, a plain frock, and a wide, tender smile.

When he focused, to rid himself of the painful reverie, he noted his surroundings.

With its neat bed of flowers, lacy curtains blowing in the open windows, and the silence of the early evening hours, the schoolhouse gleamed white in the setting sun. Since his return, he'd found himself here, outside the doors, but had never ventured around the building to the back where the schoolmistress lived in a three room cottage.

He yanked so hard on the reins that the horse reared back and whinnied loudly before his hooves clomped down on the packed road, head pointed back toward Guisford.

"Will you not speak to me tonight, my lord?"

Ward gripped the reins so tightly that his leather gloves creaked and cut into his hands.

"No," he whispered, but unlike all the tormented nights before, he didn't tighten his knees on the horse's sides and encourage the black to take him away.

Tonight was different. He shivered and rolled his shoulders, unable to leave, but unable to look back at her with the gleam of the warm cottage shining out of her open door to the ground at Thunder's feet. The indecision froze him, unable to do as he ought and leave.

"I have heard." She paused. Voice low and tentative, she continued, unaware of the shame that leached the warmth from his skin so fast a chill swept through him in a deep shudder. "I've heard of your difficulties and hoped to see you."

That he'd made a sure woman, a woman strong and capable, a woman determined enough to live without family and build a secure life, that he made her sound so unlike herself with trepidation, goaded him to unlock his knees, unclench his hands, and practically fall to the ground in his stiff-limbed dismount.

Yet, he still could not turn to face her, standing in the doorway of her welcoming cottage. The hominess had always beckoned to him, but though he'd held himself accountable and never crossed her threshold, he'd many a day knocked on that door and escorted her on walks, to the town fair, to the school outings. As a friend, as a lord doing his duty to a woman of esteem. To do her honor, he'd never pushed for more, since he'd not been in a position to marry her. A lord did not marry the schoolmistress. He married the neighboring lord's daughter, the vicar's daughter, or even some far-away miss he'd never met, but that Rukh would arrange to strengthen the Raven's position in English society.

Tonight was different. Perhaps he should do as never before.

He cleared his throat and evened his tone to cover his internal tumult. "May I come in?"

An intake of breath behind him, followed by a loud sigh nearly had him vault back on Thunder and leave Guisford behind for good. His skin coated with moisture. He shrugged his shoulders back.

"Of course. You honor me, my lord."

He most certainly did no such thing. Tonight was different because, as he only now fully acknowledged, the weeks of tumult had brought him dreams that he'd decided to succumb to. He had to speak with Clara. Tonight.

Still, he did not face the cottage until the swish of her skirts and the light from her door shifted, her shadow disappearing, proved she no longer stared at his back.

Like his feet were mired in mud, he moved to follow her.

A bright orange leaf floated down from the tree beside the cottage. Ward stopped in his tracks.

Still.

He scented the moist air. The deep breath in his lungs expanded, held there.

Autumn, the feeling on his skin, the raw sensation, the time he fought the urge to migrate.

He blew out his breath and walked inside.

"Do you have plans to go south to Spain this year?" Her question came right to the point. Clara knew him well.

She bustled in the kitchen, putting on a kettle of water. In the small cottage, her vanilla scent surrounded him. The crawling sensation he's suffered for weeks simply went away and left behind weariness. He pulled out a chair at the table and collapsed onto it. Clara put a cup of steaming tea in front of him.

"Drink. You look pale. Why have you treated yourself so?"

"You've heard?" He hadn't spoken to her since his return from Cornwall. Until reaching majority, he might have given in to the urge to migrate and head south for the winter, but other than those times, he'd never spent much time away from her since she'd taken over as schoolmistress five years ago. Like a starving man to the harvest festival, he'd always sought her out.

She sat across from him, her simple white apron, clean and crisp, rustling as she arranged her dress.

"I've heard." She blushed, color high on her cheekbones, subtle in the dim firelight, but he tensed, expectant. "And I've seen."

"You've seen my failure." He'd thought he couldn't feel worse. He was wrong.

Clara stretched across the table and covered his hand, clenched in a fist on the tabletop, with her own. Soft. Warm. No touch had ever affected him so. A burning sensation covered his chest, tingling.

She licked her lips, and an erection immediately swelled his britches.

"I didn't see your failure. I saw you trying to re-capture your magic." Her dark eyes glinted in the flickering light. "And I saw you."

The meaning of those words struck him. She'd seen him unclothed, on the edge of a cliff. The table hid his reaction, rock hard and unable to move, he broke into a sweat. He had to get away from her. Far away. So then, why did he ask, "Come away with me. To Spain."

The pleading took him by surprise, but once he'd asked her, relief swept over him. It was right. She was right.

