



Once Tasted (Silver Creek)

By Laura Moore

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Three siblings, an extraordinary family, a lasting heritage—in the irresistible Silver Creek Ranch trilogy, they'll fight for the land and the people they love.

Everything has come easily to Reid Knowles, the middle son of a California ranching family. But his charmed life is suddenly complicated when his good friend and neighbor asks him to help run the winery next door. His neighbor's niece, Mia Bodell, is in charge—and she has made it clear that she'd rather be roped to a steer than to Reid Knowles. Never one to back down from a challenge, Reid vows to win her trust.

Her life marked by loss, Mia knows that nothing comes easily—love included. In high school, her heart was crushed by Reid, and even though years have passed, the hurt lingers. Mia is achingly aware that the teen heartthrob has matured into a devastatingly handsome playboy, and the budding winemaker refuses to let down her guard. But one taste of unbridled passion changes things. From Reid's first intoxicating kiss to his unexpectedly tender seduction, Mia is swept into a passionate affair that could tear her heart to pieces . . . or give her everything she has ever wanted.

Praise for *Once Tasted*

"Fans of . . . alpha males will enjoy saddling up with this and adventurously explicit liaison full of intriguing details about winemaking."—***Publishers Weekly***

"With tension, heart and small-town details on every page, this is a genuinely engaging read that will have fans hungry for more."—***RT Book Reviews***

"Beautifully written . . . I would recommend this author to anyone."—**The Reading Cafe**

"Family, friends and small town living bring a lot of characters into the book and make it a great read. Just like grapes take time to grow and mature into something great so does the love story of Reid and Mia."—**Guilty Pleasures Book Reviews**

“Once Tasted is a really great romance and a great read for anybody.”—***Fresh Fiction***

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Laura Moore lives in Rhode Island with her husband, two children, and their Labrador retriever. Laura loves to hear from readers. Please visit her online.

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Chapter One

Reid Knowles loved life's finer pleasures: the feel of a warm, enthusiastic woman moving against him, and the rush of a powerful horse carrying him over the fields in a ground-eating run. Today he was enjoying another: a dawn ride on his Harley, its engine roaring beneath him as he took Route 1's serpentine curves. He'd chosen the coastal route for the simple reason that it was beautiful. The salty bite to the California wind against his face felt great after the weeks he'd spent in the sauna that was South Carolina in early summer.

That he was presently enjoying only item number three on his list of pleasures didn't bother him at all, not when every mile flying beneath his wheels brought him closer to numbers one and two. Acacia, California, had some exceptionally pretty women living in it, and his home, Silver Creek Ranch, had some of the finest Quarter Horses to be found anywhere. In just a few hours, he'd be riding his own, SIRRUS, a nine-year-old gelding he'd trained since birth.

No, he had no complaints at all. Life was good. And if there were moments when he recognized that maybe everything in it came to him a little too easily, well, this wasn't one of them.

He was happy.

With a grin into the morning wind, he dropped down a gear on the throttle and leaned into the next curve.

Oh, damn, he must be back.

Mia Bodell didn't need to be a modern-day Sherlock Holmes to guess who'd put the dreamy expression on Tracy Crofta's face at Spillin' the Beans. The barista fairly floated over the wide-planked, unvarnished floors

as she took Mia's order, humming to the hissing of the steamer as she prepared her triple-shot latte.

There were other signs, too.

Tracy wasn't the only blissed-out female in the coffee shop. Betty Shales, who was sixty if she was a day, wore a beatific smile. Stationed behind the cash register, she stopped patting her gray dreadlocks only long enough to take Mia's money.

But in case Mia had suffered temporary blindness and failed to notice the women's joyous glow, she'd have had to be wearing earplugs to miss the trills of laughter and excited chatter when, latte in hand, she walked in to the post office—which also housed the local bank, general store, and luncheonette.

Not many towns could boast of having a post office where you could not only pick up your mail but also cash your checks, order a stack of buttermilk pancakes or a burger, pick up a loaf of bread and a bottle of Tide, and get your daily dose of the latest local happenings, too. The post office-general store-luncheonette wasn't just Acacia's hub. It was Gossip Central.

Mia wasn't big on gossip. She'd been the butt of it too often. But as she inserted her key into the metal mailbox and retrieved the mail, dropping half of it into the recycling bin and tucking the rest of it—bills, bills, and more bills—under her arm, the air around her buzzed. Reid Knowles's name reverberated from all corners of the interior.

There was no escaping it.

The scent of freshly baked goods filled the spacious interior—another reason why the post office was such a popular place. Knowing how much her uncle Thomas loved the luncheonette's blueberry muffins, Mia got in line. And since no good deed went unpunished, she spent the next few minutes breathing in the aroma of melted butter, flour, and sugar while listening to Maebeth Krohner and Nancy Del Ray, who were working the morning shift at the luncheonette, sing Reid Knowles's praises.

"Mm-hmm, yeah, he got back today and dropped in to say hi." Nancy's voice held a wealth of satisfaction. Nancy had two small children and was five years older than Reid, but that didn't stop the divorcée from tracking his comings and goings with the breathlessness of a tween at a One Direction concert.

"Dang." Maebeth shook her head. "I knew I didn't need to fold the clothes sitting in the dryer this morning. I'd have seen Reid otherwise. Was he looking as fine as ever?"

Thirty and single, Maebeth made no bones about how much she liked Reid—really liked Reid. In this she was not alone.

