



MELISSA SENATE

The
Maverick's
Baby-in-Waiting

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Melissa Senate
The Maverick's Baby-In-Waiting

Аннотация

A millionaire...and baby booties? Pretty-and-pregnant Mikayla Brown is Rust Creek Falls' newest resident. She's determined to make it on her own, so what is she doing with aloof billionaire Jensen Jones? Could Jensen be Mikayla's Prince Charming in disguise...?

A millionaire...and baby booties?

Rust Creek Ramblings

Pretty-and-pregnant Mikayla Brown is Rust Creek Falls' newest resident. Poor as a church mouse, she is determined to make it on her own, so what is she doing with Tulsa billionaire Jensen Jones? Everyone knows that the cowboy-booted businessman doesn't "do" commitment—and Mikayla is in no position (literally!) to do casual. Yet our sources suggest Jensen may be Mikayla's Prince Charming in disguise. Could our expectant, independent Cinderella have finally found her perfect match?

MELISSA SENATE has written many novels for Mills & Boon and other publishers, including her debut, *See Jane Date*, which was made into a TV movie. She also wrote seven books for Mills & Boon under the pen name Meg Maxwell. Her novels have been published in over twenty-five countries. Melissa lives on the coast of Maine with her teenage son, their rescue shepherd mix, Flash, and a lap cat named Cleo. For more information, please visit her website, melissasenate.com.

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Melissa Senate

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Dedicated to

Marcia Book Adirim and Susan Litman—
creative geniuses!

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Booklist](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[*Chapter One*](#)

[*Chapter Two*](#)

[*Chapter Three*](#)

[*Chapter Four*](#)

[*Chapter Five*](#)

[*Chapter Six*](#)

[*Chapter Seven*](#)

[*Chapter Eight*](#)

[*Chapter Nine*](#)

[*Chapter Ten*](#)

[*Chapter Eleven*](#)

[*Chapter Twelve*](#)

[*Chapter Thirteen*](#)

[*Chapter Fourteen*](#)

[*Chapter Fifteen*](#)

[Extract](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

[Chapter One](#)

“Have you picked out a name for the baby?”

Twenty-six-year-old Mikayla Brown looked from the display of baby photos on the wall of the Rust Creek Falls Clinic, where she was waiting for her ob-gyn appointment, to her friend Amy Wainwright. Names? Oh, yeah, she had names. Mikayla's life might be entirely up in the air at the moment, but names were easy. Late at night, when she lay in bed, unable at this point—seven months along—to get all that comfortable, she'd picture herself sitting in the rocking chair on the farmhouse porch with a baby in her arms and she'd try out all her name ideas on the little one.

Problem was, she had too many possibilities. "I have six if it's a girl," she told Amy. "Seven if it's a boy. And ten or so more I'm thinking of for middle names. Can I give my child four names?"

Amy laughed, putting the *Parenting Now* magazine she'd been flipping through back on the table. "Sure, why not? You're the mama."

Mikayla shivered just slightly. The mama. Her. Mikayla Brown. She barely had her own life together these days, and soon she'd be solely responsible for another life—a tiny, helpless little one with no one to depend on but her. Mikayla had always been a dependable, do-the-right-thing kind of person, and she'd fallen in love with a man she'd thought was cut the same way. Then, boom—her life exploded like a rogue firecracker. One moment, she'd been working happily at a local day care in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and in love with her boyfriend, a good-looking, ambitious lawyer, with her entire future ahead of her. The next moment, she

was a single mother-to-be. No engagement. No marriage. No loving father-to-be beside her, just as excited about her prenatal checkup as she was.

But who *was* here today? A good friend. Mikayla was so thankful for Amy Wainwright she could reach over and hug her, and she would if her belly weren't in the way. Her belly was always in the way these days.

Hey, you in there, she directed to her stomach. *Are you a Hazel? A George?* Mikayla loved the idea of honoring her late parents, who'd always been so loving and kind. Or her maternal grandparents, also long gone—Leigh and Clinton, who'd sent birthday and Christmas cards without fail but had moved to Florida when Mikayla was young. Then there was her dear aunt Elizabeth, her mother's sister, who went by Lizzie, and her hilarious uncle Tyler, and their one-of-a-kind son, Brent, Mikayla's cousin. Brent was the one who'd suggested Mikayla move up to Montana—to Rust Creek Falls—for a fresh start. Which was how Brent's name had ended up on the possibilities list. She owed him big.

Moving to this tiny town in the Montana wilderness had sounded crazy at first. Population five hundred something? More than a half hour's drive from the nearest hospital—when she was now seven months pregnant? No family or friends?

You'll make friends, Brent had assured her. *Sunshine Farm will feel like home.*

Brent had been right. Mikayla had been a little worried that

she'd get the side-eye or pity glances from the town's residents. Pregnant and alone. But from the moment she'd arrived at Sunshine Farm three weeks ago and met the owner, Brent's friend Luke Stockton, she'd been invited to Luke and his fiancée's joint bachelor-bachelorette party held that very day. Since the recent wedding, she'd become good friends with Luke's wife, Eva, and Amy, who'd also lived at Sunshine Farm at the time.

Now Amy was engaged, with a gorgeous, sparkling diamond ring on her finger. Mikayla sighed inwardly while ogling the rock. She'd over-fantasized like a bridezilla in training about a ring on her own finger and a fairy-tale wedding. Hell, even a city hall wedding would have been fine. But all that was before she'd caught her baby's father having sex with his paralegal in his law-firm office.

The more Mikayla admired Amy's ring and thought about how her friend had reconnected with her first love, Derek Dalton, the man she'd married and divorced when they'd both been teenagers (long story!), the more Mikayla thought anything was possible. Even for seven-months-pregnant single women far from home and trying to figure out where to go from here.

A door opened, and a woman with a baby bump exited, followed by a man carrying a pamphlet. *Your Second Trimester*. Both their gold wedding rings shone in the room. Or maybe Mikayla's gaze just beelined to rings on fingers these days.

A nurse appeared at the door and smiled at Mikayla. "Mikayla Brown? Dr. Strickland is ready to see you now."

Well, where she was going right now was Exam Room 1. That was all she needed to know at the moment. One step at a time, deep breaths, and she'd be fine.

Mikayla and Amy stood and followed the nurse into the examination room. Mikayla sat on the paper-covered table and Amy on the chair in the corner. The nurse took Mikayla's vitals, handed her a paper gown to change into, then let them know Dr. Strickland would be in shortly.

"You're the absolute best, Amy," Mikayla said, her voice a little clogged with emotion, when the door closed behind the nurse. She quickly shimmied out of her maternity sundress and into the gown, Amy tying the back for her. "Thank you for coming with me today." It meant a lot not to come alone. Her ex had accompanied her to her first appointment back in Cheyenne when she discovered she was pregnant, but he had made it clear he didn't want a baby, wasn't ready for a baby and wasn't sure of anything. He'd added that he was a man of deep principles, a "crusading" attorney (read: litigator for a major corporation), and wouldn't leave Mikayla, "of course." Apparently, he'd been cheating even before she told him she was pregnant. *I have strong feelings for you, Mik, but I am who I am, and I'm not ready for any of this. Sorry.*

Who needed a lying, cheating, no-good rat sitting in the corner chair?

"That is what friends are for, my dear," Amy said, flicking her long auburn hair behind her shoulder. "And honestly? I

might have ulterior motives of finding out what goes on at these appointments. One day I hope to be sitting exactly where you are. Okay, maybe no woman loves putting her bare feet into those metal stirrups...”

