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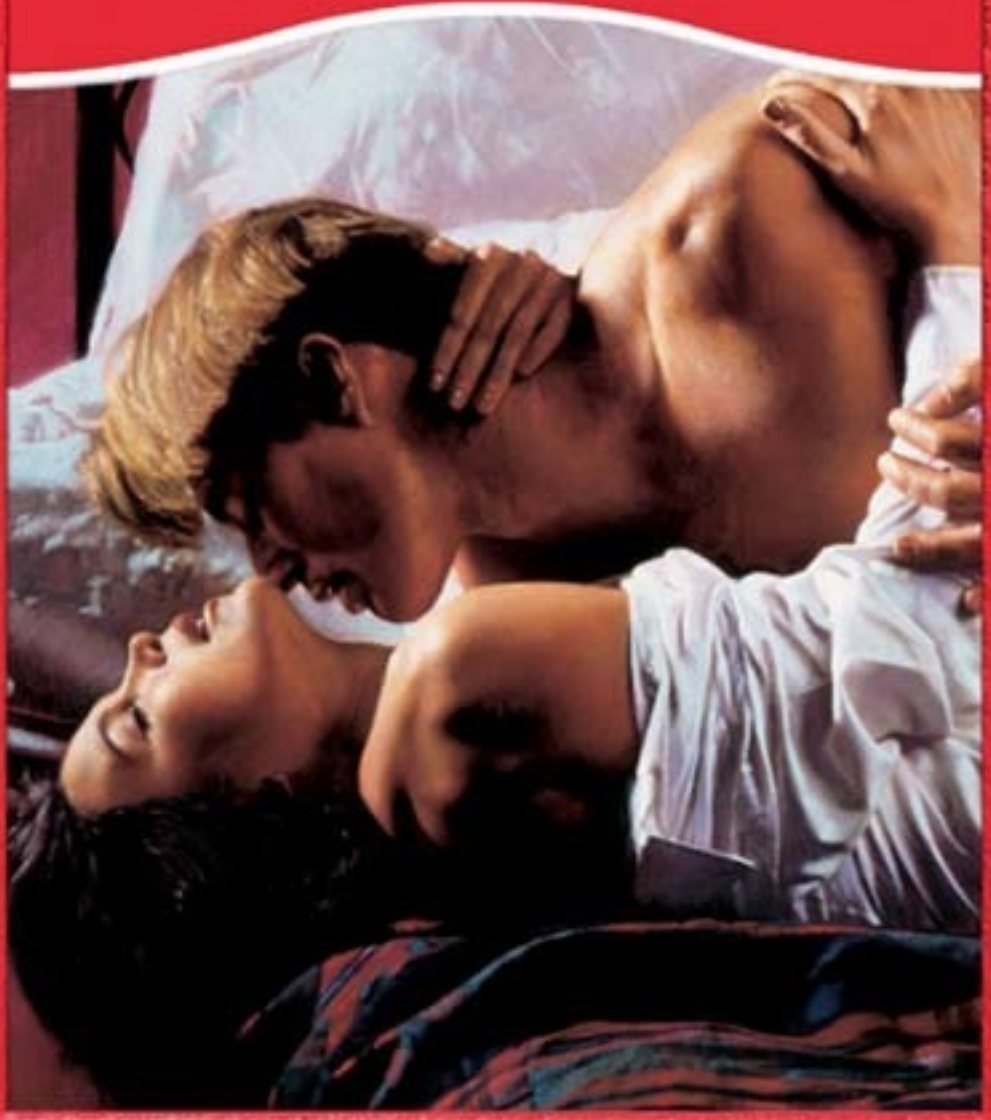
Nothing But Trouble

Beverly Barton



Vintage 90s

BEVERLY BARTON

Nothing But Trouble

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BARTON B.

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Jail… Local lawyer Peyton Rand should have left tempting troublemaker Tallie Bishop in the local hoosegow for as long as possible! That way, she'd keep out of trouble… and away from him. Instead, he bailed her out, just like he'd been doing for year. But as far as Peyton was concerned this was the last straw! But that was easier said than done.Tallie had been chasing Peyton around since they were kids, but suddenly this kid had grown - and in all the right places, too. And suddenly Peyton found that it wasn't going to be easy getting Tallie out of his system - or out of his life.

