



# MARRIAGE, MAVERICK STYLE!

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Christine Rimmer

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Christine Rimmer

**Marriage, Maverick Style!**

«HarperCollins»

## **Rimmer C.**

Marriage, Maverick Style! / C. Rimmer — «HarperCollins»,  
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THE MAVERICK MEETS HER MATCHRUST CREEK RAMBLINGSAs summer arrives in Rust Creek Falls, the town is bursting with babies...and the Gazette is bursting with news. Did you hear there's a new billionaire in town? President and CEO of Drake Distilleries and Drake Hospitality, Carson Drake is no one's baby daddy...at least, not yet. But the handsome, delicious Los Angeleno has his eye on our own Tessa Strickland, and things are about to get very interesting....Sweet, serious Tessa has had firsthand experience with heartbreak and is determined to avoid a second go-round. But after one unexpected night in Carson's sheltering arms, she begins to waver. Dear readers, that's only the beginning of the surprises. Saddle up and find out what happens when two commitment-phobes discover that love is life's richest reward!

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## **“You want *us* to be exclusive? That *is* what you’re talking about here, right?”**

She groaned at that. “See? I’m a mess when it comes to this relationship stuff. I just asked you to be my *friend* and ten minutes later I’m grilling you about other women, making you think I’m demanding exclusivity.”

“But you do want exclusivity, don’t you?” He had no doubt that she did. “See, that’s the thing, Tessa. You have to tell me what you want.”

She blew out her cheeks with a hard breath. “Well, how about if you could be exclusive for the next two weeks, anyway?”

Carson tried not to grin. “Even though we’re just friends?”

She covered her face with her hands. “We shouldn’t even be talking about this right now. It’s too *early* to be talking about this.”

He suggested, “How about this? I promise not to seduce any strange women for the next two weeks—present company excluded.”

She let her hands drop to her lap, revealing bright spots of red high on her cheeks. “Maybe you shouldn’t warn me ahead that you’ll be trying to seduce me.”

“Why not? We both know that I will, so the least I can do is be honest about it.”

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### **Montana Mavericks:**

The Baby Bonanza—

Meet Rust Creek Falls’ newest bundles of joy!

## **Marriage, Maverick Style!**

### **Christine Rimmer**



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

**CHRISTINE RIMMER** came to her profession the long way around. She tried everything from acting to teaching to telephone sales. Now she's finally found work that suits her perfectly. She insists she never had a problem keeping a job—she was merely gaining “life experience” for her future as a novelist. Christine lives with her family in Oregon. Visit her at [www.christinerimmer.com](http://www.christinerimmer.com).

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Carson Drake was ready to go home to LA.

As president and CEO of both Drake Distilleries and Drake Hospitality, Carson enjoyed luxury cars, willing, sophisticated women and very old Scotch, not necessarily in that order. As for small country towns where everybody knew everybody and every holiday included flag-waving and a parade?

Didn't thrill him in the least.

So what, really, was he doing here on the town hall steps in a tiny dot on the Montana map called Rust Creek Falls? Carson pondered that question as he watched the Rust Creek Falls Baby Bonanza Memorial Day Parade wander by. All around him flags waved. And there were babies. A whole bunch of babies.

Carson had nothing against babies. As long they belonged to someone else, babies were fine with him. But did he have any interest in watching a parade that featured babies?

The answer would be no.

Beside him, Ryan Roarke, a lawyer and Carson's friend of several years, said, "That's Emmet DePaulo." Ryan waved at a tall, thin older man on the Rust Creek Falls Medical Clinic float as it rolled by. The man was dressed in a white coat and had a stethoscope slung around his neck. "Emmet runs the local clinic with the help of Callie Crawford, who's—"

"Nate Crawford's wife, I remember," Carson finished for him. The Crawfords were one of the town's first families. Nate had a lot of influence in Rust Creek Falls, which meant he was someone Carson had made it a point to get to know.

Not that all the connections he'd forged in the past two weeks had done him much good, Carson thought glumly as he settled into a slouch against one of the pillars that flanked the steps. It had been a crazy idea, anyway. And he shouldn't let his lack of progress get him down. Not every gamble ended up in the win column. Sometimes a man simply had to accept that he was out of his element and going nowhere fast.

Carson was no quitter, but the plan wasn't happening. He needed to—

His mind went dead blank as he shoved off the pillar and snapped to his full height.

Who's that? he almost demanded of Ryan.

But he shut his mouth over the eager words and simply stared instead.

Damn. She was something. Just the sight of her had emptied his brain of rational thought and slammed all his senses straight into overload.

She rode one of the floats and was dressed as a stork. Had anyone asked him a moment before if a woman in a stork costume could be hot, he would have laughed. But she was hot.

Her thick brown hair poked out from under the long orange stork bill, escaping the white fluffy stork hood to curl around her flushed cheeks. She was perched on a box covered in white cotton batting—to make it look like a cloud, he assumed. In her wings, she held a tiny squalling baby wrapped up in a blue blanket. Her slim legs, encased in orange tights, ended in platterlike webbed orange feet. She should have looked ridiculous—and she did.

Ridiculous. Adorable.

And hot.

Giant pink-and-blue letters sprinkled with glitter proclaimed the float "The Rust Creek Falls Gazette."

"That's Kayla, Kristen's twin," Ryan said, which made zero sense to Carson.

But then he ordered his brain to start working again and noticed the other woman standing beside his beautiful stork. Rigged out to look like the Statue of Liberty, holding her torch high and wearing a pageant-style sash that read, "The Rust Creek Rambler," Miss Liberty waved and smiled as the float drifted past. She was the one Ryan had just called Kayla. Carson deduced this because the woman with the torch was a double for Ryan's wife, Kristen.

Ryan kept talking. "Kayla is the recently outed mystery gossip columnist known as—"

"Judging by the sash, I'm thinking the Rust Creek Rambler?"

"Right. Kayla had us all fooled. No one suspected she could be the one who knew everyone's secrets and put them in the Gazette. Kayla's quiet, you know? She's the shy one. Nothing like my Kristen."

Carson tuned his friend out. The sweet stork with the wailing blue bundle had all his attention once again.

As he stared, she actually seemed to feel his gaze on her; her slim body went perfectly still. Then, slowly, she turned her white, billed head his way—and bam! Just like in some sappy, romantic movie, their eyes collided and locked. And damned if it didn't feel exactly as they always made it seem in the movies. As though she had reached out and touched him. As though they'd just shared a private, way-too-intimate conversation.

As if they were the only two people in the world.

He gaped, and she stared back at him with her sweet mouth hanging open, clearly oblivious in that moment to everything but him, though the band across the street played loudly and badly and some kid nearby had set off a chain of firecrackers and the baby in her arms continued to wail.

What was it about her?

Carson couldn't have said. Maybe it was those big, shining eyes, or that slightly frantic look on her incomparable face—a face that reminded him of his perfect girl-next-door fantasy and some bold gypsy woman, both at the same time. Maybe it was the stork costume. Most of the women he knew wouldn't be caught dead dressed as a stork.

But whatever it was about her that had him gaping like a lovesick fool, he had to meet her.

Her float rolled on past. Next came the Veterans of Foreign Wars float, with men and women in uniform holding babies in camo and waving way too many flags. As the band launched into “The Ballad of the Green Berets,” Carson tried to figure out what had just happened to him.

Slowly, reality crept in—reality wrapped in a blue blanket and wailing.

The woman had a baby, for God's sake. Carson liked his women free and unencumbered. And there was not only the baby to consider but also the real possibility of a husband.

Was he losing his mind? He would never make a move on a woman with a baby. If she had a husband that would simply be wrong. And if she didn't, well, there would still be the baby. If he'd wanted kids, he wouldn't be divorced.

You'd think he'd been sampling the magic moonshine that had brought him to Montana in the first place, the magic moonshine created by a local eccentric named Homer Gilmore. Carson wanted the moonshine formula for Drake Distilleries. So far, he'd gotten nowhere near his admittedly out-there goal.

Which was why he'd just about convinced himself to give up and go home.