Mikayla laughed. Amy would make an amazing mother.

And so would she. Mikayla had had to give herself a few too many pep talks over the past several months, that she could do this, that she *would* do this—and well.

There was a gentle knock on the door and a tall, attractive man wearing a white lab coat entered the room with her chart and a warm smile. He introduced himself as Dr. Drew Strickland, an ob-gyn on temporary assignment here from Thunder Canyon, but he let Mikayla know he would absolutely be here through her delivery.

Fifteen minutes later, assured all was progressing as it should with the pregnancy, Mikayla sat up, appreciating the hand squeeze from Amy.

A minute after that, her resolve was blown to bits. The doctor’s basic questions were difficult to answer, which made her feel like a moron. He asked if she was staying in Rust Creek Falls long-term, because he could recommend a terrific pediatrician here and a few out in Kalispell if she didn’t mind the drive. But Mikayla wasn’t too sure of anything.

She felt as though her empty ring finger was glowing neon in the room. No partner. No father for her baby. No family for the little one. Just her. A woman who had no idea what the future

held.

“Will the baby’s father be present for the labor and delivery?” Dr. Strickland asked.

Were those tears stinging the backs of her eyes? Hadn’t she cried enough over that louse? When she first held on to hope that Scott would come around for her and the baby, she’d pictured him in the delivery room—or tried to, anyway. Not that she’d actually been able to imagine Scott Wilton there for the muck *or* the glory. Another reality check—which helped her rally. She and her baby would be just fine. She blinked those dopey tears away and lifted her chin.

“Nope. Just me.”

“And me,” Amy said with a hand on her shoulder. “Here if you need me. I’ll even coach you through Lamaze, not that I’d know what I’m doing.”

Mikayla smiled. “Thank God for girlfriends. Thank you, Amy. Honestly, I don’t know what I’d do without you.” Between Amy and then Eva, her landlady at Sunshine Farm, Mikayla had truly comforting support.

“You know what?” Mikayla added, nodding at the doctor. “I might be on my own, but I have great friends, a very nice doctor, and I’m going to be a great mama to my little one. That’s all I need to know right now.”

Dr. Strickland beamed back. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

Mikayla smiled. Why did she have a feeling the doc had been

waiting for her to come to those conclusions?

“See you in two weeks for the ultrasound,” the doctor said. “Call if you have any questions. Even if it’s after hours, I’ll get back to you right away. That’s my promise.”

Feeling a lot better about everything than she had an hour ago, Mikayla and Amy left the exam room. Mikayla checked out, and then Amy had a really good idea.

“Of course, we have to go to Daisy’s Donuts,” Amy said, linking her arm with Mikayla’s. “A gooey treat and a fabulous icy decaf something or other. To celebrate an A-OK on the little one,” she added, gently patting Mikayla’s very pregnant belly.

Mikayla laughed. “Lead the way.” She’d been to Daisy’s a few too many times since she’d arrived in town, the call of lemon-cream donuts and crumb cake irresistible. It wasn’t as if she was going to crave salad, so Mikayla let herself have a decadent treat when she really wanted one.

She was sure the baby appreciated it.

* * *

“Jensen Jones, you listen to me! I want you out of that two-bit, Wild West, blip-on-the-map town this instant! You’re to fly back to Tulsa immediately. Do you hear me? Immediately! If not sooner!”

Jensen shook his head as his father ranted in his ear via cell phone. Walker Jones the Second was used to his youngest son doing as he was ordered by the big man in the corner office, both at home and at Jones Holdings Inc. But Jensen always drew the

line where it needed to be. When his dad was right? Great. When Walker the Second was wrong? Sorry, Dad.

“No can do,” Jensen said, glancing around and wondering if he was headed in the right direction for Daisy’s Donuts. Apparently, that was *the* place to get a cup of coffee in Rust Creek Falls. Maybe even the only place. “I’ve got some business to take care of here. I should be back in Tulsa in a few days. Maybe a week. This negotiation is going a bit slower than I thought it would be.” Translation: it wasn’t going at all. And Jensen Jones, VP of New Business Development at Jones Holdings, wasn’t used to that.

His father let out one of his trademark snorts. “Yeah, because you’re in Rusted Falls River or whatever that town is called. Nothing goes right there.”

Jensen had to laugh. “Dad, what do you have against Rust Creek Falls? The land out here is amazing.” It really was. Jensen was a city guy, born and bred in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and he liked the finer things in life, but out here in the wilds of Montana, a man could think. Breathe. Figure things out. And Jensen had a lot to figure out. He hadn’t expected to like this town so much; hell, he’d been as shocked as his father was that three of his four older brothers had found wives in Rust Creek Falls and weren’t coming home to Tulsa. *This* was home now for Walker the Third and Hudson. Even jet-setter Autry had come to visit, fallen madly in love with a widowed mother of three little girls and moved the lot of them to Paris to finish a Jones Holdings negotiation. But Autry had made it clear he’d bring his wife and daughters back

to Rust Creek Falls when his deals were done.

But just because Jensen liked the wide-open spaces and fresh air didn't mean he'd settle down here. As the youngest of the five Jones brothers, each one a bigger millionaire than the next, he'd always had something to prove. Now three of his brothers had become family men and had given up their workaholic ways. Autry used words like *balance*. Walker the Third wanted to invest in an ergonomically correct toddler-chair company for the day care business he'd added to the Jones Holdings lot. And Hudson knew the middle names of all his nieces and nephews. Middle names! This, from three of the formerly most confirmed bachelors in Tulsa.

“What do I have against Rusted Dried-Up Creek?” his father repeated. “I'll tell you what,” he added in one of his famous Jones patriarch bellows. “That town is full of Jones-stealing women! There are sirens there, Jensen. Just like in the Greek myths. You'd better watch out, boy. One is going to sink her claws into you and that'll be the last your mother and I will see of you. Jones Holdings can't operate remotely! I want my sons here in Tulsa where they belong. If not all, then you. You've always been the one I could count on to listen to reason.”

His poor father. The man hated not getting what he wanted. And it was rare. His mother said the man-stealing in Rust Creek Falls couldn't be helped, that there was something in the water—literally. Apparently, at a big wedding a couple years ago, some local drunk had spiked the punch with an old-timey potion or

something and no man was safe from the feminine wiles of Rust Creek Falls women. Especially the millionaire Jones brothers.

“Dad, I assure you, I’m not about to fall for anyone. The last thing on my mind is marriage. You’ve got nothing to worry about.” He wasn’t exaggerating for his father’s sake, either. Jensen was done with love. So there would never be a marriage.

“Yeah, I think that’s what Autry said right before he proposed to that mother of seven.”

Jensen rolled his eyes. “*Three*, Dad. Three lovely little girls. Autry is very happy with Marissa. So is Walker with Lindsay. As is Hudson with Bella.”

His father made a noise that sounded like a harrumph. “They were happy running Jones Holdings right here in Tulsa until those women got to them! Just come home now. I’m thinking of buying a major-league baseball team. You can help me decide which one.”

“I’ll see you in a few days, Dad,” Jensen said. “Speaking of buying pricey things—what are you getting Mom for your fortieth anniversary?” Forty years was something to celebrate. Hell, *five* years was something to celebrate.

“That woman will be the death of me!” Walker the Second bellowed. “I—Oh, Jensen, my assistant is signaling me that Nick Bates from Runyon Corporation is on line two. Time for a takeover. Get home quick or I’ll come get you myself. And I’m not kidding.”