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Nothing But Trouble
Beverly Barton

www.millsandboon.co.uk

To my dear friend, Jan Celeste Hamilton Powell, whose ability to truly rejoice with me as well as cry with me keeps our long-standing relationship strong.

And a special thanks to Nancy Sue Elkins and Brenda Hall, friends I can always count on when I need them most.

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Prologue

Tallulah Bishop swung open the door of her one-ton Chevy tow truck, ordered her Great Dane, Solomon, to *stay*, and grabbed her shotgun off the seat. Jumping down to the ground, she called out a warning to the drunken man a few yards away.

"Cliff Nolan, you let Richie go right now, you hear?"

Holding his young son by the nape of his neck, Cliff turned his head sharply, sneering at Tallie. "Get the hell off my property, you damned nosy do-gooder. This here's my land and my family. I'll do whatever I damn well please."

Richie's small mongrel dog growled at Cliff, who immediately thrust out his big foot and kicked the animal.

"No, Daddy, don't. Please don't hurt Whitey," Richie cried when he heard his dog yelp in pain.

Tightening his hold on Richie, Cliff swung the boy around several times and tossed him to the ground. Richie reached out for Whitey, circling the dog's neck with his thin little arms and looking up with tearful, pleading eyes at his staggering father.

"Hell's toenails," Tallie muttered to herself, then she shouted out again to Cliff. "Leave Richie and Whitey alone or I'll shoot you. Do you hear me?"

Cliff Nolan stared at Tallie, his bloodshot hazel eyes half-closed, his thin lips curved into a smirk. "You ain't nothing but hot air. Always coming around here, putting ideas in my Loretta's head. She don't need the likes of you telling her how to be a wife. You wouldn't know the first thing about being a woman."

"I know that no man has the right to beat his wife and kids or mistreat his animals." Tallie took several tentative steps away from the gravel driveway and into the weed-infested yard.

Loretta Nolan crept out onto the porch of her mobile home, her haggard face appearing far older than her twenty-seven years. "Please, Cliff—"

"Shut your trap, woman!" Cliff glared at his wife.

"Best you go, Tallie," Loretta said.

With his arms wrapped around Whitey's neck, Richie Nolan crawled away from his father, dragging his dog with him. Shifting his feet in the dust, Cliff turned halfway around, stared down at the escaping twosome and raised his leg.

"No, Daddy, don't!" Richie shouted just as Cliff's foot came down on the dog, who yelped in pain.

Lifting his foot again, Cliff kicked at Richie, but missed his target when the boy scooted away. Still holding a trembling, whimpering Whitey, Richie kept pushing himself farther and farther away from his rampaging father.

"This is my last warning, Cliff. Get away from Richie. Now!" Tallie aimed her shotgun.

Cliff Nolan raised his foot. Richie froze in horror when he bumped into the side of the house. Drawing back his leg, Cliff aimed his foot for a kick into Richie's stomach. Tallie screamed. Cliff turned sharply in her direction. With Whitey in his arms, Richie stood up quickly and ran toward the front porch. Unsteady on his feet, Cliff spun around and bellowed for Richie to stop.

"Leave him alone," Tallie warned.

"Go to hell!" Cliff said.

Tallulah Bishop pulled the trigger on her shotgun. Birdshot ripped through Cliff's ragged jeans, splattering across his back, butt and legs. Yelling in pain, Cliff dropped to the ground.

Still clinging to Whitey, Richie flung himself and his dog into his mother's open arms. Loretta stood on the porch steps, her dark-circled eyes staring at her husband in disbelief.

"Call the sheriff," Tallie said. "And an ambulance, too. Cliff's going to need Doc Hall to pick that birdshot out of his butt."

Nodding in silence, Loretta turned slowly and walked back inside her mobile home. Richie stood on the porch, holding Whitey close to his little chest while tears streamed down his dirt-streaked face.

Tallie supposed she should go over and see if she could help Cliff, who lay on the ground in a heap, his skinny behind sticking straight up in the air while he moaned and groaned and cursed everything from heaven to hell. But Tallie wasn't inclined to offer either sympathy or assistance. The ambulance would be here soon enough, and it was unlikely that Cliff would bleed to death from birdshot splattered into him from yards away.

