

CHAPTER 1

Just ahead of her, a group of at least a dozen people drifted into The Parrot Confectionery, talking and laughing. Marisa Hiller growled in frustration. First a large delivery truck blocked the alley so she couldn't drop her box of fresh rosemary at the back door, and now the front of the candy shop was clogged with customers. That's what she got for agreeing to Brian's late-afternoon request for the herb.

She shifted the large box to her other hip and peered in the wide windows. Yep. It would be a few minutes before she could edge her way through to the back of the business.

Her gaze caught on the wooden notice board nestled beside the door with dozens of posters in various degrees of tatter. Homemade ads with photos offered puppies, while tear-off strips provided the kennel's phone number. Pampered Chef parties, the Helena Symphony, a new daycare in town. People could live their whole lives off a board like this.

A larger poster in the top corner begged attention. Miss Snowflake Pageant? She narrowed her gaze and stepped closer to see the details. Back in the day, she'd have been the first in line to sign up for that kind of competition. Now? Not so much. Not after...

"Marisa? Marisa Hiller?"

Had she slipped back in time? Was her memory

playing tricks on her? But no. The voice had been real. She pivoted.

Jase Mackie.

Her gut lurched. What was he doing in Montana? She hadn't seen him since that day at the JFK airport. Since...

For a second he looked like the old Jase. The shock of red hair she'd once run her hands through. The blue-green eyes that once looked adoringly into her own. She'd kissed those freckles on his nose.

But then his eyebrows pulled together, and his gaze grew wary. "It is you. I thought I must have been imagining things."

"Real and in the flesh." Marisa did her best to tamp any feelings out of her voice. It'd been twenty-seven months and four days since they'd flung hostile words at each other beside the luggage carousel. She'd grabbed her bags and run for a taxi, blocking out not only Jase's words but Terry's. Yeah, that had gotten her fired. She was supposed to keep personal matters out of her work.

She yanked her gaze free of Jase's and glanced through the confectionery door beside her. Maybe she could squeeze past the late-season tourists peering into the candy case if she lifted the box above her head. "Been nice seeing you." *Liar.*

"You look good."

In jeans with a ripped knee? A tank top with tomato stains? Not precisely the runway model apparel he'd last seen on her. Marisa's gaze snapped back to his.

He looked surprised to have let the words out then his chin jerked toward the notice behind her. “Going to enter that pageant? It looks right up your alley.”

“I just noticed the poster, so I don’t exactly have any plans. Never heard of it before.” Not in this century, anyway.

“Oh.” His gaze slid away, then back.

She’d missed him. Missed everything she’d dreamed might happen in those heady days.

Before he’d ruined everything.

Marisa took a deep breath. He’d never come after her. Never apologized. Her conscience pricked. Not that she’d left a forwarding address with Terry. No, she’d left everything behind in one go. She’d returned to the apartment she’d shared with two Broadway actresses, packed up her stuff, rented a truck, and driven across the country. Mom needed her, she’d told herself. It’d been true. Still was. The farm wasn’t huge, but it was theirs, and needed them both to make it work.

She shoved her hands into her jeans pockets. Jase didn’t remember her with cropped, unpolished fingernails.

“Marisa, I—”

She shook her head, backing up a step. “I’ve got to go.”

Jase reached past her and tapped the poster.

Every fiber of her being stretched toward the heat from his arm. She shifted away. If only she could move nearer instead.

“You should consider entering. I can totally see

you doing something like that.”

She blew out a breath. The nerve. “You lost any chance to give me advice.”

“It’s not advice.” A shadow crossed his face, and his lips tightened. “I’m a friend drawing attention to something you may not have noticed.”

“You lost the right to call me your friend, too. What are you doing here, anyway? Go back to New York. Just get out of my life and stay there.”

“This is home.”

“Since when?” East-coast city boy, born and bred. Helena, Montana, might not be the Wild West anymore, but it wasn’t big enough to hold the likes of Jase Mackie.

“My folks bought a resort west of town last year, planning to semi-retire, and I moved my studio here a few months ago.” He pointed up the walking mall that’d been created along historic Last Chance Gulch.