Before Jensen could say a word, a click sounded in his ear.

Now it was Jensen's turn to harrumph. His parents' anniversary was in two weeks and his mom and dad were barely speaking. There had always been rifts among the Jones boys and their parents over the years, but Walker the Second and Patricia Jones had always been such a strong team, bossy and snobby and trying to order around their sons as a united front. Now there were cracks in the forty-year marriage. Lately, Jensen had heard the strain in their voices, seen it on their faces, and once he'd caught his mother crying when she thought she was alone in the family mansion. Of course, she'd refused to acknowledge those were tears and insisted she was just allergic to their cook's "awful perfume."

As the youngest, Jensen had always fought for his brothers' respect and his parents' attention and had barely been noticed in the big crew. But he was the one who'd watched his brothers grow up one by one and go their own ways, even if that way was the family business. The five Jones brothers might as well be living and working on different continents for how close they were, and that included Walker and Hudson, who lived here in town and worked together, though they had gotten more brotherly, thanks to their wives.

But Jensen was the one who cared about family dinners and holidays and birthday celebrations, insisting, even as a teenager, that his older brothers come home for his big sports games. When he was seventeen, his parents had taken him to a therapist, insisting that Jensen be cured of "caring too much," that it would

make him soft when family in the Jones world meant business.

He still cared. And his parents still didn't get it.

But there was one thing his father would get his way on. Jensen *would* be coming home in a few days—once he finally convinced the most stubborn old coot in Montana to sell a perfect hundred acres of land to him for a project very close to his heart. The man, a seventy-six-year-old named Guthrie Barnes, was holding out, despite Jensen upping the price well past what the land was worth. But Jensen was a Jones and a skilled negotiator. He'd get that land. And then he'd go home.

Because no woman, siren or otherwise, could tempt him beyond the bedroom. Adrienne, his ex, had made sure of that. He wasn't even sure if he could count her as an ex, since she'd never really been his; she'd been after his money and had racked up close to a million dollars on various credit cards she'd opened in his name, then fled when he'd confronted her. The worst part? She'd admitted she'd done her research for weeks before setting her sights on him, reading up on him, asking questions, finding out his likes and dislikes, what made him tick. When she'd engineered their meeting, the trap had been set so well he'd fallen right into it. He'd walked away from that relationship in disbelief that he could have been so stupid. She'd walked away with his ability to trust.

The only thing he had, really had, was his family, and hell, he barely had that. If his snobby, imperious, stubborn father and his snobbier, refuses-to-talk-about-her-feelings mother thought they

were going to throw away forty years and the family because they were too set in their ways or too stubborn to deal with each other, well, then they didn't know what was coming.

Jensen was coming. Well, more like he was packing a wallop for the Jones patriarch and matriarch. Family was supposed to be there. *Should* always be there. Disagreements, problems, rifts, whatever. You worked it out. So, hell, yeah, he was going to unite the Jones family and save his parents' marriage. They were damned lucky and had no idea, no clue how blessed they were for all they had.

But Jensen knew. He knew because he'd been so willing to go there, to love, to open up his heart and life to another person—before Adrienne had destroyed all that. And three of his brothers knew—they'd surrendered to love and were now truly happy. And he'd need their new family-men status to help him work on the parents. That meant Autry flying in from Paris. He had no doubt the jet-setter would. Because when it came down to it, Jensen could count on his brothers. And it was time for the whole family to be able to count on one another.

The bell jangled over his head as he entered the donut shop, the smell of freshly baked pastries mingling with coffee. A large, strong blast of caffeine, some sugary fortification and he'd be good to go on his plans.

Except when he looked left, all thought fled from his head. His brain was operating in slow motion, his gaze on a woman sitting at a table and biting into a donut with yellow custard oozing out.

She licked her lips. He licked his, mesmerized.

Was it his imagination or was she *glowing*?

She had big brown eyes and long, silky brown hair past her shoulders. There was something very...lush about her. Jensen couldn't take his eyes off her—well, the half of her that was visible above the table, covered by a red-and-white-checked tablecloth. And he was aware that he was staring. Luckily, the beauty in question was more interested in her donut and the woman sitting beside her than in anything else. She put down the donut and picked up an iced drink, then laughed at something her companion said.

He even loved her laugh. Full-bodied. Happy.

Oh, yeah, this was a woman who knew how to have a good time. If a donut and a joke or whatever her friend had said could elicit that happiness and laughter, then this was someone Jensen would like to whisk off to dinner tonight. Maybe to Kalispell, about forty-five minutes away, to an amazing Italian restaurant his brother Walker had told him about. Kalispell had a nice hotel where they could have a nightcap before spending the night naked in bed, taking a soak together, and then he'd bring her home in the morning and go meet Guthrie Barnes with a better offer on the land to get the man to sell. A great night, a deal and back in Tulsa midweek. Now that was the Jones way. His father would be proud.

A woman behind the counter, her name tag reading Eva, smiled at him. He was pretty sure he'd met her at her and her

husband's joint bachelor-bachelorette party a few weeks ago.
"May I help you?"

"I'd like to send refills of whatever is making those women so happy," he said, nodding his chin toward the brunette beauty.

Eva slid a glance over and raised an eyebrow. "You sure about that?"

Was that challenge in her voice? Jensen loved a challenge. "I'm a man who knows what he wants."

Eva grinned. "Well, then. I'll just ring you up and then bring over their refills."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said. "You can add a café Americano and a chocolate cider donut for me."

She'd raised another eyebrow after the *ma'am*; she couldn't be more than midtwenties, but he was a gentleman born and bred.

After handing him his much-needed coffee and donut, Eva went over to the women's table with two more donuts and two more coffee drinks. She whispered something, then lifted her chin at him. Two sets of eyes widened, and they looked over.

He locked eyes with his brunette. The most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. The woman he planned on spending the night with. He'd show her an amazing evening, treat her like a princess, give her anything her heart desired, and then they'd go their separate ways, maybe not even knowing each other's last names. They'd each get what they needed—a night of pure fantasy—and then they'd go back to real life.

He froze, mentally slapping his palm to his forehead. He

hadn't even checked her ring finger. The auburn-haired woman she was with wore an engagement ring; he could see that a mile away. But now that he was looking at his brunette's hand, he was relieved to see there was no ring.

Which meant she was his. For the night. Maybe for the few days it would take him to convince Guthrie Barnes to sell.

Eva waved him over, and he sidled up. The brunette was staring at him. The auburn-haired friend seemed delighted by the turn of events. "Mikayla Brown, Amy Wainwright, I don't even have to ask this man's name to know he's a Jones brother. I'm right, right?" she said, looking at him.

He laughed. "Was it the diamond-encrusted *J* on my belt buckle that gave me away?"

"That and the fact that everything you're wearing probably cost you more than rent on this place for a few months. And I'm pretty sure I saw you with your brothers at our party at the manor a few weeks ago. We didn't have a chance to meet then—I think the whole town was there. I'm Eva Stockton."

He smiled. "Jensen Jones. And yes, I was there. Great party. Congratulations on your marriage." He bit into the donut on his plate. Chocolate cider, his favorite. "Mmm—this donut is so good you should charge a thousand bucks for just one."

"You'd probably pay that," Eva said, shaking her head with a smile.

"Hey, my family might have done all right in business, but we're not idiots. *Two* thousand."

The three women laughed, and then the bell jangled, so Eva went back to the counter.