But the sight of the girl changed all that. The sight of the girl had him thinking that he didn't really want to give up. He just needed something to go right; that was all. He needed a win.

Meeting the adorable girl in the stork costume would definitely cheer him up, even with the damn baby—as long as there was no husband involved.

So then. First and foremost, he needed to find out if she was already taken.

At least that was easily done.

He asked Ryan, “Did you see the girl in the stork costume?”

Ryan gave it right up. “Tessa Strickland. Lives in Bozeman. She's visiting her grandparents at their boardinghouse.”

Tessa. It suited her. “Married to...?”

Ryan shot Carson a narrow-eyed, you-can't-fool-a-lawyer look. “You're interested in Tessa. Why?”

“Ryan, is she married or not?”

His friend shoved back that shock of sable hair that was always falling over his forehead. “Tessa's single.”

“But with a baby.”

“You are interested.”

“Would that somehow be a problem?”

Ryan smirked. “No problem at all. And Tessa's got no baby.” She's single, no baby. Things were definitely looking up. Ryan added, “The baby is Kayla's—you remember, Kristen's sister, the Rust Creek Rambler in the Lady Liberty costume?”

Not that it really mattered but... “How do you know who that baby belongs to?”

“I will repeat, Tessa doesn't have a baby, whereas Kayla is married to Trey Strickland, and they have a son. Little Gilmore is just two months old. Kayla gave up her job writing the gossip column last year. She and Trey live down in Thunder Canyon now, but they come back to visit often. Somebody

else writes the Rambler column now. Nobody knows who, but apparently someone talked Kayla into riding on the float. For old time's sake would be my guess."

"Props to you, man. You're here six months and you know everything about everyone."

Ryan extended both arms wide. "Welcome to my new hometown." Actually, Ryan and Kristen lived in nearby Kalispell, but why quibble over mere facts? And Ryan was smirking again. "The baby's named Gilmore. Get it?"

Carson stared at him, deadpan. "You're not serious."

"As a guilty verdict."

"They named their baby after Homer Gilmore?"

"Yes, they did."

"Who names their kid after a crazy old homeless guy?"

Ryan leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Kayla and Trey first got together last Fourth of July..." He arched a dark eyebrow as he let the sentence trail off.

Carson took his meaning. "You're telling me that they 'got together' over a glass of Homer's moonshine and in the biblical sense?"

"You said it—I didn't." The previous Fourth of July, a lot of women had drunk the famous moonshine, left their inhibitions behind and ended up pregnant—thus, the current Baby Bonanza. Ryan added, "As for why Tessa was holding Kayla's baby, I'm guessing that managing the torch and the baby was too much for Kayla, so she got Tessa to carry Gil—and you're definitely interested. Just admit it."

"I have another question."

"Carson. Admit it."

"Wait. Listen. Kayla's husband is a Strickland, you said, same as Tessa. So then, Trey Strickland must be Tessa's brother, right?"

"Wrong. Trey and Tessa are cousins and—Carson, what are you up to here? We've been friends a long time. I'm happy to introduce you around and tell you everything you need to know. But you've got to be up front with me. I care about what happens in this town. What do you want with Tessa?"

Carson met Ryan's eyes—and admitted the truth. "I think she's gorgeous, and I want to meet her. Is there something wrong with that?"

Ryan made a low, self-satisfied sound. "I knew it. Rust Creek Falls is getting under your skin."

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is. You're just like the rest of us."

"Uh-uh."

"Oh, yeah. You'll fall in love with Tessa, and you'll never want to leave."

Carson had to make an effort not to scoff. "I just want to meet the girl. Can you make that happen?"

"Consider it done."

\* \* \*

Tessa rocked the crying baby and ordered her racing heart to slow down.

But baby Gil kept right on bawling, and Tessa's heart kept beating way too fast and much too hard. Dear God, she was horrible with babies. They were so small and vulnerable and she always felt like she was holding them wrong. And boy, did little Gil have a set of lungs on him. How could someone so tiny make such a racket?

"Shh now, it's okay. Shh, sweetie, shh..." She tried to sound soothing as her heart galloped a mile a minute and a voice in her brain ordered her to toss the baby to his mother, leap right down off the moving float and run away from Main Street as fast as her webbed feet would carry her.

She really did need to get out of there. And she needed to do it ASAP, before he found her—and, no, she didn't know him. She'd never seen the man before in her life. She had no idea who he was or what he was doing in town.

What she did know, what she'd known at the first sight of him, was that he would be looking for her.

She had to make certain that he didn't find her. Because that man was nothing but trouble for someone like her.

Oh, yeah. One look at him and she knew it all.

Because he had it all. Tall, broad-shouldered and killer-hot, he had dark, intense eyes and thick brown hair, chiseled cheekbones and a beautiful, soft, dangerous mouth. He'd looked like he owned the place—the steps he stood on, the town hall behind him, the whole of Rust Creek Falls and the valley and mountains around it.

Tessa could tell just from the perfect cut of his jacket and the proud set of those broad shoulders that he had money to burn.

Just the sight of him, just the way he'd looked at her...

Oh, she knew the kind of man he was, knew that look he gave her. That look was as dangerous as that beautiful mouth of his.

The last time she'd met a man who gave her that kind of look, she'd thrown away her job, her future, everything, to follow him—and ended up two years later running home to Bozeman to try to glue the shattered pieces of her life back together.

No way could she afford a disaster like that again.

Kayla glanced down at her. "You doing okay, Tessa?"

"Fine," she lied and rocked the howling Gil some more.

"Just hold on. We're almost there."

There was Rust Creek Falls Elementary School, where the parade had started and would end after a slow and stately procession up one side of Main Street and back down the other.

Why couldn't they hurry a little?

At this pace, he would probably be waiting for her, standing there in the parking lot, the sun picking up bronze highlights in his thick brown hair, looking like a dream come true when she knew very well he was really her worst nightmare just waiting to happen all over again.

Yes, she'd been instantly and powerfully attracted to him. The look on that too-handsome face had said he felt the same. And that was the problem.

Tessa knew all too well where such powerful attractions led: to the complete destruction of the life she'd so painstakingly built for herself. She would not make that mistake twice. Uh-uh. No way.

Five minutes later—minutes that seemed like forever—they turned into the school parking lot. As soon as the float stopped rolling, Tessa jumped to her feet. Taking pity on her, Kayla set down her Lady Liberty torch and reached for the baby.

Gil stopped crying the second his mother's arms closed around him. "Thanks, Tessa." Kayla gave her a glowing, new-mommy smile.

Tessa was already jumping to the blacktop, headed for her battered mini-SUV on the far side of the lot. "No problem. Happy to help," she called back with a quick wave.

"We'll see you at the picnic," Kayla called after her.

Tessa waved again but didn't answer. She wouldn't be going to the Memorial Day picnic in the park, after all. He was far too likely to show up there, all ready to help her ruin her life for a second time.

She hurried on, grateful beyond measure that she'd thought to drive her car. It wasn't that far to her grandmother's boardinghouse, but her stupid webbed stork feet would have really slowed her down. Not to mention, she was far too noticeable dressed as a big white bird.

Yes, she realized it was absurd to imagine that the dark-eyed stranger with whom she'd exchanged a single heated glance might be coming to find her, might even now be on her trail, determined to run her to ground. Absurd, but still...

She knew he would be looking for her, knew it in the shiver beneath her skin, the rapid tattoo of her pulse, the heated rush of her blood through her veins. She could taste it on her tongue with every shaky breath she drew.

It was ridiculous for her to think it, but she thought it, anyway. He would be coming after her.

And she needed to make sure he didn't find her. Getting to the safety of the boardinghouse was priority number one.

Main Street was packed with parade-goers, so she took North Broomtail Road. Tessa had her windows down. As she rolled along, she could smell the burning hickory wood from the big cast-iron smokers trucked to Rust Creek Falls Park before dawn. The giant racks of ribs and barbecue would have been slow-smoking all day long. The picnic in the park would go on for the rest of the day and into the night.

At Cedar Street she turned left. A minute later, she was pulling into the parking lot behind a ramshackle four-story Victorian—her grandmother's boardinghouse. Strickland's Boarding House was purple, or it used to be years ago. The color had slowly faded to lavender gray.