She could make a snide comment about following Mommy and Daddy, but who was she to call the kettle black? She slept in her old bed, with her mother’s room down the hall.

“How about you?”

Marisa lifted a shoulder. “This is where I grew up. On a farm.”

His face brightened. “I’d love to do a piece on a local farm. Could I—?”

Their eyes collided for an instant, then the light went out of his and his shoulders slumped. “Never mind.”

“I’d rather not.” It would never do to be seen as

eager. She wasn't. Not really. She'd been doing her best to forget him. Seeing him again created a pothole in her road, but she'd get back up to speed in a minute. But — what if he still cared? What if he was so awkward about their encounter for the same reasons she was? Attracted but burned. Oh man. Had she just admitted her infatuation, even to herself? Was there any hope?

She took a step back. "If you want to do a farmer story, get in touch with the Tomah CSA. There are more than a dozen member farms. Maybe someone will be happy to work with you."

"CSA?"

"Community supported agriculture. People in the Helena area can pay a monthly subscription fee and get a box of produce delivered every week."

"Oh. I've heard of that sort of thing."

Well good for him. It was her life. Her chosen life, she reminded herself. A worthy calling providing real food to people. She'd been trying to do that in Kenya, too.

Stay clear of Jase Mackie. He's a dream smasher.

She pivoted and yanked the door to The Parrot open. She'd edge her way to the back one way or another.

"Marisa!"

She'd walked away in JFK, and she could do it again.

~*~

Jase pulled into the parking lot at Grizzly Gulch Resort. He rested his forehead against the Jetta's steering wheel. Man, he'd bungled that. For over two years he dreamed of what he'd say, how he'd apologize — if he ever found her again. How she'd throw herself in his arms and forgive him for being an idiot.

Um, right. Hadn't happened. But still, he'd seen her. She looked as good as always, even with minimal makeup and her long brown hair pulled back into a lopsided ponytail. The casual look of someone who worked for a living and got her hands dirty, like that day in Kenya.

He'd been over her forever already, hadn't he? After all, he'd been seeing Avalon for several months. Did Avalon even have a down-to-earth side?

She definitely couldn't hold a candle to Marisa.

He groaned and thumped his head on the wheel a couple more times for good measure. Maybe he'd knock some sense into himself.

A tap sounded on the car window. "Jase?"

He glanced up at his sister's concerned face. With a sigh he pulled the handle and opened the car door.

Kristen stepped out of the way as he pulled himself out. "You okay, little brother? You look like you just had a nightmare."

"I'm fine."

"You don't look it."

"Thanks. I think." He glanced around the parking lot and spotted her rental car. "I didn't know you were coming up this weekend. Did you bring the kids?"

“Yes, they’re around back in the playground with Dad. Todd had to work, and you know how much the kids love it here. So much more room to go wild than our apartment.”

Jase fell into step beside her as they headed toward the side door that led to their parents’ penthouse suite. “Why did you come?”

She turned laughing eyes and pouting lips his way. “At least pretend you’re happy to see me.” Her elbow caught his side.

“Why wouldn’t I be? You’re my favorite sister.”

“The only one.” Kristen sighed dramatically. “Good thing I gave you a niece and nephew, or you wouldn’t even notice my existence.”

“Not so.” He grinned down at her. “But it does help.”

“You need to get married and have a family, Jase. Seriously. The kids adore you. And besides, they need cousins. You wait too much longer, and Charlotte will be old enough to babysit instead of play with them.”

Images of Marisa flooded his mind. She wore a strappy gown and crazy tall heels like on the runway in Milan, shorts and beachwear as she had in Kenya, jeans—

“Earth to Jase?” Kristen’s voice mocked his thoughts. “Your brain headed over to — what’s her name — Avalon, isn’t it? When do I get to meet her and see if she’s worthy of my little brother?”

He gave his head a quick shake. “Oh, she won’t be.” In his mind, Avalon frowned, her lips pulling into a pout as though tempting him to kiss her displeasure

away. But it was true. Kristen would see through Avalon in a heartbeat. Why hadn't he? Why had it taken a chance encounter with—?