“Mikayla,” he said, unable to take his eyes off her. “I know this is going to sound crazy. We just met. We don’t know a thing about each other. But I’m going to be in town for a few days and would love for you to show me around, show me the sights—if you’re free, of course.”

His fantasy woman looked positively shocked. Her mouth dropped slightly open, that sexy, pink lower lip so inviting, and she glanced at her friend. Both their eyes widened again, as if his asking her out, politely couched in terms of a sightseeing guide, was so unusual. The woman was beautiful, her lush breasts in that yellow sundress so damned sexy. Surely she was hit on constantly. Maybe not by millionaires, though.

Ah, Jensen thought, disappointment socking him in the gut. That was it. That was what was so unusual about his interest. She probably wasn’t used to attention from a man with so many commas in his bank account.

Another gold digger? Oh, hell, what did it matter if she were? Jensen wasn’t going there—never again. His heart wasn’t up for grabs. Mikayla Brown was gorgeous, not wearing a ring, and he had a few days to enjoy her company—around town and in bed. He’d wine and dine her, she’d give him her *full* attention and then they’d both go their separate ways, maybe hooking up once or twice a year when he came to Rust Creek Falls to visit his brothers. Perfect.

The more he looked at her, the more he had another thought: *Forget Kalispell. I'm whisking her away to Ibiza or a Greek island for the weekend.* No harm in a decadent no-strings weekend romance if they were both for it, right?

She was staring at him. About to say yes. Of course she was. C'mon.

“Oh, I don't think I'm your type, Mr. Jones,” Mikayla said. She took another bite of her donut, a hint of pink tongue catching a flick of errant custard.

He held her gaze, able to feel his desire for her in every cell of his body. “Trust me. You are.”

She took a breath, lifted her chin and stood up.

Which was when it became obvious that she was very pregnant.

Chapter Two

Mikayla gave the guy five seconds to run screaming out the door of Daisy's Donuts. Maybe even three.

A wealthy, hot man with a diamond-studded belt buckle, slicked-back movie-star blond hair and intense blue eyes glittering with desire and challenge? Yeah, he'd run as soon as he realized he was coming on to a pregnant woman.

All six feet two inches of muscular millionaire cowboy froze, those gorgeous blue eyes on her seven-months-pregnant belly.

She would have burst out laughing if a tiny part of her wasn't a bit angry. A minute ago she'd been his biggest fantasy—apparently. Now, not so much.

Reality always won.

“Oh,” he said. “You’re...”

Ding, ding, ding. “Pregnant.”

“I...I didn’t mean to intrude on your time together,” he said quickly, slowly backing away with his coffee and what was left of his donut. “Enjoy your afternoon. It was very nice meeting you both.”

So, eight seconds. He was out the door and probably stopped around the corner, catching his breath from actually having been flirting with a pregnant woman.

“Why is every Jones brother better-looking than the last?” Eva asked, coming over with extra napkins.

The man *was* beyond good-looking. He was the kind of gorgeous that was hard to draw your gaze from, and Mikayla had felt a connection, a tiny little spark of chemistry that went beyond just the physical. There had been something sweet under the sizzling in their two-minute conversation—before her belly had introduced itself.

But he was gone. As expected. And as it should be! Mikayla Brown wasn’t looking for a man. Or a savior. Or a father for her baby. That wasn’t how life worked. If she met someone and they fell in love and he was wonderful and father material, okay, fine.

Now she did burst out laughing. Ha ha ha. Like that would happen.

She’d been burned bad by the father of her baby, which hurt like hell. She’d cried her eyes out, wished until she’d marked

every star, and she'd still been abandoned, her baby unwanted by the man who'd helped create him or her. She hated that with every fiber of her being. And she didn't understand it. But that was when that handy word came in again: *reality*. Things were what they were, and she damned well was going to make the best of them. She had a baby to consider, a life to bring forth, a child to raise. She was going to be the best mother she could be.

And anyway, the silver lining? She'd *noticed* Jensen Jones. Could imagine herself kissing Jensen Jones. Which meant that flicker of hope and faith was still alive inside her. Her ex had taken himself out of the equation, but his loss hadn't taken the red-blooded woman out of her. Score one for Mikayla.

Her hundredth pep talk issued, Mikayla took a sip of her decaffeinated mocha. "Well, at least he liked the top half of me. Which includes my brain. So that's something." She took another bite of her donut.

"If only he could have seen your feet," Amy said, "And the sparkly blue pedicure I gave you last week. That would have hooked him."

"Jensen Jones doesn't strike me as a man who'd like sparkly blue toenails," Mikayla said. "Did you know that Jackie Kennedy Onassis once said that fingernails should be the color of ballet slippers and toes a classic red? He seems like one to agree. Too highfalutin for me, anyway. I'm an eat-ribs-with-my-fingers and blue-toenail-polish kind of woman."

Amy laughed. "We all should be that woman."

Eva came over with a tray of samples. “Want to try my new red velvet donut holes? Fresh out of the oven.”

Mikayla adored Eva, who not only baked for Daisy’s, worked the counter when they were understaffed and had recently finished business school, but was letting her stay at Sunshine Farm. “Ooh, of course,” Mikayla said, snatching one and popping the heavenly treat into her mouth. This would have to be her last bite or she’d gain a hundred pounds in this final trimester.

Eva sat down. “Mikayla, you were great today, you know that, right? Standing up like that was hilarious. I’ve never seen a man stammer without saying a word quite like that.”

“Poor guy,” Amy said, sipping her iced latte. “Did you see the way he looked at Mik? He was clearly swooning over her.”

“What’s his deal, anyway?” Mikayla asked. “Not that I care.”

Both women smirked at her.

Mikayla smiled. “I definitely would have remembered meeting him at your and Luke’s party, Eva, but there was so many people and I left a bit early. He has how many brothers?”

“Four,” Amy said. “All rich beyond belief. They’re from Tulsa and all work as major bigwigs in the corporation their father started. Hudson and Walker—you know them from town—still work for Jones Holdings. They opened a satellite office here in town. And Autry whisked a widowed mom and her three little girls to Paris for the year, but they’re due back. There’s another brother, Gideon, who was at the party, too, since he was visiting Hudson and Walker that week, but I didn’t meet him. Put the five

Jones millionaires in a row at a party and women start swooning. Even if three are taken.”

“No one knows much about Jensen,” Eva said. “Other than he’s rich and I heard he’s a workaholic. He’s in town working a deal, I think.”

“Well, sometimes a gal needs a donut and some eye candy, and I got both, so I’m good for a while,” Mikayla said. “I’m not looking for anything. I have great new friends and a great place to live. I’m set.”

Eva squeezed Mikayla’s hand. “It’s so nice having another woman at Sunshine Farm. I’m so glad you’re living in the house with us.”

Eva Armstrong Stockton was so kind and generous. She and her husband were thinking about officially starting a guesthouse at the ranch. There wasn’t much in terms of places to stay in Rust Creek Falls. There was a boardinghouse and a high-end hotel that was more Jensen Jones’s speed. Mikayla knew that the Stocktons hoped to turn the cabins on their property into little guesthouses, the kind of place that people could come to when they needed somewhere to go, somewhere like home. People like Amy, who’d reconnected with her first love in Rust Creek Falls. And people just like Mikayla.

She was temporarily in flux. The Stocktons had told her she was welcome to stay in their ranch house as long as she liked, even when she had her baby, who was sure to wake everyone up a few times a night. She’d have friends and support and

community. She knew she was lucky.

So was it wrong that she couldn't stop thinking about that tiny spark of something wonderful that had ignited between her and Jensen Jones? She'd have to fill her nights somehow, so fantasizing about him was really quite smart.