Tessa parked, jumped out and headed for the steps to the back porch, her ridiculous orange stork feet slapping the ground with each step. She didn't breathe easy until she was inside and on her way up the narrow back stairs.

In her room, she shut and locked the door and wiggled out of the stork suit. She felt sweaty and nervous and completely out of sorts, so she put on her robe, grabbed her toiletries caddy and went down the hall to the bathroom she shared with the tenant in the room next to hers. It was blessedly empty—the whole house felt empty and quiet. Everyone was probably celebrating on Main Street or over at the park.

She took her time, had a nice, soothing shower, slathered herself in lotion afterward and put real care into blowing her unruly curls into smooth, silky waves. She put on makeup, too—which didn't make a lot of sense if she planned to hide in her room for the rest of the day.

But that was the thing. By the time she got around to applying makeup, an hour had passed since she'd locked eyes with the stranger on Main Street. As the minutes ticked by, her panic and dread had faded down to a faint edginess mixed with a really annoying sense of anticipation.

Come on. He was just a guy—yeah, a really hot guy with beautiful, intense eyes and a mouth made for kissing. But just a guy, nonetheless. It was hardly a crime to be hot and rich and look kissable, now, was it?

She'd overreacted—that was all. And it was silly to let a shared glance with a stranger ruin her holiday. The more she considered the situation, the more determined she became not to run away from this guy.

She was not hiding in her room.

She was taking this out-of-nowhere attraction as a good sign, a sort of reawakening, an indication that she really had recovered—from the awful, depressing way it had ended with Miles and from the loss of the hard-earned, successful life that she'd so cavalierly thrown away to be with him.

Tessa returned to her room and dressed in a white tank that showed a little bit of tummy. She pulled on skinny jeans and her favorite red cowboy boots. She looked good, she thought. Confident. And relaxed.

On the way out the door, she grabbed her Peter Grimm straw cowboy hat with the studs and rhinestones, the leopard-print accents and the crimson cross overlay. The park was half a block from the boardinghouse, so she left her car in the boardinghouse lot and walked.

She was going to have a good time today, damn it. The past didn't own her. Not anymore.

A single shared glance during the parade didn't mean a thing. That man was a complete stranger, and he'd probably forgotten all about her by now.

Most likely, she'd never see the guy again.

[Chapter Two](#)

Tessa left the sidewalk and started across the rough park grass. She strode confidently toward the rows of coolers filled with ice and canned soft drinks.

Halfway there, Ryan Roarke caught her arm. “Tessa. Come on over here. There’s someone I want you to meet.”

She turned—and there he was, not twenty feet away under a cottonwood, with Kristen, Kayla and Trey. He stared right at her, a sinful look in those beautiful eyes and a smile playing at the corners of his too-tempting mouth. She half stumbled at the sight of him.

Ryan steadied her. “Whoa. You okay?”

She was. Absolutely. She was meeting Mr. Tall, Dark and Dangerous, and it would be fine. Because he was not Miles and now was not then. “Whoa is right. I think I stepped in a gopher hole.”

Ryan, who was playful and smooth and a little bit goofy all at the same time, gave her a knowing grin. “Gotta watch out for those.”

“Tell me about it.”

Ryan led her to the group under the cottonwood. She gave Kristen and Trey each a hug and touched Kayla’s arm in greeting.

And then the moment came. He spoke to her. “Hello, Tessa.” She lifted her chin and met those dark eyes—really, he was much too tall. Six-four, at least. Too tall, too hot, too...everything. She felt breathless all over again, felt that hungry shiver slide beneath her skin.

Ryan said, “Tessa, this is Carson Drake. He’s up from LA on business. I’ve known him for years, used to do legal work for him now and then.”

Tessa swallowed her breathlessness and teased, “Are you telling me he’s harmless and I should trust him?”

Ryan hesitated. “Harmless. Hmm. Don’t know if I’d go that far.”

“Don’t listen to him,” the man himself cut in gruffly. Then he stage-whispered to Ryan, “You’re supposed to be on my side, remember?”

“Well, I am on your side, man. I’m just not sure if harmless is the right word for you.”

Kristen moved in close to her husband. She tipped her head up and pressed a kiss to Ryan’s square jaw. “Sweetheart, Tessa’s all grown up. She can handle Carson.”

Tessa made a show of rolling her eyes. “Why am I feeling like I’m being set up here?”

“Because I asked to meet you.” That deep, velvety voice rubbed along her nerve endings like an actual caress. Her stomach hollowed out as she stared into his eyes. The warning bells in her head started ringing again, loud and clear.

She ignored them. They were getting no power over her. It was a beautiful day, and she meant to have fun. She looked straight at Carson again, took the full force of those dark eyes head-on. “So, Carson. What kind of business is it that brings you to Rust Creek Falls?”

Ryan volunteered, “He’s here to try and make a deal with Homer Gilmore.”

She kept looking at Carson. He stared right back at her. “What could Homer possibly have that you would want?”

“I want to talk to him about that famous moonshine of his.”

“You want to buy some moonshine?”

“I want to buy the formula.”

“Had any luck with that?”

“Not a lot. I’ve been here two weeks trying to set up a meeting with the man. It’s not happening—though Homer has called me four times.” Carson’s brow furrowed. “At least, I think it was him. But then, I understand he’s homeless. Does he even have a phone? And how did he get my cell number, anyway? Maybe someone’s just pranking me.” He sent Ryan a suspicious glance.

Ryan put up both hands. “Don’t give me that look. If you’ve been pranked, it wasn’t me.”

Kayla suggested, “Homer always knows more than you’d think. He’s a very bright man, and he has a big heart. He’s just a little bit odd.”

Tessa asked Carson, “So what did Homer—if it even was Homer—say when he called you?”

He gazed at her so steadily. A ripple of pleasure spread through her at the obvious admiration in his eyes. “Homer told me that he knew I was looking for him and he was ‘working’ on it.”

“Working on what?”

Carson lifted a shoulder in a half shrug. “Your guess is as good as mine. He said he might be willing to talk business with me. Soon.”

Trey prompted, “And?”

“And that’s it.”

“He called you four times and that’s all he said?” Kristen asked.

“Pretty much. It was discouraging. You’d think a homeless person would be eager to meet with someone who only wants to make him rich. Not Homer Gilmore, apparently.”

“You’re serious?” Tessa didn’t really get it. “You want to buy Homer’s moonshine formula and that’s going to make him rich?”

“That’s right.” Carson reached out and took her hand. His touch sent warmth cascading through her. He pulled her closer—and she let him. “Come on. Let’s get a drink.” He wrapped her fingers around his arm. She felt the pricey fabric of his sport coat, the rock-hard muscles beneath, and she didn’t know whether she was scared to death or exhilarated. Carson Drake was even more gorgeous and magnetic close up than from a distance. And he smelled amazing. He probably had his aftershave made specifically for him—bespoke, no doubt, from that famous perfumer in London, at a cost of thousands for a formula all his own.

And it was worth every penny, too.

He gave her a smile.

Pow! A lightning strike of wonderfulness, a hot blast of pure pleasure. It felt so good, to have this particular man looking at her as though there was no one else in the world—too good, and she knew it.

She’d been here before and she should get away. Fast.

But she did nothing of the sort. Instead, she said, “I’ll have a drink with you—but only if you tell me more about how you’re going to buy Homer’s moonshine formula and then make him rich.”

“Done.”

They waved at the others and he led her to the row of coolers, where he grabbed a Budweiser and she took a ginger ale. Arm in arm, they wandered beneath the trees looking for a place to sit—and stopping to visit with just about everyone they passed. Two weeks he’d said he’d been in town. He certainly hadn’t wasted any time getting to know people.

Eventually, they found a rough wooden bench at the foot of a giant fir tree. They sat down together, and Carson told her about his clubs and restaurants in Southern California and about Drake Distilleries.

“I know your products,” she said. “High-end Scotch, rye and whiskey. Vodka and gin, too. And are you telling me you’re hoping to bottle and sell Homer’s moonshine in liquor stores all over the country?”