"I cannot." Unlike women of society, after being asked such a scandalous question, she did not order him away, remove her hand, nor break eye contact. She stared into him as if she saw directly to his damaged soul, if he still had one.

"I did not intend to make such an improper suggestion, my lady. I will leave." He did not move, still unable to stand with the erection riding him hard.

"I have waited years for you to make me an improper suggestion." She smiled, the same tender smile she gave him in stolen moments, but this time, edged with desire. She'd never shown him such a forthright passion.

"But not to migrate with me to Spain." Now that he'd asked her aloud, he wanted her beneath him. That she'd denied his overture brought back the crawling sensation on his skin.

"You haven't gone in two years, I thought you'd outgrown it, but when I saw your uneasiness, I thought maybe you'd planned to go again. Your brother has already left, hasn't he?"

"Yes. He can't fight back the urge." A strong wind blew and even inside the cottage the rustle of the leaves tingled through him. "Yet, he didn't seem so fevered this year, and I've yet to be gripped by it. The magic is gone."

To say it to the one woman to whom he'd never wanted to show weakness, alleviated the burning on his chest. He cupped the tea and kept his other hand beneath hers, his existence seeming to radiate out from that point of contact.

"Why would you ask me to go, then?"

"I did not mean to ask." He couldn't take her. Erection or not, he had to ignore her allure and leave. Perhaps he should go to Spain and never come back.

She took a deep breath, the rise of her chest taunting him to look at her full breasts, but he kept his stare in place, caught in hers. She tightened her hand on his.

"I'd hoped you asked because you want to be with me." The words were rushed, and she closed her eyes, breaking contact. The color on her cheekbones bled out into her cheeks.

"I do, but we cannot marry. I want you as I have never wanted another. Never have I dreamed about anyone else, but . . ."

"Yes." She opened her eyes and her lips formed a hard line. "I've always known you and I could not marry. You would marry a woman with rank. But I'm no virgin."

The color left her cheeks, and she went pale. Possessiveness surged through Ward and he nearly choked. Erection lost, he surged from his chair, but despite an urge to march out the door and strangle someone, he couldn't leave her. They'd never spoken of their connection, and he found it impossible to leave before he'd confessed it all and she told him more.

"That's not my business, of course." Such rubbish he spoke when he wanted it to be his business more than he wanted his next breath.

"I've always been a woman of needs and have never been afraid to fulfill them, but society does not appreciate a woman with her own mind."

He stopped and faced her, but she continued, her face set in harsh lines, her eyes unfocused as if she weren't here with him. He held his tongue.

"I've made mistakes, but they were mine to make. And now, I cannot regret them because they brought me here. To you." She focused on him and the anger left him. He'd been no pure saint, either, and he'd always appreciated her strength, her self-possession. Before he grabbed her and pulled her to the floor, he turned toward the door but couldn't make himself leave. This was heading in a direction that would seal his fate, but though he should, he couldn't walk away.

"You, though, are more noble than I. You treated me with honor, and I did the same. I wanted to be good, for you. I didn't dare reach what I wanted. But now, after seeing your

pain, day after day, I find that I can't deny there's more than desire. I love you, but I know you cannot feel the same, nor can you give me marriage, but I want to be with you, for as long as I can."

Ward kept his back to her because his desire was now plain to see again. Perhaps it was easier this way, to stare at the door rather than the deep pink lips that had haunted his dreams. "I am not the man for you. I betrayed my best friend and heaven ripped away my Raven for my betrayal."

As if she hadn't heard him, she continued, her voice close enough to cause his spine to tingle. "I'll be with you, if you'll have me, until you marry. I have to leave then. I'll have to leave whether or not you ever touch me. I cannot bear to stay and see you with a wife. A mate."

Her voice cracked on the last word. The tension in his shoulders pulled tight. He shrugged again, but the pain streaked through him. "I have no magic. I can't bring immortality to a mate. I'm broken."

Her arms came around his waist and her head leaned on his back. Ward stiffened and then relaxed into her hold. Nothing had ever felt so right. She soothed him. "You're not broken. You're still a strong, caring man. Who else would replace Mr. Brown's plow horse when it died of old age?"

"He's my tenant. It's my responsibility."

"It's not your responsibility to ride through rain and snow to retrieve the doctor for Mrs. Fellows when she was due. Mr. Fellows or his eldest sons should have done so."

"That was two years ago."

"You've done much more."

"No more than any lord would do."

She sighed heavily. Through the layers of his shirt and coat, her kiss sank into his skin and tingled outward from the middle of his back.

Such a small thing, to change his life.

He drew himself up to his full height, but before he moved to follow where his heart had been for half a decade, he had to give her one last chance to save herself.