The sheriff probably wouldn't be far behind the ambulance. Even though Lowell Redman didn't like Cliff any better than she did, he'd have no choice but to arrest her. After all, she had shot a man.

Now she'd have to call Peyton. He'd be madder than a wet hen. He'd warned her the last time she'd had to call him for help that he was tired of bailing her out of one jam after another. But what should she have done, just stood there and allowed Cliff to abuse Richie and Whitey? For over a year, she'd been begging Loretta to take the kids and leave, but her pleas had fallen on deaf ears.

Tallie knew she'd done something really stupid this time, and whether she wanted to or not, she'd have to ask Peyton to come get her out of jail. And if there was a trial, she'd need him to defend her.

She dreaded facing Peyton far more than she dreaded spending the night in jail. No matter how good her intentions were, she always wound up creating problems for him, and she really didn't want to cause him any difficulties, especially not now when he was thinking about running for governor. Peyton Rand was a good man and deserved only the best—and the best for him certainly wasn't Tallie Bishop.

As bad as she hated to admit it, maybe Peyton had been right when he'd told her that she was nothing but trouble.

One

Tallie could tell by the look on his face that he was spitting mad. There was a ruddy hue to his tanned skin, a cold fire in his deep blue eyes and a coiled tension in the way he moved. His salon-styled ash blond hair appeared slightly mussed, as if the wind had dared to tousle it. Glancing at Deputy Wanda Simple, Tallie smiled, straightened her shoulders and prepared herself to endure his wrath. Although Peyton Rand was usually a calm, controlled, easygoing man, Tallie knew she possessed the power to dent his Southern-gentleman facade.

He slammed his leather briefcase down onto the table. Leaning over slightly, he splayed his big hands on each side of the briefcase, then glared at Tallie.

"You've done some stupid things before, Tallulah Bankhead Bishop, but this has to be the—"

Oh, he was really angry. He'd called her Tallulah! "I warned him to stop, Peyton. I promise I did." Tallie took several steps forward, her hands cuffed behind her back. "He was beating Richie. Kicking him around. I couldn't just stand there and let him hurt that child, now, could I?"

Straightening to his full six-foot-two height, Peyton bent his arms at the elbows and threw open his hands, knotting his palms into half-closed fists. "Okay, so you had to do something to stop him, but did you have to shoot Nolan with birdshot?"

"What was I supposed to do?" Tallie inched her way toward Peyton, one cautious step at a time, looking up at him with what she hoped was a remorseful expression on her face.

"You had Solomon with you, didn't you?" Peyton reached out and grabbed Tallie by the shoulders, giving her a gentle shake. A shiver of awareness zipped through his body, reminding him of why he shouldn't touch Tallie. Regardless of his unwanted attraction to the woman, the fact remained that she was bad news. "Why didn't you let Solomon handle Cliff Nolan?"

"Hell's toenails, Peyt, if I'd let Solomon attack Cliff, I'd be in here on murder charges instead of assault."

"You're going to be able to get her off, aren't you, Mr. Rand?" Wanda Simple asked. "This whole town knows Cliff Nolan is a no-good skunk, always manhandling Loretta and those kids. Tallie just did what she thought was right."

"Well, I hope the judge will see it that way." Releasing his hold on her, Peyton shook his head. Why, dear God, why had he been cursed with the responsibility of Tallie Bishop? If ever there were two people on earth who were a mismatched set, it was Tallie and him. "I came straight from Jackson, so I haven't had a chance to talk to Clayburn about your bail. But I have talked to Lowell, and you can thank him that the charges aren't assault with intent."

"I've already thanked him." Tallie realized that nothing she said or did would soften Peyton's attitude, and she couldn't much blame him. Ever since her brothers had left Crooked Oak to find their own way in the world, Peyton had acted as their substitute, trying to look out for his friends' kid sister—a kid sister who, at twenty-six, should have known better than to shoot a man.

"I'll see if Clayburn won't go ahead and set bail so I can get you out of here today." Peyton glanced at Tallie's arms, arched behind her back to accommodate the handcuffs. "Wanda, take this little heathen to her cell until I can make arrangements with Judge Proctor." Pointing his index finger at Tallie, he said, "It would serve you right if I left you in here all night."