“All over the world, as a matter of fact.”

“Wow.”

“My family has been making good liquor for nearly a hundred years. When the story of the magic moonshine popped up on the wire services and the web, I read all about it. That was when it happened. I got the shiver.”

“Which shiver is that?”

“The one I get when I have a great idea—like packaging Homer’s moonshine for international distribution under the Drake label.”

“Sounds a little crazy to me.”

“Sometimes the best ideas are kind of crazy. I called Ryan. He gave me more details. Homer’s famous formula is supposed to be delicious. I want to find out if it’s as good as everyone seems to think—and if it is, I want it.”

“Be careful,” she warned. “Last Fourth of July, people drank Homer’s moonshine and then did things they didn’t even remember the next morning.”

“I take my business seriously,” he replied, his eyes level on hers. “And there are a lot of laws governing the bottling and distribution of alcoholic spirits. If I ever get my hands on Homer’s formula, there will be extensive testing and trials before the finished product ever reaches the marketplace.”

She tipped her head down and found herself staring at his boots. They were cowboy boots. Designer cowboy boots. The kind that cost as much as a used car. She sighed at the sight and lifted her gaze to him again. “It is kind of magical, what happened last year. I wasn’t here, but everyone said people had the best time of their lives. There was a lot of hooking up.”

“Thus, the Baby Bonanza.”

“Exactly. People behaved way out of character, lost all control. Homer put the moonshine in the wedding punch, which was only supposed to have a small amount of sparkling wine in it. Nobody knew what they were drinking.”

“I heard about that, too. The old fool is lucky nobody sued his ass.”

“At first no one knew how the punch got spiked. For a while, there was talk about tracking down the culprit and putting him in jail. It was months before Homer confessed that he was the one.”

“Was he ever arrested or even sued?”

“Nope. By then, folks were past wanting him to pay for what he’d done. It was getting to be something of a town legend, one of those stories people tell their kids, who turn around and tell their kids. It was as if Homer’s moonshine allowed people to be...swept away, to do the things they would ordinarily only dream of doing. I mean, this little town is not the kind of place where people go to a wedding reception in the park and then wake up the next morning with a stranger, minus their clothes.”

He leaned closer, so his forehead almost touched the brim of her hat, bringing the heat of his big body and the wonderful, subtle scent of his skin. “The whole aphrodisiac angle could be interesting—for marketing, I mean.”

“Marketing.” She put some effort into sounding less breathless and more sarcastic. “Because sex sells, right?”

“You said it—I didn’t.” His mouth was only inches from hers.

She thought about kissing him, and wanted that. Too much. To get a little distance, she brought up her hands and pushed lightly at his chest. “You’re in my space.”

One corner of that sinful mouth kicked up. “I think I like it in your space.”

She kept her hands on that broad, hard chest, felt the strong, even beating of his heart—and slowly shook her head.

He took the hint, leaning back against the bench again and sipping his beer. “Ryan tells me you’re from Bozeman.”

“Born, bred and raised.”

“You have a job there in Bozeman, Tessa?”

“I’m a graphic designer. I freelance with a small Bozeman firm—and I mean very small, so small the owner closes it down every summer.”

“And that gives you a chance to have a nice, long visit in beautiful Rust Creek Falls every year?”

“Exactly. I also take work on my own. I have a website, StricklandGraphix.com—that’s an x instead of a cs, in case you’d like to pay me a whole bunch of money to design your next marketing campaign.”

“Are you good?”

“Now, how do you think I’m going to answer that?”

“Tell me you’re terrific. I like a woman with confidence.”

She took off her hat and dropped it on the bench between them. “Glad to hear it. Because when it comes to design, I know my stuff.” Even if I was blackballed from the industry and am highly unlikely to work in a major design firm or ad agency ever again.

“Where did you study?”

“The School of Visual Arts.”

“In New York?”

She poked him with her elbow. “Your look of complete surprise is not the least flattering.”

“That’s a great school.” He said it with real admiration.

She shouldn’t bask in his approval. But she did. “One of the best. I worked in New York for a while after I graduated.”

“What brought you home to Bozeman?”

“Now, that’s a long story. One you don’t need to hear right this minute.”

“But I would love to hear it.” He was leaning close again, his arm along the back of the bench behind her, all manly and much too exciting. “You should tell me. Now.” How did he do that? Have her longing to open her mouth and blather out every stupid mistake she’d ever made?

Uh-uh. Not happening. “But I’m not telling you now—so let it go.”

“Maybe you’ll tell me someday?” He sounded almost wistful, and that made her like him more, made her think that he was more than just some cocky rich guy, that there was at least a little vulnerability under the swagger.

“I guess anything’s possible,” she answered, keeping it vague, longing to move on from the uncomfortable subject.

Again, he retreated to his side of the bench. She drank a sip of ginger ale. Finally, he said, “You looked amazing in that stork costume.”

“Oh, please.”

“You did. You looked dorky and sweet and intriguing and original.”

“Dorky, huh?”

“Yeah. Dorky. And perfect. Almost as perfect as you look right now. I couldn’t wait to meet you. And now I never want to leave your side.”

“I’ll bet.”

He put up a hand as though swearing an oath. “Honest truth.”

She let out a big, fake sigh. “Not so perfect with babies, unfortunately. Poor little Gil—that’s Kayla and my cousin Trey’s baby, the one I was holding during the parade.”

“I remember.”

“Did you hear him wailing?”

“I did. Yes.”

“He’s probably scarred for life after having me hold him for the whole parade.”

“I’m not much of a baby person, either,” Carson confessed with very little regret.

She teased, “So you’re saying that we have something in common?”

“I’ll bet we have a lot in common.” He sounded way too sincere for her peace of mind. She tried to think of something light and easy to say in response, but she had nothing. He picked up her hat, tipped it back and forth so the rhinestone accents glittered in the sunlight, and then set it back down between them. “Any particular reason you rode the Gazette’s float?”

“Two reasons. One, I need work and I’m trying to get in good with the paper’s editor and publisher. I love Rust Creek Falls and I’m considering moving here permanently—if I can pull enough business together from my website and locally to make ends meet, that is.”

“And the second reason?”

She leaned closer and whispered in his ear, “The stork costume fit me.”

He chuckled at that. Then he asked about her family. “Ryan told me that you’re staying at your grandmother’s boardinghouse.”

She explained that she had two sisters, one of whom still lived in Bozeman, as did their mom and dad. “My other sister, Claire, her husband, Levi, and Bekka, their little girl, live here at the boardinghouse. Levi manages a furniture store in Kalispell and Claire is the boardinghouse cook.”

Carson listened to her ramble on. He really seemed to want to know everything about her. She found his interest flattering.

Maybe too flattering. Was she playing with fire?

Of course not. She’d met an interesting, attentive man, and she was enjoying his company.

Nothing wrong with that.

Eventually, they got up and each took a beer from the coolers. They visited with friends and family until the barbecue came off the smokers; then they sat together at a picnic table with Ryan and Kristen, Trey and Kayla. Tessa’s sister Claire and her husband, Levi, joined them, too.

Tessa was having a fabulous time.

Her original fears about Carson seemed so silly now. He liked her. She liked him.

It was a beautiful day, and she was spending it with a handsome, hunky guy. It would go nowhere, and she was happy with that. Before very long he would return to his glamorous life in LA. She would stay right here in Rust Creek Falls, enjoying her summer break and trying to figure out what to do with the rest of her life.

Later, as twilight fell, she and Carson got a blanket from his car. They spread the blanket on the grass, got comfortable and talked some more.

She confessed that she was kind of at a crossroads, trying to decide where to take her graphic design career. There was her nice, safe job in Bozeman and the growing business she was building through her website. “I kind of want to try leaving the Bozeman job and focusing on freelancing independently, but it’s tricky.”

He stuck his long legs out in front of him and crossed them at the ankles. “I thought you said you wanted to move here, to Rust Creek Falls.”

“I do, but that doesn’t really fit with my ambitions for work. I’m slowly accepting that eventually I need to choose between trying again for a more ambitious career and a move here.”

“Go big,” he suggested.