* * *

Walker and Hudson were belly-laughing so hard in the lobby of Maverick Manor that Hudson actually had to stand up and catch his breath.

What was so hilarious, apparently, was the idea of their parents coming to Rust Creek Falls for a surprise fortieth anniversary party.

"A *planned* party wouldn't get them here," Walker said, running a hand through his blond hair. "God, I needed that laugh. Thanks, Jensen."

"They hate this town," Hudson said, sitting back down in his club chair, an expanse of Montana wilderness visible through the floor-to-ceiling window behind him. He picked up his beer and took a drink. "They showed up for our weddings, then turned around and flew home, grumbling all the way about Jones-stealing women and Rust Creek Falls not even being on the map."

"Those Jones-stealing women are their *daughters-in-law*. Jeez," Jensen said, sipping his scotch. "You'd think Mom especially would like some women in the family after five sons."

Walker popped a walnut from the dish on the table into his mouth. "I tried—hard. I talked to Dad about how much I

like Rust Creek Falls, that we can easily work from the Jones Holding satellite building we built in town, that we're—wait for it—*happy*, and he just doesn't get it. Or want to hear it."

"Lost cause," Hudson said, shaking his head. "I'm over it. You have to be. It's the only way to move on."

Family couldn't be a lost cause, though. If you gave up, that was it. You accepted defeat. Jensen knew Hudson had always had a hard time dealing with the Jones patriarch; he was the cowboy in the family, the one who'd always gone his own way.

He knew his father had to be proud of the way the Jones brothers had forged their own identities and paths. And to bring this family together, Jensen would do whatever it took.

"Forty years is a big deal," Jensen said. "That has to mean something."

Walker shrugged. "Look, you want to plan some big shindig, I'm in. But I remember you getting disappointed more than a time or two, Jensen. Mom and Dad don't care about anniversaries and family get-togethers. They never will."

"I'm in, too," Hudson said. "And I'm sure Autry will fly in from Paris with his family and that Gideon, who's traveling on company business, will make an appearance. But it will end up being just us celebrating our parents' anniversary. I seriously doubt Mom and Dad will show up."

Jensen grumbled to himself, staring hard at the trees and woodlands out the window. Why was everything he wanted—woman, land, anniversary party—not going his way? Maybe

whatever was in the water in Rust Creek Falls had a negative effect just on *him*. “I’ll figure something out,” Jensen said, taking another sip of his scotch.

Except he couldn’t figure anything out right now. Because from the moment he’d left Daisy’s Donuts this morning, feeling like the biggest jerk who ever lived, his mind had been a scramble. Why couldn’t he stop thinking about Mikayla Brown? Yes, she was lovely to look at and there was some kind of instantaneous chemical reaction between them that rarely happened—to him, at least. But the woman was very, very pregnant! About to have a baby.

And even if Jensen could overlook that one detail—one big detail—there was no way Mikayla was in the market for a casual weekend fling.

Yet he couldn’t shake the thought of seeing her for the first time sitting there and biting into that custard donut. The deep brown of her intelligent, kind eyes. The melodic sound of her laughter. Her calm voice. What the heck was her story? No wedding ring. Unmarried and pregnant in a small town like Rust Creek Falls.

“Since you’re so family oriented,” Hudson said, shaking him out of his thoughts, “you’re invited to the Stockton triplets’ party tomorrow afternoon. It’s not their birthday, but Auntie Bella can’t resist throwing a party for her brother’s adorable kids, so we’re celebrating the fact that all three triplets are potty trained.”

“A potty-trained party?” Jensen couldn’t help but laugh.

“Should I bring superhero underwear as a gift?”

“Actually, yes,” Hudson said. “Two boys and a girl, if you forgot. And Katie is nuts about Wonder Woman,” he added with a smile. “Listen, Bella would love to see you and catch up, so I hope you can make it.”

Triplets. That had to be a handful. Three handfuls.

Made one baby seem not quite as...scary.

Which made him think of Mikayla again. For all he knew she was having quintuplets, though. *So forget her, man, he told himself. She's off-limits. She's not looking for a good time. And that's all you can take on these days. A good time. No commitments. No future. No hurt feelings.*

“I’ll be there,” Jensen said. Which was what he wanted to hear his parents say when he made up some ruse to get them to their own party. Their own surprise party. He wanted to surprise them, wanted them to know their sons cared, even if they themselves had forgotten to show how much they did. And his parents did care, somewhere deep down where their feelings were buried—Jensen was sure.

He glanced at his watch. Guthrie Barnes had agreed to meet with him face-to-face to discuss the land deal. He had to be over there on the outskirts of town in fifteen minutes. He stood up and slapped down a fifty. “Drinks on me. See you tomorrow at the party.”

Walker raised an eyebrow. “This is Rust Creek Falls, Jensen. And Maverick Manor may be the most upscale place to get a

drink in town, but two good scotches and a beer still won't run you even close to fifty bucks."

"For the till, then, for the owner to stock up," he said, tipping the Stetson he'd bought specifically to make himself look more like a land guy than a businessman to Barnes.

In ten minutes, he'd parked the shiny black pickup he'd rented in front of the Barnes ranch house. He got out and surveyed the land, which stretched as far as he could see. The access road to the highway was two minutes away—perfect. And the location on the outskirts of town would allow convoys through and choppers to land out here without clogging up traffic in the center of town.

These hundred acres would be perfect for the crisis distribution center he was planning on. The man who'd been like a second father to him had died in a flash flood while volunteering not too far from here, and Jensen wanted to honor his memory, as did his brothers, in a way that would help the area and community. Davison Parkwell had been a very close friend of his father's once, but the two had had a falling-out and his father had refused to talk to him, let alone about him, in the past five years. Walker the Second hadn't even gone to Davison's funeral. But Davison had been there for Jensen in ways his father hadn't been, as a Boy Scout leader, a coach of his baseball team, a mentor. His dad had always been too busy, but Davison and his wife, who'd died years before him, hadn't had children and they'd doted on the Jones boys, particularly Jensen and Gideon, the two youngest, in any way they could. Not with money, which

they'd all had in truckloads, but with *time*. Whenever Jensen had had a problem, his heart and mind all messed up over a girl or a coach making him feel like dung or because he'd learned that all the Jones money couldn't buy what really mattered in life, he'd sought out Davison Parkwell, who'd listened and comforted and had taught him that riding out in the country could soothe a lot of ailments. He'd been right. Saddling up and taking off always managed to clear Jensen's head.

Maybe he'd go for a ride once he'd squared things away with Barnes. Anything to get his mind off Mikayla Brown, her brown eyes and her very pregnant belly.

But right now, Jensen was going to pay it back and pay it forward—just the way Davison would want. Victims of natural disasters, such as the Great Flood in Rust Creek Falls a few years ago, wouldn't have to wait for supplies and food and fresh water or shelter; they'd have a place to go right here.

Jensen glanced at the run-down farmhouse at the edge of the land. Peeling paint. Rotting posts. A barn that looked like it might collapse any day. What the hell? Why wouldn't Guthrie Barnes, clearly having financial issues, sell the land? Jensen was offering a small fortune. The old-timer had hung up on his assistant twice and told Jensen no on the phone once already.

Two old dogs with graying muzzles ran up to Jensen, and he gave them both a pat, waiting a beat for Barnes to come out. He didn't. Jensen walked up the three porch steps, the middle of which was half-gone, and knocked on the front door. He was

surprised he didn't punch a hole right through it.