Thrusting out her chin, Tallie gave him a haughty stare. "You do whatever you want to do, Peyton Rand. I splattered Cliff Nolan with birdshot to keep him from doing any more harm to his child and the child's dog. I hate that I had to shoot him, and maybe what I did was wrong, but if you can't see past the law into the human heart, then I doubt—"

"Dammit, woman, will you shut up!"

With a startled jerk, Tallie tensed, then swallowed hard and glanced up into Peyton's stern face. "You tell Judge Proctor that if I could have thought of another way to handle the situation, I wouldn't have filled Cliff with birdshot, but...at the time, I saw no other alternative."

"I'll tell him, and maybe he'll agree to set bail."

"Do you have any idea how much bail will be?" Tallie didn't have a lot of cash money, but her garage and tow-trucking business was quite successful, so she didn't think there'd be a problem with posting her own bail.

"I'll handle the bail," Peyton said. "I can trust you not to leave the country, can't I?" A hint of a smile twitched at the corners of his mouth.

And Lord, how Tallie loved his mouth. She'd spent endless hours wondering just what it would feel like to kiss that mouth.

Taking a deep breath, Tallie didn't even try to disguise the sense of relief she felt knowing that Peyton's anger had begun to subside. She grinned at him. "I won't even leave the state."

"That's good to know." Retrieving his briefcase, Peyton headed for the door, all the while chiding himself for being a total fool. No matter how many times her behavior created problems for him, he could never stay angry with Tallie. Despite her fierce independence and feminist bravado, she was a tenderhearted, vulnerable woman—somewhere beneath all that grease, the boyish haircut and her aggravating take-charge attitude.

"Oh, Peyt, would you please go by the Humane Shelter and pick up Solomon?" Tallie asked. "I had Wanda call Susan to come get him and keep him until we could straighten out this mess."

"We'll pick up Solomon after you're released." Peyton stopped just inside the doorway, turned around and surveyed Tallie from head to foot. "How the hell can such a little woman stir up so many stinks in this county and cause me nothing but trouble?"

Before Tallie could reply, Peyton left. She supposed she should be grateful that he'd even bothered to come when she'd called. After all, he really didn't owe her anything. Just because Peyt's father, old Senator Rand, had been a hunting and fishing pal of her grandfather's and just because her brothers and Peyton had buddied around together—despite the differences in their social positions—didn't mean he was responsible for getting her out of every mess she got herself into, did it? Of course not. But ever since Jake and Hank and Caleb had, one by one, left Crooked Oak for the big, wide world outside the boundaries of Tennessee, Peyton had become her guardian angel, always just a phone call away. Of course, he fussed and fumed and swore she'd be the death of him. And whenever she called him for help, he warned her, "This is the last time, so help me, Tallie."

"Come on, Tallie, let's get you into a cell until Mr. Rand comes back for you." Wanda Simple, a tall, skinny, bespectacled woman in her early thirties had graduated from high school with Jake, and she and Tallie had been on friendly terms for years.

"Do you think Clayburn Proctor will go ahead and set bail so I can get out of here today?" Tallie asked.

"Ah, shoot, Tallie, you know Judge Proctor thinks the world of you. Why, ever since you saved his grandson's life when you got to the scene of the wreck before the ambulance and performed CPR on that child, Judge Proctor's thought you hung the moon." Placing her hand on the small of Tallie's back, Wanda led her down the hall toward the short row of jail cells. "Besides, Peyton Rand could charm the birds down from the trees, couldn't he?"

Tallie stood perfectly still, while Wanda uncuffed her. "Yeah, you're right. Peyton's got his daddy's silver tongue. He's a born politician."

"I swear, girl, why haven't you made a move on that man? It's plain to see that you're crazy about him, and everybody in the county knows he's always acting like your knight in shining armor."

"Peyt just feels responsible for me, that's all." Tallie walked into the cell. "My brothers made him promise to keep an eye on me."

Wanda closed the cell door. “Well, for a man who doesn’t care, I’d say he keeps a pretty close eye.”