“And what, exactly, does that mean?”

He shrugged. “You need to be where the action is. Why don’t you move to LA?”

She set her hat on the blanket between them and stretched out on her back. Folding her hands on her stomach, she stared up at the darkening sky. “You weren’t listening to me.”

He leaned over her and touched her chin with a light brush of his finger, causing a bunch of small, winged creatures to take flight in her belly. “I would be there. To help you get settled.”

She tried to keep it light. “Oh, I just bet you would.”

“Can you dial back the sarcasm?” He held her eyes.

“Carson, you hardly know me.”

“And that’s my point. I want to know you better.”

There was a moment—a long, sweet one—when he gazed down at her and she looked up at him. The world seemed wide-open at that moment, bright and so beautiful, bursting with hope and limitless possibility.

He whispered, “It’s just a thought.”

“Don’t tempt me.” She meant it to sound teasing. Flirtatious. But somehow, it came out too soft. Too full of yearning.

But then the band started playing over by the portable dance floor beneath the warm glow of the party lights strung between the trees.

“Come on.” He took her hand and pulled her to her feet. “Let’s dance.”

And they did dance. For over an hour, they never left the floor. He was more than a foot taller than her, but when he wrapped his big arms around her, it felt only...right. He knew the two-step and how to line dance.

When she told him she hadn't expected an LA boy to know the cowboy dances, he laughed. "You oughta see my disco moves."

"Okay, Carson. Now you're starting to freak me out."

Eventually, they got bottles of water from the coolers and returned to the blanket. Theirs was a great spot, out of the way of the action, shadowed and private, with only the thick swirl of the stars and the waning moon overhead for light.

They whispered together like a couple of bad children plotting insurrections against unwary adults. He told her that he'd been married to his high school sweetheart, Marianne. "Marianne wanted to start a family right away."

"And you didn't want kids, right?"

"Right. I realized I'd married too young. We divorced. She remarried a couple of years later. Her husband Greg's a great guy. They have four kids."

She stretched out on her back again and stared up at the stars. "So you're saying she's happy?"

"Very. I don't see much of her anymore, but it's good between us, you know? We're past all the ugly stuff. She ended up finding just what she wanted."

"And what about you?"

"I'm happy, too. I like my life. It's all worked out fine." He leaned over her, bending closer.

It just seemed so natural, so absolutely right, to offer her mouth to him, to welcome his kiss.

His lips settled over hers, light as a breath. They were every bit as soft and supple as they looked. She sighed in welcome as little prickles of pleasure danced through her, and she was glad, so glad, that she'd denied her silly fears and come to the park, after all. That she'd met this charming man and was sharing a great evening with him.

When he pulled back, his eyes were darker than ever. "What is it about you, Tessa? I can't take my eyes off you. I feel like I've known you forever. And how come you taste so good?"

She laughed. "Oh, you silver-tongued devil, you." She was trying to decide whether or not to kiss him again when a raspy throat-clearing sound came from a clump of bushes about ten feet away.

Tessa sat up. "What was that?"

Carson challenged, "Who's there?"

Branches rustled—and an old man emerged from right out of the center of a big bush. He wore baggy black jeans, a frayed rope for a belt, battered lace-up work boots and the dingy top half of a union suit as a shirt. Bristly gray whiskers peppered his wattled cheeks. What was left of his hair stood up at all angles.

Tessa recognized him instantly. "Homer Gilmore, were you eavesdropping on us?"

### [Chapter Three](#)

Homer Gilmore blinked as though waking himself from a sound sleep—and then he grinned wide, showing crooked, yellowed teeth. "Well, if it ain't little Tessa Strickland. Stayin' at your grandma's place for the summer?"

"Yes, I am. And you didn't answer my question."

Homer scratched his stubbly cheek. "Me? Eavesdropping?" He put on a hurt expression. "Tessa, you know me better than that."

Beside her, Carson rose smoothly to his feet and held down a hand for her. She took it, and he pulled her up to stand beside him.

Homer came toward them.

Carson seemed bemused. "Homer Gilmore. Face-to-face at last."

Homer recognized him. "Carson Drake." He accepted Carson's offered hand and gave it a quick pump before letting go. "Told you I'd be in touch."

“So then, that really was you on the phone?”

“Course it was.” Homer had a mason jar of clear liquid in his left hand. “Here.” He shoved it toward Carson.

Carson eyed the jar doubtfully. “What’s this?”

“This is what you came here to get.” Homer grabbed Carson’s hand and slapped the jar into it.

“No kidding.” Carson held the jar up toward the party lights in the distance. “Homer Gilmore’s magic moonshine?”

“The one and only.” Homer spoke proudly, puffing out his scrawny chest. “Truth is, I like your style, kid. And here’s what I want you to do. Try a taste or two. See what you think. Then we can talk.”

“I’m sorry.” Carson actually did sound regretful. “It doesn’t work that way.” He tried to hand the jar back.

Homer refused to take it. “I say how it works. Taste it.”

“Look, we need a meeting. A real meeting. Yes, there should be sampling, but formal sampling, in a professional setting. And chemical analysis, of course—but all that comes later. First, how about we meet for dinner and we can discuss—”

“Hold on.” Homer put up a hand. “We’ll get to the talk and the dang analysis. But first, you try it. This deal goes nowhere until you do.”

“Homer, you’re not listening to me. I can’t just—”

“Nope. Stop. You heard what I said. Have yourself a taste. After that, we’ll talk.”

“When, exactly, will we talk?”

“Don’t get pushy, kid. I’ll be in touch.”

Carson opened his mouth to say something else—but then shut it without saying anything. Tessa got that. What was the point? Homer wasn’t listening. With a wink and a nod in her direction, the old man turned and walked away. Tessa and Carson stared after him as he vanished into the darkness of the trees.

Baffled, Carson stared down at the jar in his hand. “I don’t believe this.”

Tessa dropped to the blanket again. “It’s Homer. What can you expect?”

“You think he might be crazy?”

“Of course not. He’s a little peculiar, that’s all. Being an oddball doesn’t make you crazy. Kayla had it right. He really does have a good heart.”

“If you say so.” But he seemed far from convinced. She patted the space beside her. He folded his tall frame down next to her. “So...” He set the jar on the blanket next to her hat. For several seconds, they stared at it together. Over near the dance floor, the band launched into the next number.

Tessa laughed when she recognized the song. “That’s ‘Alcohol’ by Brad Paisley. Perfect, huh?”

Carson slanted her a look full of mischief and delicious badness. “Want to try it?”

She did want to try it. She was really, really curious—just to know how it might taste, to maybe get a sense of whether or not any of the outrageous rumors about it might be true.

“Tessa?” he prompted when she failed to answer him.

She tried to remind herself of all the reasons that taking a chance on Homer’s moonshine was not a good idea. “It could be dangerous...”

“You really think it’s all that bad?”

“I didn’t say bad. But you’ve heard the stories.”

He flapped his arms. “Bok-bok-bok.”

She laughed and gave his shoulder a playful shove. “Don’t make chicken sounds at me. I’m being responsible.”

He leaned a little closer. “And what fun is that?”

Oh, she did like him. She liked him a lot—liked him more and more the longer she was with him. He was not only hot. He was fun and smart and perceptive.

And a very good kisser.

Did he see in her eyes that she was thinking about kissing him? Seemed like he must have, because he leaned even closer and brushed a second kiss against her mouth.

So good.

His lips settled more firmly on hers. She sighed in pure delight and had to resist the sharp desire to slide a hand up around his neck and pull him closer still.

She was probably in big trouble.

But the more she got to know him, the less she feared her attraction to him and the more it just felt right to be sitting beside him under the stars with the band playing country favorites. The night had a glow about it, even here in the shadows on their private little square of blanket. She was having so much fun with him, loving every minute of this night. She never wanted it to end. She wanted to sit here and enjoy the man beside her and maybe, a little later, to get up and dance some more. And after that, to steal another kiss.

And another after that.

He reached for the mason jar and unscrewed the lid.