Barnes opened the door but didn't step out or invite Jensen in. "I had you come out here face-to-face so I could make myself clearer than my previous noes have been. Obviously, you rich city types don't care what people like me have to say. You just keep coming, run roughshod. Well, you're not going to bulldoze me, Jones. My answer is *no*. Now go back to New York or wherever it is you come from."

With that, he slammed the door in Jensen's face. A piece of rotting wood fell off and landed on Jensen's boot.

"Well, guys," he said to the dogs, "that didn't go well." He peered in the window, but the old man shoved the curtains closed. He took another look at the falling-down house and shook his head. Stubborn old coot.

Jensen got back into the truck. This was the perfect land for the crisis distribution center and shelter. The perfect site. And his assistant had made clear to Barnes what Jensen's plans for the land were. The man had not been moved.

Frustrated, Jensen drove back to Walker's house, surprised, as he always was every time he saw the place, how magnificent it was—a luxury log cabin nestled in the woods. *I could live here*, he thought, breathing in the pine and listening to the blissful quiet, broken only by the sound of a wise owl, a coyote or crickets.

His brother and his wife weren't home, and as Jensen walked around, he was drawn to a photo on the gorgeous river-rock mantel over the huge stone fireplace in the living room, a picture

of the Jones family at his brother's wedding last year. *I'm gonna get you people together in two weeks for the party whether you like it or not*, he thought, tapping on the frame.

He moved down the mantel, looking at the many pictures. Happy family after happy family: his brother Hudson and his wife, Bella. Bella's brother Jamie Stockton, his wife, Fallon O'Reilly Stockton, and their triplets—the ones having the party tomorrow. His brother Walker and Lindsay. His brother Autry with Marissa and their three little girls in front of the Eiffel Tower. A shot of Gideon with a girlfriend, though they'd probably broken up by now. And then there was a picture of Jensen, alone. As usual, these days.

Something twisted in his gut, and he turned away from the mantel. Sometimes, usually late at night when he couldn't sleep, he'd get the unsettling feeling that life was moving on without him. His brothers were getting married, settling down. Then there was him, the bachelor without the plus-one, since he was afraid that even asking the women he dated to accompany him to events made them think things were more serious than they were. He wasn't interested in serious. Might never be again.

From the time he was knee-high, his parents had drummed it into his head that people would try to take advantage of him because of his money and family name. He'd vowed he would never be fooled. He could remember Davison dismissing that kind of talk with a wave of his hand and saying, "It's better to have loved and lost," and all that. But was it? What the hell did

Jensen have to show for loving Adrienne? A million-dollar loss. His trust stolen. His heart broken.

He didn't trust women anymore. Stupid and sad of him, maybe, but it was true.

A beautiful brunette with soulful brown eyes and a very pregnant belly came to mind again. Dammit. Why couldn't he shake the thought of her? He didn't know a thing about Mikayla Brown, what her situation was, if she had the support of family, if she had a significant other. Was she on her own? Why did he even care?

All he knew was that he couldn't get her off his damned mind. Which was why he'd steer clear of town and Mikayla Brown until he got Barnes to agree to the land deal, then hightail it out of Rust Creek Falls.

Chapter Three

Your baby will be soothed to sleep in this must-have bouncer that features gentle vibration and sweet lullabies.

Mikayla's gaze moved from the description on the box to the price tag. Two hundred ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents. Her heart plummeted. Baby Bonanza, a baby-supplies emporium in Kalispell, was supposed to have reasonable prices, but last week, when she'd driven out here to buy a crib, she'd been shocked by the cost and had to start a layaway account. She certainly couldn't afford this bouncer. Unless she took the packs of diapers, pajamas and onesies and the infant car seat and snap-in stroller base out of her cart.

Well, she already had a built-in bouncer that featured vibration and sweet lullabies: herself. There was a rocker right in her room at Sunshine Farm, and she'd hold her baby against her chest, gently rock the little one and sing Brahms's "Lullaby" herself. Who needed a bouncer for three hundred bucks?

I wish I could buy you everything, she said silently to her baby. She didn't have much in savings, and since her job at the day care had ended in June, she'd been unemployed for a couple months. Trying to get a new job when she was seven months pregnant seemed foolhardy, but she really had no choice. Perhaps she could find a job where she could bring her newborn.

Right. Because every workplace wanted a crying baby interrupting things.

You will figure it out, Mikayla. Trust in yourself.

She reached into her purse for the list of baby must-haves that Baby Bonanza had stacked at the front of the shop.

Crib. Bassinet. Bouncer. Play mat. Bottles. Wipes. Wipes warmer. Diaper master...

Apparently, a diaper master was a special little garbage pail in which you threw out diapers. Wouldn't a regular old garbage can with a lid work? For a quarter of the price?

"Ooh, I'm definitely getting that deluxe bouncer, Mom," a very pregnant woman said as she and an older woman walked up behind Mikayla. She was eyeing the model that had given Mikayla sticker shock. "Only the best for my little Arabella," she added while patting her belly. She looked to be around seven or

eight months along.

“That one only vibrates and plays music,” her mother said, reading the description on the side of the box. She pointed at another box on the shelf above. “This double-deluxe model says it vibrates *and* gently massages the baby, a must when cranky. It’s only fifty dollars more. Worth every penny.”

“Oh, definitely that one,” the expectant mom said. Her mother lifted the even more expensive model into the cart, which already had a lot of items.

Only fifty dollars more. Jeez. That’s two weeks’ worth of layaway payments for me.

It was just stuff, she reminded herself. And not what mattered.

An image of her own mother popped into her mind. Widowed when Mikayla was a teenager, Hazel Brown had been a wonderful mother, and Mikayla had lost her just three years ago to a car accident. How she wished her mother was here now, by her side, explaining things, telling her what to expect, telling her everything would be okay. At least she knew her mama was looking down on her, watching over her like a guardian angel.

Chin up, she moved away from the expensive bouncers. The next aisle was filled with baby blankets and crib sheets that were so adorable her heart lifted again. She could afford one package of sheets and a waterproof liner. After all, that was what laundry three times a day was for.

Smiling, she put into her cart a lemon-yellow sheet with tiny pastel animals, along with a waterproof pad, then turned and

headed for the checkout, but her gaze was caught by the cradle and crib aisle. Last week she'd put a beautiful white spindle crib on layaway. She stared at the floor model, struck by the fact that in just a couple months, the crib would be in her room at Sunshine Farm, her baby nestled inside on little animal-print sheets. She smiled at the rocking bassinets, one of which she'd also put on layaway, and the toddler beds in the shapes of race cars and butterflies. She couldn't even imagine her baby walking and talking and sleeping in a big-kid bed. That seemed so far down the road.

"Oh, how adorbs!" another expectant mom said—this time to her doting husband, who was pushing their cart with one arm around his wife. Their gold wedding rings gleamed in the dimly lit aisle.

Mikayla glanced over to see what was so "adorbs," and oh, God, it was. A plush baby blanket, hand knit, with little bulldogs on it. Each corner of the blanket had little chewing triangles for when the baby started teething.

"Aw, Oliver, these bulldogs look just like our Humphrey." Into the cart the forty-five-dollar baby blanket went. Mikayla knew the price because she'd ogled the blanket not two minutes ago.

And there she was, the hugely pregnant single woman with no ring, no husband, and not able to buy a quarter of what she wanted for her child.

She sighed and was about to turn toward the checkout when a

gorgeous man appeared at the other end of the aisle.