"Could you doubt it? The man rode his motorcycle all the way from South Carolina. He came in here looking windblown and scruffy," Nancy replied.

"Oh Lord." Maebeth made a show of fanning herself.

It was nine a.m.; the luncheonette was busy and would stay that way until around two o'clock. Yet even as the two women dropped slices of multigrain bread into the toaster, set plates filled with steaming scrambled eggs and hash browns in front of hungry customers, and deposited stacks of dirty plates and empty coffee cups into a partially filled black rubber tub, their conversation didn't skip a beat.

“Such a bummer I missed him,” Maebeth repeated dolefully. “You think he’ll be at The Drop tonight?”

“I expect so,” Nancy said.

“His being back sure will liven up the place.”

Nancy nodded in agreement. “Mom’s already offered to take the kids tonight so I can slip into my boogie shoes.”

Mia was tempted to roll her eyes at the women’s preoccupation with Reid Knowles and his limitless appeal. She refrained, reminding herself about casting stones.

Taking a fortifying sip of her latte, which somehow she’d forgotten she was holding while she listened to Nancy and Maebeth, Mia focused her attention on the couple ahead of her, who’d stepped forward to pay. Both wore sturdy walking shoes. A folded map was tucked into the back pocket of the man’s chinos.

Tourists, Mia decided. Since they weren’t in jeans and cowboy boots, they probably weren’t staying at the Knowleses’ guest ranch, Silver Creek. There were plenty of other things to do in Acacia, though, such as hiking along the state preserve’s trails, kayaking on Silver Lake, or touring the local vineyards. Spotting the Wine Spectator sticking out of the woman’s canvas tote, she had her answer. Vineyard hopping was on the couple’s agenda.

Although less renowned for its vineyards than Napa and Sonoma, Mendocino County produced some terrific wines. The carefully selected Dijon and Pommard clones, soil, and microclimate made the Pinot Noirs Mia and her uncle crafted rank among them.

Another vintner might have tapped either wife or husband on the shoulder and suggested a stroll over to Good Grapes on Laurel Street, where they could pick up the Bodell Family Vineyard 2011 Pinot Noir. It was delicious and a steal at sixteen dollars. She wished, too, she could have invited them to drive out to the vineyard for a tasting, but her dream of opening a tasting room had yet to materialize.

Besides, while Mia knew wine, she had no talent for self-promotion. Peddling her family’s products in front of Nancy and Maebeth, who didn’t have a shy bone between them, would only compound her embarrassment. It was all too easy to imagine their expressions at her awkward attempt at a sales pitch.

So she waited in silence while Nancy rang up the couple’s items. Transaction complete, they moved aside. Pinning a smile on her face, Mia stepped in front of the register.

Nancy’s expression changed from openly friendly to something more reserved. “Hi, Mia.”

“Good morning, Nancy. I’d like a blueberry muffin, please.” She also wanted to get the hell out of there. Maebeth had been in the same grade as her cousin, Jay, and so knew the stories, which meant that Nancy had heard every one of them, too. Certain tales didn’t have an expiration date on piquancy.

But even if she wasn’t convinced that both Maebeth and Nancy knew the filth Jay loved to spread about her and her mother, Mia would have felt uncomfortable with the two women who partied their free evenings away at The Drop or at the night spots in Napa. Hers were more often spent in front of the computer, entering moisture, pH, and nutrient levels for the different blocks of their vineyard. Then there was her new pastime of choice: fretting about the distracted look in her uncle’s eyes. Something about Thomas had

changed over the last few weeks. Was he sick? Was it money again?

“You came just in time. They’re still warm.” Nancy grabbed a brown paper bag from the stack on the counter and shook it open. Lifting the wire-mesh dome off the platter, she picked up the tongs. “It’s for Thomas?”

The tongs hovered in the air. Mia nodded. “Yes.”

At her answer, Nancy swooped down and plucked the largest of the batch off the white platter. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s fine,” she said brightly, firmly.

“Your uncle is such a doll. You tell him to come on down for breakfast. We’ll make blueberry pancakes to go with his blueberry muffin.”

“Heck, we’ll put blueberries in anything he wants,” Maebeth offered as she picked up two orders of scrambled eggs and home fries for a table.

Everyone at the luncheonette knew Thomas loved blueberries, and they knew why. They’d been Aunt Ellen’s favorite fruit. She’d died fourteen years ago, but Thomas never missed an opportunity to order something with blueberries.

Mia’s smile lost its stiffness. “I’ll tell him,” she promised. It’d be fun to watch him gobble down a stack of gold and purple pancakes drowning in maple syrup and butter.

Nancy passed her the paper bag. “Can I get you anything, Mia? A lemon-raspberry muffin? A pecan roll?”

Her hips couldn’t afford either. “No thanks, I grabbed a latte.”

Nancy looked at the cup with undisguised envy. “I keep telling Charlie to get one of those espresso machines for here, too, but he doesn’t want those java junkies over at Spillin’ the Beans to go out of business.” Charlie Haynes owned both the luncheonette and the building that housed Spillin’ the Beans. Diversifying was the name of the game in this economy.

Mia tucked the mail more securely beneath her elbow, ready to say goodbye, just as Maebeth returned with an order. She gave it to Lou behind the grill and then turned to Mia.

“So, did you hear? Reid Knowles is back from South Carolina.”

Leaving now would be too obvious, she thought with an inward sigh. “Yes, I caught you and Nancy saying as much.”

Users Review

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Lydia Sanders:

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