“Right.” Kristen studied him as he reached past her to open the door to their parents' penthouse suite. “Well, I can solve your problem.”

“My problem?” A wave of irritation sloshed over him. “It's none of your business, sweet sister.”

Kristen went on as if he hadn't interrupted. “The pageant is drawing in all these beautiful, poised women. You might meet somebody new.”

Or someone from his past.

“Hi, you two.” Mom floated over. “Dinner's ready, so you're just in time. Grandpa will be up in a minute with Charlotte and Liam.”

“Sounds good.” Kristen dropped her briefcase on the marble kitchen island. “Guess what I found out.” She opened the latches and pulled out her laptop.

Jase leaned his elbows on the counter and faked a bright, interested smile. “The sun sets in the west?”

“Oh, you.” She swatted at him, and he shied away with years of practice. “No, really. Mom and I were talking last weekend about how registrations for the pageant have been kind of slow.”

He'd been in Wyoming, shooting a fall wedding on a leaf-studded ranch. “There's still lots of time.”

“Yes and no. The businessmen are loath to sink their money into it if we don't get a big name or two on the list. Somebody who will pull in some attention for the pageant among all the other events going on for Helena's 150th birthday. We may not need a full

docket for another month, but we do need the right woman or two to make sure people take the event seriously.”

Hmm. That made some kind of sense.

“And I found someone. I mean, not that I’ve asked her yet, but it’s why I’m here this weekend.” Kristen’s green eyes glowed with excitement.

The door flung open and a four-year-old locomotive slammed into Jase’s leg. “Unca Jase! Unca Jase! I comed to see you!”

Jase squatted and pulled his nephew into a hug. “Hey, Liam. Good to see you, buddy.” He reached out his other hand, and Charlotte placed hers in it with a little curtsy. “Princess Charlotte.” He pressed a kiss on her palm. He knew how mere subjects presented themselves to royalty.

“Sir Uncle Jase, I am pleased to see you.” Then the princess dissolved into little-girl giggles and snuggled against him.

“See? Jase needs kids of his own.”

He looked up at his sister, whose hands waved as she talked to their parents. Sure, he wanted a family, but at the right time. With the right woman. He blocked Marisa’s image and plunked on the floor to tickle the stuffing out of these two.

“It wasn’t as difficult as I thought,” Kristen went on. “There weren’t many descendants along the way, but you’ll never guess what I found.”

All tickling aside for the moment, Jase leaned against the base of the leather love seat. “What are you talking about, Kris? I’m completely lost.”

“Oh. Mom and I talked about how cool it would be if we could find a descendant of Calista, the first pageant winner in 1889, the year Montana became a state. If there happened to be a woman of suitable age, etc, and she could be persuaded to run, we’d easily get all the backers we need for the whole pageant.”

“Sounds like a long shot.”

Liam tackled him again, stubby fingers inflicting more pain than pleasure.

“It seemed like it.” Kristen nodded. “But it turned out to be a fabulous idea. There is one person who has the perfect credentials, more than we’d dreamed of.”

“Tell us already.”

So Mom found Kristen’s penchant for dramatic effect as annoying as Jase did.

“Okay. So you know Calista married Albert, who’d been the owner of the original Tomah Inn. The family sold it in the thirties and bought a small farm on the other side of Helena. And they still live on that farm.”

“It would help if Miss Snowflake is a local girl.” Mom sounded excited, even though she wasn’t so local herself.

“Right. But it’s even better than that.”

The laptop creaked open, but Jase couldn’t see the screen from his spot on the floor.

“She’s actually modeled in New York. She’s drop-dead gorgeous. See? She’s done a bunch of work for Juicy Couture. Tory Burch. Michael Kors.” Kristen glanced over at Jase. “You might even know her. You’ve shot sessions for some of those designers,

haven't you?"

Jase's jaw clenched and the room tilted a little. Good thing he was already on the floor. He held Liam off at arm's length. "What's her name?" But he knew.

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