The gorgeous man she'd last seen running out of Daisy's Donuts. This morning he wasn't wearing a suit, as he had been yesterday. Today he was wearing sexy jeans, a navy blue Henley shirt, the zillion-dollar belt buckle and cowboy boots. His thick, silky blond hair was movie-star perfect, even though he probably hadn't done a thing to it.

Then suddenly he froze as he noticed Mikayla at the end of the aisle. "Mikayla?" He grinned. "Well, I guess if I'm going to run into you anywhere, it would be in a baby store."

She knew why she was here. But why was Jensen here? He wasn't a father, was he?

"Buying a little relative a gift?" she asked.

"My brother's nephews and niece," he said. She was momentarily mesmerized by his blue eyes and the slight crinkles at the corners, his strong nose and square jawline. "They're celebrating being potty trained with a party today, but I have no idea what to buy them as a gift."

She was trying to remember back to the bachelor/bachelorette party and the Jones brothers she'd met. "Oh, that's right—Hudson is married to Bella and she's Jamie Stockton's sister," she said. "I remember meeting Jamie and his wife. They have two-year-old triplets. They potty trained three babies at once? That's one heck of an achievement. Definitely partyworthy."

He grinned. "I don't doubt it. So I want to get them something worthy. Any ideas?"

“Hmm,” Mikayla said, glancing around. What would be just right for two-year-olds? “I noticed some wonderful educational toys and lots of great electronics in that aisle,” she said, pointing. “And those big stuffed animals are so adorable,” she added, gesturing at the three-foot-tall giraffe with a little seat built in. “Oh, I love those toddler beds in the shape of a race car and a butterfly.”

“Sold,” he said as his gorgeous blue eyes lit on the beds.

“What? Really?” She’d noticed the very high price tags when she was here last week. The beds cost a small fortune. Times three? A big fortune. The cost of things clearly didn’t faze him. When you were a Jones millionaire, it was probably like buying a cup of coffee at a gas station. Barely a blip on the budget.

She wondered what it would be like not to have a budget. But she truly couldn’t imagine.

“Do two-and-a-half-year-olds sleep in those kind of beds, or would they still be in cribs?” he asked.

“They’re probably just the age to move into big-kid beds,” she said.

“Perfect. I knew you were the woman to ask.”

“Ha, I have no idea what a newborn needs, let alone a toddler. I’m seven months along and just learning on the go. There must be a million books written about what to expect when you’re pregnant, but until I’m actually holding a newborn and need to do the zillions of things infants require...”

“I suppose you’ll hire a baby nurse,” he said. “That should

make things easier.”

She almost laughed. Baby nurse! Was he kidding with that one? As if she could afford another crib sheet in addition to the one in her cart, let alone a living, breathing, experienced baby nurse to care for her infant during the night while Mikayla got eight hours of interrupted sleep.

“Uh, *I'll* be the baby nurse. And nanny. And chief bottle washer.”

He smiled. “One-woman operation, huh?”

Her own smile faded. “Yeah. Just the way it is.”

Her heart pinching, Mikayla wanted to flee and stay at the same time. That was a weird dichotomy.

“So what are you buying today?” he asked, glancing in her cart.

“Just a crib sheet and some pajamas. I guess I can't help window-shopping for the nursery I'd love to have, but that's silly when I'm staying at Sunshine Farm and don't know when I'll move into my own place.”

He tilted his head and stared at her. “Sunshine Farm? Isn't that Luke and Eva's ranch house?”

She could feel her cheeks turning pink. She was pregnant and didn't even have her own place.

“That property is gorgeous,” he said. “I love the big yellow barn. I think I heard my brothers say the Stocktons intend to turn the place into a guest ranch.”

Mikayla nodded. “I'm trying to be a very good guest so that

I don't ruin their fantasy for them. But when the baby comes..." Her eyes widened and she grinned. "I can't believe they haven't told me to scram before my due date, but they apparently like the idea of a baby in the house."

He winced. Slightly, but he did. She knew what he was thinking: Who'd want to wake up in the middle of the night to a baby wailing? Or change a diaper—ever? Mikayla wondered if he'd feel differently if it were his own baby, but she figured he'd hire a day and night nurse if he ever had a kid of his own.

"Are you planning on staying in Rust Creek Falls permanently?" he asked.

"I really don't know," she said, quite honestly. "I'm kind of...figuring things out right now." Could the floor open up and swallow her and her cart? He'd probably never had to figure out the basics of life—like a place to live and money to buy a crib. *Move along, Mikayla*, she told herself. *There's no sense even making this man's acquaintance. You live on different planets.* "Well," she said with what probably looked like a forced smile. "I'd better get going. Nice to see you again, Jensen."

Too bad pulling her eyes off him was so hard. She could stand here and look at this man all day and night.

"Nice to see you again, too," he said, kind of wistfully, if she wasn't mistaken. Huh. Once again, Mikayla the Amazing Mind Reader had a good idea what he was thinking: *Shame she's pregnant. She could be showing me the sights around town, including lovers' lane, where we could have had some fun.*

Was there even a lovers' lane in Rust Creek Falls? As if Mikayla would know.

"Can I help you?" a store employee asked as she walked over, smiling at Mikayla and Jensen. "Oh, and congratulations, you two. Mommy and Daddy are getting their nursery in order before the big day, I see."

Mikayla turned beet red.

Jensen practically choked.

"Oh, we're not together," Mikayla rushed to say. *Why do I always feel the need to explain?* she wondered. For a second there, she'd been someone's wife, her baby had a father and she was setting up her nursery in advance of the big event. Just the way she'd dreamed.

The sales clerk cringed. "Sorry. I'm always putting my foot in my big mouth. You could have been brother and sister, too."

"We're definitely not," Jensen said. "I'll take three race car beds," he added to the clerk. "And they must be delivered this afternoon by one. Oh, and I'd like the beds personalized with the names across the fronts. Jared, Henry and Katie."

"Did you want the butterfly bed for Katie?" the salesclerk asked, pointing at the pink-and-purple bed.

Jensen shook his head. "Apparently, Katie loves cars just like her brothers, so a race car it is. Her favorite color is orange, so maybe her name can be stenciled in orange."

The manager nodded. After Jensen gave the delivery information, she said, "I'll make sure everything is correct and

delivered with bows by 1:00 p.m. to the Stockton residence in Rust Creek Falls.”

“Thanks,” Jensen said. Then he turned to Mikayla. “And thanks for your help. I never would have thought to buy the beds. They’re perfect.”

She managed a smile. “Well, ’bye,” she said too brightly and practically ran down the aisle to the checkout.

Crazy thing was, the moment she stopped, she missed being around him.

* * *

Well, the woman was definitely not trying to find herself a husband—and a rich one, at that, Jensen thought. She couldn’t get away from him fast enough.

He wondered why. Most single women flirted with him outright, making no mistake of their interest. Mikayla Brown’s interest was less than zero.

As he watched her wheel her cart to the checkout, Jensen stood about fifty feet away, partially blocked from view by a giant stuffed panda he pretended interest in buying. He was trying to come up with some reason to stall her, to talk to her more, maybe offer to take her for coffee—decaf—or an early lunch.

Why, though? he asked himself. *The woman is about to have a baby!* And the last thing Jensen planned to be was anyone’s daddy. Maybe in ten years. Or never. But definitely not in a couple of months.

“I’d like to put twenty-five dollars down on the crib I have on

layaway,” he heard Mikayla say to the cashier. “And I’d also like to add this car seat and snap-in stroller to my account.”