She leaned close and whispered, “You shouldn’t have done that. It’s all over now. Our lives will never be the same.”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “The temptation is just too great. I can’t resist.” He sniffed at the open jar. “Smells like a peach.” He tipped his head to the side, his expression suddenly far away. “I’ve always loved peaches.”

“Peaches? No, really?”

“Really.” He offered her the jar.

She took it and sniffed the contents for herself. “Hmm. Smells like summer.”

“What’d I tell you?”

“But not peaches. Blackberries. Just a hint.” She really wanted to taste it now. “I adore blackberries. They’re my favorite fruit.”

He wrapped his big hand over hers, and they held the jar together. He sniffed again, then insisted, “Admit it. It smells like peaches.”

“No, Carson.” She shook a finger at him. “Blackberries.”

“Peaches.”

“Blackberries. And look.” She pulled the jar free of his grip and held it up to the party lights. “It even has a faint purple tint. Can’t you see it?”

He took it from her hand and raised it high to decide for himself. “Looks more golden to me.” He faked a serious expression. “And really, it would be a bad idea to taste it. Right?”

“Right. Bad idea to—Carson!” She let out a silly shriek as he took a careful sip from the jar. And then she leaned closer and asked, wide-eyed, “Well?”

He swallowed. Slowly. “That’s good. Really good.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Blackberries, right?” She nodded, holding his gaze, certain she could get him to nod along with her.

But his head went the other way—side to side. “Peaches. Definitely. And a hint of a moonshine burn going down. Gives it a nice kick.”

“You’re just playing with me.”

He looked slightly wounded. “Never.”

Only one way to make sure. “Give me that.”

He held it away. “You’d better not. You never know what might happen.”

“Knock it off, Carson. Hand it over.”

“Whoa. Suddenly you’re a tough girl.”

“That’s right. You don’t want to mess with me.”

“Never, ever would I mess with you.” His voice was so smooth and manly, with just the perfect hint of roughness underneath. He gazed at her so solemnly. She really wanted to kiss him again.

Better not.

She reached for the moonshine instead. That time, he surrendered it. She put the jar to her lips and took a teeny, tiny sip.

Flavor bloomed on her tongue. A hint of sweet, summer fruit, and then wonderful heat going down. “Oh, yes. It’s good.”

“Told you so.”

She gave a fist-pump. “Blackberry! Yes!” She sipped a little more, savoring the taste, relishing the lovely burn—and then handed it back to him.

A wonderful, sexy laugh escaped him. She laughed, too, the sound husky to her own ears.

He was watching her so closely, as though he couldn’t get enough of just looking at her. She stared right back at him, a warm glow all through her. It was beautiful. Perfect.

She was lost in his eyes.

#### Chapter Four

Tessa woke slowly, smiling a little. All cozy and safe in bed, she was curled on her side, the blankets tucked up close under her chin.

But then she opened her eyes and felt her smile melt away.

What was this place?

The room was rustic, but richly so. She blinked and stared at an antique bronze mission-style glass lamp by the side of the bed. It sat on a night table made of gorgeous burl wood. Across the room—which was quite large—she saw a pair of French doors that looked out on a redwood deck with plush, padded furniture and a view of evergreen-blanketed mountains beyond. In the far distance, rugged snowcapped peaks poked the sky. It was clear, that sky, and very blue.

Daylight blue.

It must be morning.

But hadn’t it been nighttime just a moment ago, nighttime at the Memorial Day picnic in Rust Creek Falls Park?

She shut her eyes and waited. Surely when she opened them again...

Nope. Nothing had changed. Same big, beautifully appointed room. Same morning light.

She pulled the covers tighter under her chin and whispered, “Where am I?” not really expecting an answer.

Then things got worse.

A sleepy male voice asked from behind her, “Tessa?”

She knew that voice—didn’t she?

Carefully, slowly, clutching the covers close, she rolled to her back. With great reluctance, she turned her head. And there he was, Carson Drake, hair all ruffled, the scruff on his lean cheeks thicker than last night, his devastating mouth sexier than ever.

With a tiny squeal of distress, she lifted the covers enough to confirm her suspicions.

Yep.

Naked under there.

She grabbed the covers close again. “This cannot be happening.”

He looked as bewildered as she felt. “Tessa, I don’t...” Dark eyebrows drew together. Now he looked worried. About her. “Look, are you okay?”

She turned her gaze to the beautiful beamed ceiling above. Staring at it really hard, she whispered, “No, Carson. I am not okay.” Panic rose. Breathe. She did, slowly, and exhaled with care. “I’ve...got nothing. I have no idea what we did for a least half of last night. I don’t know how we got here.” And then she went ahead and confessed the awful truth. “This is exactly like what everyone said happened to people last July Fourth. I’ve had a blackout, I think. Last thing I remember, we were

in the park sampling Homer's moonshine." She gulped and stared even harder at the ceiling overhead. "Do you, um, happen to know where we are and how we got here?"

"Hey. Look at me. Come on. Please?" He spoke so gently. As though her ears were tender and wounded—like her heart right now, like her self-respect and her very soul. She made herself face him again. He captured her gaze. "I didn't know—I promise you. I didn't believe that a jar of moonshine could really—"

"It's okay."

"No, it's not."

"Carson, what I mean is I didn't believe it, either. Just...would you answer my question, please? Where are we and how did we get here?"

"We're in my suite at Maverick Manor. But as to how we got here, I don't have a clue. I remember we drank the moonshine. And there are...flashes of memory after that. Us laughing on the blanket, staring up at the stars. I kissed you. And we danced."

"That was earlier."

"Yeah, and then we danced again, later. And...well, it all starts to go hazy after that."

"But did we...?" It seemed silly to even ask the question. They were here, together, naked. Almost certainly, they had.

He reached out a bare, beautifully muscled arm and scooped some bits of foil off the nightstand. "Looks like it."

"What do you mean?"

He opened those long fingers to reveal three empty condom wrappers. They crackled on his palm as the foil relaxed.

"Omigod." How could she? She didn't even know this man. And yet here she was naked in bed with him, staring at empty condom wrappers with no recollection of using them. It was awful and embarrassing and not the kind of thing she would ever do—well, except with Miles. She'd fallen straight into bed with Miles the night she met him, too. But at least she was conscious when she did it. At least it had been her choice, and she'd loved every minute of it.

This, on the other hand...

No. Just...no.

This was all wrong. She didn't remember making a choice. She couldn't recall anything after those first few sips of moonshine.

Okay, she'd been attracted to him from the instant her eyes met his. Wildly so. But falling into bed with him? Uh-uh. No way.

"God. Tessa. Your face is dead white. Are you sure you're all right?" He was watching her as though he feared she might shatter.

Well, she wouldn't. Not a chance. She was tougher than that. Yeah, she'd messed up royally. But that didn't mean she couldn't hold it together. She let out a shaky little sigh. "I just can't believe that this is happening, that's all."

"At least we were safe about it," he offered sheepishly.

She played along, because she was not going to lose it right here in front of him. "Yeah. I guess that's something, right?"

"Right." He pushed himself to a sitting position.

She did the same, careful as she scooted up against the headboard to keep the blankets close. They leaned against the headboard side by side. She stared hard at the far wall and wished that the floor would just open up beneath her and swallow her whole.

The silence, weighted so heavily with regret and embarrassment, went on forever.

Finally, she murmured shakily, "I want to go home."

He looked at her again then. His eyes were so sad. "Tessa, I'm so sorry..."

She showed him the hand and aimed her chin high. “Don’t. It’s no more your fault than mine. I don’t blame you. I drank that moonshine of my own free will.” It had tasted so good. And she’d never really believed the stories about it. Until now. Slow fury rose in her. “I might have to kill Homer Gilmore, though.” She spoke through clenched teeth. “Seriously. It’s like we were roofied.”

He made a low sound of agreement. “So much for my big plans to get the formula for Drake Distilleries. That stuff is way too dangerous.”

She pressed a hand to her queasy stomach. “I may never drink anything with alcohol in it again.”

“Believe me, I understand.”

They shared a wry, weary glance, and she said, “I really do want to go now.”

“All right.”

She looked away, toward the balcony and the snowcapped mountains in the distance. The covers shifted as he left the bed. More fabric rustled.