"You'll take a damaged man, no longer whole?"

"I'll take you, no matter how you come to me, for as long as I can, but never will I believe you are damaged."

In one motion, he spun, lifted her into his arms, and crushed her into his chest.

"Your bed." His speech had lost all semblance of humanity, and the demand came out harsh, brutal.

Arms thrown around his shoulders, she tucked her mouth into the crook of his neck and nuzzled him, her breathless reply whispered across his skin sending chills down his back. "Straight ahead. You can't miss it."



With her heady weight in his arms, he crossed the small cottage in a few long strides. An open door revealed a small, cozy room softly lit by candles on the fireplace mantle. The hearth lay cold, but Ward had plans to heat the room.

He grinned and threw Clara onto the quilt covered bed. Her skirts in disarray, she pushed herself up onto her elbows and stared at him. An uncontrollable fear that she'd change her mind surged through him, and he dropped between her spread legs.

"Ward. Our clothes are in the way." She panted and in opposition to her chastising, she clung fast to him. His head pillowed on her covered chest, he reveled in her tight embrace.

In a desperate need to hurry, urgency nearly strangling his tightened throat, he made quick work of his clothes before he helped tear the apron and frock off of Clara. Her chest visibly heaved, her luxurious hair falling from its binding to feather around her flushed face. The beauty in this woman struck him anew and he lunged on top of her before she could remove her slip.

He tore it off of her and palmed the snowy white breast beneath his hand. Her nipple hardened in his palm, and he grew dizzy. Now that she was finally beneath him, he was going to pass out.

She whimpered her pleasure, and her legs wrapped around his waist.

"I want you, Clara."

"Take me. Please."

He'd dreamt of this moment, but in his innocence, he'd believed in hers. Now that he was here, between her legs and ready to claim her, he thanked heaven he didn't have to be careful. Unable to wait, imperative that he merge with her immediately, he lifted one of her thighs to better position himself. And plunged inside.

Wet. Hot. Ready for him. She moaned and with a thrust of her heel, drove him deeper, to the hilt inside her. Bliss made him dizzy again but the clutching of her fingers on his back, the sharp pain of her nails, brought him back. Of their own accord, his hips drew back and plunged forward again, setting a mindless rhythm he couldn't control.

She ground up into him, her hips meeting his in inelegant slaps. Their heated union more animal than dignified, soothed his damaged soul, fed him, eased the anger, the hurt, the hunger.

On edge, he clung, desperate to hold off and enjoy the slick slide of their joining. Like he straddled the edge of forever, an eternity of pleasure, he drifted in sensation, not knowing where he ended and she began. But he couldn't stop the rise of bliss. White hot heat gripped his thighs and his body shook as he hugged her tight. Together. They had to be together.

Clara panted in his ear. "Almost. Just there. More. Almost."

Her body shuddered, and she squeezed around him with a cry. "Oh, yes."

He released inside her in a surge of his hips that ground her into the bed. With that release, the sense of peace he'd not had since his first migration, he knew to the bottom of his soul that he was home, to stay.

"Marry me, Clara. Make me whole again."

Hair in disarray, cheeks spotted in color, her brown eyes hazy with repletion, she stared up at him. She saw him. Still joined, the slickness of their bodies a hedonistic pleasure, their belonging together couldn't be questioned.

"You are already whole, Ward. More a man than anyone I've ever known. I'll always be with you."

"I know what you're thinking, but you're wrong. I don't need to marry anyone for status. More than any, a Raven knows when he's found his mate and no other Raven would ever question that choice, not even my Alpha. You are mine."

The tender smile returned and she stroked back the hair that clung to his forehead. "I'm yours."

"No question. You are home. No migrating. No flying away. Just, home."

"Yes, I'll marry you Ward, and be your home as you are mine."

His chest expanded and the grin that spread his lips erupted into a whoop. Clara laughed, nearly dislodging him, an action that grounded him immediately. A serious need to claim her again brought him down to earth.

"I'll be sure you never regret it." He growled. "Never." A primal flickering along his spine made him gruff again.

His hips rotated at their joining and she gasped. Over and over, she gasped as he brought them to the heights.

And then he flew again.

### **About the Author**

To read more about the Hayle Raven shifters and see what happened to bring Ward Hayle to this crossroad, read *The Forbidden Chamber* from Samhain Publishing.

<http://samhainpublishing.com/authors/ella-drake>

As a child Ella Drake read books under the covers with a flashlight. There she found a special love of elves, dragons, and knights. Now that she's found her own knight in shining armor and happily ever after, she loves to write tales of fantasy, hot enough to scorch the sheets. No flashlight needed. To learn more about Ella Drake or to join her mailing list, please visit <http://www.elladrake.com>.