A crib and car seat on layaway. Jesus. He knew not everyone could afford everything they wanted right then and there, and racking up debt on credit cards wasn’t a great idea, but these seemed to be necessities for a newborn. It killed him.

When she left the store with her meager purchase of a crib sheet and two pairs of cotton pajamas, grand total \$24.52, he walked up to the cashier.

“I’d like to pay off the balance of Mikayla Brown’s layaway items,” he said. “The woman who just left.”

“Oh, she sure is lucky to have a guardian angel,” the woman said. She typed in Mikayla’s name into the computerized cash register. “Ah, the crib, a bassinet, diapers, wipes, a changing table and pad, and an infant car seat with a snap-in stroller.”

Just the basics, Jensen realized. He could do a lot better than that for her. “Does she have a wish list?”

“Oh, yes,” the woman said. “Helps our expecting mothers keep track of what they’d like, particularly for registries for baby showers.”

“I’ll pay off the layaway and also take everything on the wish list,” Jensen said.

The woman’s mouth dropped open. “Wow, you’re like a summertime Santa Claus.” She punched in a bunch of keys. “I can have everything delivered to Ms. Brown’s address—Sunshine Farm in Rust Creek Falls—by late this afternoon. We have

everything in stock here, and instant delivery is how we keep folks from going to the big-box store outside town.”

“Thanks for all your help,” Jensen said.

He felt much better as he exited the store into the bright August sunshine. He couldn't have Mikayla Brown, but he could help her out.

He lifted his face as the refreshing breeze ruffled his hair. This was a perfect morning for a long ride. Walker kept horses and had told Jensen to take one out whenever he wanted. A ride would clear his head, hopefully ridding it of Mikayla's beautiful face and her not-so-great life situation. He had to forget her.

So why the hell couldn't he?

“Last place I'd ever expect to see you, Jensen,” called out a familiar voice.

Jensen turned to find his brother Walker and Walker's wife, Lindsay, exiting their car in the parking lot of the baby store and heading toward him.

“I came out here to pick up some gifts for the potty party,” he said. “Try saying *that* five times fast.”

Lindsay laughed, tossing her long brown hair behind her shoulder. “Us, too. Oh, Jensen, I keep meaning to tell you. I've heard through the grapevine that several women in town are *very* interested in meeting you. Everyone keeps asking me, ‘Is he single? Seeing anyone? Should I tell my sister to go for it?’”

Walker shook his head with a grin. “I told you, Lindz. They're all wasting their time.”

She playfully socked her husband in the arm. “Oh, come on. Until I hear it from the man himself, I won’t believe you. Who wouldn’t want to meet the love of their life?”

No wonder Lindsay was such a good lawyer. She put it right out there. No escaping the truth.

“I’m open to a dinner out or seeing the sights around the county,” Jensen said. “But beyond that—no. I’m not looking for a relationship.”

“Every time a Jones man says that, one finds him,” Lindsay said. “So beware.”

Jensen froze as the image of Mikayla Brown putting two mere packages of baby pajamas on the checkout came to mind.

“Told you,” Walker said to his wife. “Look up the word *bachelor* in the dictionary and you’ll find a little photo of my kid brother—the ladies’ man Jensen Jones.”

“Ladies’ man?” Jensen said on a laugh. “I haven’t taken out one woman since I’ve been in Rust Creek Falls.”

“Yeah, because Dad’s been after you to get the hell out of here before some woman gets you to put a ring on her finger.”

“Don’t you have three stuffed animals to buy or something?” Jensen grumbled at his brother.

Lindsay cracked up. “We most certainly do. Come on, Walker. You’ve been ragging on your baby brother since he was born.”

“I owe you, Lindsay,” Jensen said.

He wasn’t anti-commitment in general. Just for himself. And maybe even just for now. For the next few years, at least. Maybe

when he was forty he'd settle down.

But as he watched his brother and his wife walk hand in hand into Baby Bonanza, once again he was struck by how alone in the world he was. He'd never really felt that way before, except when Adrienne betrayed him.

What in the hell was going on with him?

Chapter Four

"Mikayla, your fairy godmother is here," Eva called out from downstairs.

Huh? Mikayla got up from her bed, where she'd been making a list of possible jobs she could apply for after the baby was born, and glanced out the window. A huge Baby Bonanza truck was in front of the farmhouse.

She headed downstairs to find Eva standing at the front door, watching two burly guys taking out a giant box marked White Spindle Crib.

That's weird, she thought. That's the crib I put on layaway.

"Eva! Did you and Luke buy me that crib?" Mikayla asked, stunned.

Eva shook her head. "Wasn't me. And besides, you told me you planned to keep the baby bedside in a bassinet."

But then who? Amy? Maybe her cousin Brent?

The delivery guys leaned the box on the porch, then went back for another box, this one a deluxe bouncer—the exact one she'd ogled and had on her wish list. Wait—what? The porch was soon full of baby paraphernalia—all items that looked very familiar.

“Um, Eva, this is bizarre. This is everything from either my layaway account or my wish list at Baby Bonanza.”

“Rich relative?” Eva asked.

“Not a one,” Mikayla said. She knew Brent loved her, but not *this* much, and besides, he could barely keep himself afloat.

The burlier delivery guy held a clipboard and walked over to Mikayla. “I assume you’re Mikayla Brown. No offense,” he added, gesturing at her huge belly.

She smiled. “Well, I am the likely recipient of all this, but I didn’t order any of it. I mean, it’s all stuff from my layaway and wish list, but I owe a ton more on layaway and the wish list is exactly that—just wishful thinking. There must be some mistake.”

The guy glanced at the order form on his clipboard. “Nope. No mistake. Paid in full, including delivery and our tip. You can thank—” he scanned the sheet “—Jensen Jones.”

Eva gasped.

Mikayla’s mouth dropped open. *What?*

“Where should we place everything?” the delivery guy asked. “The order includes white-glove assembly.”

“Of course it does,” Eva said with a grin. “I take back what I said, Mik. You don’t have a fairy godmother. You have a fairy god*father*.”

Jensen Jones, any kind of father? Ha. Mikayla couldn’t see it. Hadn’t he run screaming—well, maybe not screaming—out of Daisy’s Donuts when he realized the woman he was trying to

pick up was pregnant?

But hadn't he also driven all the way to Kalispell to buy presents for his brother's triplet toddler nephews and niece? Granted, there wasn't a dedicated baby shop in Rust Creek Falls, but he could have bought three stuffed animals at Crawford's General Store and called it a day. He hadn't.

She bit her lip and recalled how she'd dashed off to the checkout, needing to put a little distance between them. He must have overheard her paying another week on her layaway, then gone and bought everything for her—including all the stuff she'd added to her wish list, items she'd never spend money on. A wipes warmer? Come on.

"Why would Jensen Jones have bought me all this?" Mikayla said more to the air than to Eva.

"Oh, I have a few ideas why." Eva turned to the delivery guy. "Upstairs, first room on the right."

"Wait a minute," Mikayla said, holding up a hand. "I can't accept this. Any of it." She glanced at the deluxe bouncer that had almost had her in tears in the store. The huge container of wipes and the crazy wipes warmer so the baby's tush wouldn't startle from a chill. The diaper pail. The beautiful white spindle crib on the side of the giant box. The Exersaucer. A play mat. Crib mobile. Bassinet. Changing table with a deluxe pad. The lovely pale yellow baby carriage. The blanket with the bulldogs. And so many onesies and pajamas.

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