He said, “I’ll just use the bathroom.” Footsteps padded away.

As soon as she heard the bathroom door close, she jumped from the bed, grabbed her wrinkled clothes from the bedside chair and put them on. Once she was fully dressed, including her socks and red boots, she went looking for her hat.

She found it on the coffee table in the sitting room—next to a sketch pad and a bunch of pastels and colored pencils. “What in the...?” She picked up the pad and turned the pages slowly.

The drawings were her own, though she had zero memory of creating them. And as to where she got the pad and pencils, who knew? But apparently, not only did she and Carson use three condoms last night; she’d also whipped him up an ad campaign for Homer’s magic moonshine.

For the first time that morning, she almost smiled.

Not bad. Not bad at all. Clean, clear, imaginative and well executed, if she did say so herself. Even her domineering, tough-as-nails former boss, the legendary Della Storm of Innovation Media in New York, would approve. Tessa especially liked her rendering of a frosty-blue bottle with a sliver of silver moon on it and the words *Blue Muse* in a retro font. She also thought the sketch of a golden bottle with a lightning strike on the front was really good. That one was called *Peach Lightning* in bold copperplate Gothic. And the way she’d managed to work the Drake Distilleries logo of a rearing dragon into both designs? Damn good.

Glancing up from the pad in her hand, she stared into the middle distance, remembering how much fun she and Carson had had in the park, how they’d bantered back and forth over whether the ’shine was blackberry or peach. She’d loved every moment with Carson yesterday—at least, every moment that she could recall.

She heard the bathroom door open. With a hard sigh, she tossed the sketchbook back on the low table.

He appeared in the doorway to the bedroom, fully dressed in jeans, a knit shirt and a different pair of high-priced boots than he’d worn the day before. Dear Lord, he was a fine-looking man. Regret dragged at her heart that there couldn’t be more between them.

But no. It had all gotten way too complicated too fast. She didn’t need complications with a man, not until she had her own life figured out. She needed him to take her back to her grandmother’s boardinghouse. After that, she never wanted to see that amazing face of his again.

Across the room, he stared her somberly. Probably trying to think of something to say to her.

She knew exactly how he felt. “I’ll just use the bathroom and then I’m ready to go.”

\* \* \*

Carson found his car in his usual space in the parking lot. He’d had his keys in yesterday’s jeans, so he must have driven them there. It freaked him the hell out to think that he’d gotten behind the wheel so drunk on moonshine he had no memory of the trip.

The ride back to town was a silent one.

Carson despised himself the whole way. And he couldn't stop thinking about the condom wrappers, couldn't stop asking himself if they were fools to depend on those empty wrappers as proof that they'd played it safe.

When he pulled in at the curb in front of the boardinghouse, she grabbed her hat off the seat with one hand and the door handle with the other. He should just let her go. It was obvious she wanted to get as far away from him as possible.

But he couldn't let her walk away. Not yet. First, they needed to deal with the consequences of their actions—whatever the hell those actions had actually been.

“Wait, Tessa. Please.” She froze and stared at him, her dark hair a wild tangle of curls around her unforgettable gypsy-girl face. He made himself ask, “Are you on any kind of contraception?”

She winced and then confessed bleakly, “No. I had an implant, but when it expired last time, I didn't replace it. And... I know, I know. Way more information than you needed.”

His gut twisted at her news, but he kept his voice gentle and low. “I'm sorry, but I can't stop thinking that those condom wrappers don't really prove we were as careful as we needed to be.” For that, he got a soft, unhappy groan.

She put her face in her hands. “You're right. You're absolutely right.” With a ragged intake of breath, she lifted her head and squared her shoulders. “Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it. I'll get the morning-after pill today.”

Rust Creek Falls had one general store. That store had no pharmacy area that he could remember. “Can you get it at Crawford's?”

She chuckled, a sound with very little humor in it. “No. I'll drive over to Kalispell. It's a quick trip, not a big deal.”

He didn't want her doing that all alone. “I'll take you. We can go right now.”

She looked at him for a long count of five. And then she answered firmly, “No, thank you. I appreciate the offer. You're a stand-up guy. But I really need to get through the rest of this walk of shame on my own.” She grabbed the door handle again and was out on the sidewalk before he could think of some way to change her mind. “Goodbye, Carson,” she said. The word had all the finality of a death sentence. She shut the door.

He watched her climb the boardinghouse steps and knew that it was over between them—over without really even getting started.

\* \* \*

Tessa's grandmother Melba Strickland was waiting for her in the foyer just inside the front door.

“There you are.” Melba reached out her long arms for a hug. Tessa went into them. Her grandmother always smelled of homey, comforting things. Right now it was coffee and cinnamon toast and a faintly floral perfume. “When you didn't come down for breakfast at seven as usual, I got a little worried. I knocked on your door. No answer. I tried calling you, but your phone went straight to voice mail.”

“Sorry.” She'd left her phone in her room the night before. Because she'd only been running down the street to the park and she'd expected to return within a few hours. It must have died.

Her grandmother took her by the shoulders. “Are you all right?”

“I'm fine.” Tessa resisted the urge to make up a lie that explained her whereabouts last night. Yes, her grandmother had old-fashioned values and wouldn't approve if Tessa said where she'd really been. But Tessa was a grown woman and her mistakes were her own to work out. Her grandma didn't need to hear it. “I want to grab a shower. Then I need to drive into Kalispell and pick up a few things.” You know, like the morning-after pill. Because I'm an idiot, but I'm trying to be a responsible one.

Melba searched her face. “I just want you to know that I'm ready to listen anytime you need to talk.”

Tessa's empty stomach hollowed further with a mixture of equal parts love and guilt. “I do know, Grandma. And I'm grateful.”

Melba gave her shoulders a squeeze. “You need to eat.”

“I really want to get going.”

“Humor me. An egg, some toast, a nice cup of hot coffee...”

So Tessa followed Melba to the kitchen, where eighteen-month-old Bekka sat in a booster seat at the table, drinking from her favorite sippy cup and munching on Cheerios and grapes. It was after nine, so Levi was off at work in Kalispell.

“Auntie Tess, Auntie Tess! Kiss!” Bekka made loud smacking sounds until Tessa bent close and let the little girl press her plump, sticky lips to her cheek. Tessa might not be good with most babies, but at least her niece seemed to like her well enough. Bekka offered a fistful of Cheerios.

They were limp and soggy. Tessa ate one anyway as Bekka beamed her approval.

Then Tessa got herself some coffee, pausing to pat her sister’s shoulder as she went by. Claire sent her a questioning look, and Tessa gave a rueful shrug in response. She set herself a place at the table, and Claire whipped her up some scrambled eggs. The food helped. Tessa felt a little better about it all once she’d eaten.

Upstairs, she hung her hat on the peg by the door, had a shower and paid no attention to the mild tenderness between her legs. She ignored the love bite on her left breast. It would fade to nothing in a day or two. She let the water run down over her, soothing her shaky nerves. And she tried not to regret what she couldn’t even remember.

Not too much later, dressed in a short denim skirt and a soft plaid shirt, she was on her way to Kalispell. At the first drugstore she came to, she bought a root beer and the hormone pill she needed. She took the pill the moment she got back behind the wheel, sipping the root beer slowly as she drove back to town.

That taken care of, she helped Claire in the kitchen for a while and then went upstairs to check email and dig into some projects she’d acquired through her website. Last Friday, when she’d agreed to ride the Gazette float, she’d told Dawson Landry, the paper’s editor and publisher, that she was looking for design work. Dawson had said that if she came by, he would put her to work. She’d said she would, on Tuesday.

Well, it was Tuesday. And follow-through mattered.

So once she’d made sure she was on top of her other projects, she called Dawson. He said to come on over.

At the Gazette, she spent a couple of hours punching up the layout for the next edition. Once she got absorbed in the work, she was glad she’d come. It helped to keep busy.

As for Carson, well, whatever they’d done last night, it wouldn’t be happening again. Last night was clear proof that she should have followed her first instinct when it came to him, should have stayed at the boardinghouse and out of his way.

She wouldn’t be seeing him anymore. She would get past her own stupid choices yet again. Everybody made mistakes and life went on.

And if Homer Gilmore knew what was good for him, he’d keep the hell away from her for the next hundred years.

\* \* \*

Carson didn’t notice the sketchbook until late that afternoon.

He’d driven into Kalispell, too. He’d had a late breakfast at a diner he found. And then he’d wandered around the downtown area, checking things out, seeing what the larger town had to offer.

Was he hoping he might run into Tessa?

A little. Maybe.

But it didn’t happen.

It was so strange, the way he felt about her. He missed her. A lot. He’d met her less than twenty-four hour ago, yet somehow he felt as though he knew her. She had a kind of glow about her, an energy and warmth. Already he missed that glow.

His world was dimmer, less vibrant, without her.

As he drove back toward Rust Creek Falls, he realized that he hadn't felt this way about a woman in years. Not since he was fifteen and fell head over heels for Marianne.

He wished he could remember making love with Tessa. Somehow, even though he couldn't remember what they'd done late in the night, the clean, sweet scent of her skin and the lush texture of her hair were imprinted on his brain.

At the Manor, he spent a couple of hours catching up with email and messages. He got on the phone to a number of employees and associates in Southern California. When asked how the moonshine project was going, he said that it had fallen through.

He didn't, however, mention flying back to LA, though he might as well pack up and go. There was no reason to stay. So far, though, he'd failed to start filling suitcases. Nor had he alerted the pilot on standby in Kalispell to file a flight plan and get his plane ready to go.

At a little after four, Carson dropped to the sofa in the suite's sitting room and reached for the TV remote on the coffee table in front of him.

He noticed the two dozen colored pencils and bright, fat, chalklike pastels first. For several seconds, he frowned at them, wondering where they might have come from. Then he saw the sketchbook. The maids had been in and placed it just so on top of the complimentary stack of magazines.

Tessa. The sketchbook must be hers. But he didn't remember her carrying any art supplies with her yesterday. Where had the pad, the pencils and the pastels come from?

He had no idea. It was yet another lost piece of last night. Curious and way too eager to see what might be inside, he grabbed the sketch pad and started thumbing through it.

Instantly, at the first drawing of a series of different-shaped jars and bottles, he was impressed. Each design was unique. The jars were mason-style, the kind with raised lettering manufactured into the glass. Each one made him feel that he could reach out and grab it, that he could trace the pretty curves of the lettering with the pad of a finger. She had great skill with light and shadow, so the bottles almost seemed to have dimension, to be smooth and rounded, made of real glass.

Carson got that shiver—the one that happened whenever he had a really good idea.

These drawings of Tessa's gave him ideas.

She gave him ideas. Because beyond being gorgeous and original, with all that wild, dark hair and a husky laugh he couldn't get out of his head, Tessa Strickland had real talent. He slowly turned the pages, loving what he saw.

She knew how to communicate a concept; her execution was brilliant. Unfortunately, now that a deal with Homer was off the table, he wouldn't be able to use what she'd come up with here.

But you never knew. Homer Gilmore didn't have the moonshine market cornered. If Drake Distilleries developed their own, less dangerous brand of 'shine, the Blue Muse and Peach Lightning flavors might well have a future, after all.

And even if he gave up on making moonshine completely, Drake Distilleries could benefit from a talent like Tessa's. And so could his restaurants and nightclubs. Targeted, carefully executed advertising and effective promotion were a lot of what made everything he put his name on successful. Adding Tessa to the firm that promoted his brand could work for him in a big way.

And for her, too. Before last night faded into oblivion, they had talked about her career, about where she might be going with it. He'd said she should go big. Now that he'd seen her work, he knew he'd been right. If he could make her a tempting enough offer, maybe he could convince her to come to LA, after all.

All at once he felt vindicated. He hadn't told his people he was returning to Southern California because he wasn't. Not yet.

Not until he'd convinced Tessa Strickland to move to LA, where he could help her have the kind of successful design career she so richly deserved. He knew he could give her a big boost professionally.

And if it went somewhere personal, too, he would be more than fine with that.

\* \* \*

First thing the next morning, Carson called Jason Velasco, his contact at Interactive Marketing International in Century City. He was about to explain that he'd found a brilliant graphic designer and he was hoping she might be a fit for IMI. He planned to tell Jason that he wanted Tessa working on the various ad campaigns that IMI developed for both Drake Distilleries and Drake Hospitality, which was the mother company for Carson's clubs and restaurants.

But then he caught himself.

True, Jason knew where his bread was buttered. If Carson wanted Tessa working at IMI, Jason would damn well do all in his power to make that happen.

But how would Tessa react to Carson's setting her up for an interview without consulting her first?

Quite possibly not well.

Given that she'd walked away from him yesterday without a backward glance, he really couldn't afford to take the chance of pissing her off in any way.

And Jason was still waiting on the line, probably wondering if he'd hung up. Carson said lamely, "Hey! Just thought I'd call and check in, see how we're doing with the new campaign." Drake Distilleries was preparing to launch a series of flavored brandy-based liqueurs.

Jason gave him a quick rundown. Then he asked, "So you're still in the wilds of Montana on that supersecret new acquisition of yours?"

"Still in Montana, yes. And the project did start out as a secret. But this is a small town, and it's hard to keep a secret around here." He explained about Homer's moonshine, and how he'd thought it might work for Drake Distilleries. "But it was a long shot and it didn't pan out. The downstroke is it's a no go."

"That's too bad."

"Can't win 'em all."

"So you'll be on your way back now?"

"Not yet. I have a few more things I need to look into here first." Things like how to convince a certain adorable brunette that California is the place for her.

"But we'll see you on the twentieth?" On the twentieth, Jason and his team would be presenting the game plan for the liqueur campaign. It was an important meeting. In fact, Carson had more than one meeting he couldn't miss during that week. He would have to return to LA by then.

That gave him two and a half weeks to get through to Tessa. Ordinarily he had limitless confidence in his powers of persuasion. Not so much in this case.

"Carson? You still with me?"

"Right here. And of course I'll be there on the twentieth."

Once he hung up with Jason, Carson called Strickland's Boarding House. Tessa's sister Claire answered, politely identifying herself. He almost told her who he was. But then he remembered the look on Tessa's face when she'd left him the morning before. If Tessa knew he was calling, would she even come to the phone?

He decided to take no chances. "I'd like to speak with Tessa Strickland."

"Hold on."

A moment later, she came on the line. "This is Tessa."

Just the sound of her voice made his chest feel tight. He wanted to see her, wanted it a lot. "You probably won't believe this, but I can't stop thinking about you."

A silence. Not a welcoming one. "Hello, Carson."

“I was thinking maybe lunch. We could drive over to—”

“Carson, I don’t think so.”

He lowered his head and stared at his boots. “It’s just lunch.”

She spoke again, her voice almost a whisper. “Please don’t worry. I went to Kalispell yesterday and took care of it.”

“It?” And then he caught on. He swore low. “Come on, Tessa. Don’t. I’m not calling about the damn morning-after pill.”

A silence on her end. A long, gruesome one. Then finally, “It’s just...not a good time for me to get anything started, you know?”

“Fine.” Though it wasn’t. Not fine in the least. “This isn’t a personal call, anyway.” That was only half a lie. He wanted to get close to her, absolutely. But he also wanted to help her have the career she deserved. “Did you know you left sketches in my suite?”

“Yeah. I saw the sketch pad on the coffee table and looked through it. I don’t remember how or when it happened, but apparently we plotted out a moonshine campaign.” She paused, then, “Wait a minute. You’re going ahead with the moonshine thing after all?” Now she sounded surprised—and not in a good way.

“No.”

She sighed. “Glad to hear it. You had me worried there for a minute.”

“This isn’t about the moonshine. It’s about you, about your future. Those sketches are amazing. I want you to think about—”

“Carson.”

He stared at his boots some more and knew he was getting nowhere. Feeling desperate and pitiful—emotions with which he’d never been the least familiar—he took one more stab at getting through to her. “You have so much talent. I only want to—”

“No, thank you,” she said softly, with utter finality. “I have to go now. Goodbye.”

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