“He’s never thought of me as anything but a pest. Besides, I’m hardly the kind of woman a man like Peyton Rand would want, and I’m certainly not what he needs.” Stepping away from the bars and into the center of the small cell, Tallie spread out her arms and slowly turned around in a circle. “Just look at me. I’m a country girl. What I need is a man with calluses on his hands and dirt on his boots, not some rich lawyer who wants to be governor.”

“You look fine.” Wanda ran her gaze from the top of Tallie’s head to the tips of her feet. “Well, you could use a little dolling up, but that wouldn’t be too difficult with your face and figure. And even if you and Peyton Rand are totally different, that doesn’t mean you weren’t meant for each other. Opposites attract, you know?”

“Wanda, a man on the verge of running for governor isn’t about to get himself romantically involved with a woman who owns a tow-trucking company, has only a junior college education and is always getting into trouble because she can’t keep her nose out of everybody else’s business.”

“Well, if you don’t make a move soon, you’re liable to lose him for good,” Wanda said. “He’s been dating that Donna Fields for three months now. You know her granddaddy was governor and her uncle’s a federal judge.”

“Peyton and I are all wrong for each other, but he and Donna Fields are a different matter. She’d probably make him the perfect wife.” Tallie hated admitting that another woman was far more suitable for Peyt than she was, but the truth was the truth. Donna Fields was the best possible choice for a politician’s wife. Tallie Bishop would be a politician’s nightmare.

* * *

Peyton sat in the luxury of his dark blue Jaguar, his shoulders resting comfortably against the leather seat as he spoke on his cellular phone. With casual grace, he flicked the ashes off the end of his cigar into the tray.

“She’s never gotten herself into this much trouble before, Clayburn, but she honestly thought she was doing the right thing.”

“I know,” Clayburn Proctor said. “Tallie’s got a good heart, it’s just that she acts without thinking. I don’t have a problem with setting her bail now. No sense in that girl staying overnight in jail. But there’s no way we can get out of a trial. Of course, since Lowell’s only charging her with assault and battery, I can just put the case on my docket if she pleads guilty. No need to take this before a jury.” Clayburn laughed. “But my bet is if it did go to a jury, they’d acquit her. I know she broke the law, but by God, somebody’s needed to do something about Cliff Nolan for a long time. If only his wife would press charges against him.”

“Thanks, Clayburn. I appreciate this.” Peyton hadn’t had a doubt that the judge would bend over backward to help Tallie; as a matter of fact, there was hardly a soul in the whole county, especially around Crooked Oak, who wouldn’t go out of their way for Tallie Bishop. Just about everybody liked her. Despite her penchant for getting into trouble, Tallie’s main fault was that she was always trying to help others. He’d never known anyone so concerned about every living creature on earth. He supposed that was the main reason he’d never been able to sever the ties that bound him to Tallie, despite the many times he’d wished she’d get the hell out of his life.

“Well, who’s going to post bond for Tallie?” Clayburn asked.

“I am.” Peyton laughed. “She’s promised me that she won’t leave the country.”

“Well, since you’re the one posting bail, I’d say that a fair amount would be 1,678. Wouldn’t you say that would be fair?”

Hearing the slight chuckle in Clayburn Proctor’s voice, Peyton took a draw on his cigar, then blew out a ring of smoke. Damn the man! The judge had a warped sense of humor. Whoever heard of such an odd amount for bail?

“That’s a rather unusual sum, don’t you think?” Peyton asked.

"You know, for some reason that amount sticks in my mind. I seem to connect 1,678 with you, Peyton."

"It couldn't possibly be the exact amount you've lost to me in our friendly little poker games over the last few months, could it?

"Well, well, that must be the reason."

"Clayburn, you're not going to get that money out of me. Tallie won't jump bail."

"Not intentionally," the judge said, chuckling loudly. "But knowing Tallie, she just might take that tow truck of hers into Mississippi without even thinking, and if she does, and if I have a mind to, I can rule that she's jumped bail."

Clayburn Proctor was a wily old fox who enjoyed his games. Peyton wouldn't put anything past him. If anyone else had been posting Tallie's bail, Clayburn would have named a different amount, but the judge couldn't resist the chance to needle Peyton. "You wouldn't do that to Tallie."

"Probably not," Clayburn admitted. "We're both under that girl's spell, aren't we, Peyt? Like everybody else in these parts."

"You may be under her spell, but I'm damn well not!" Peyton had never been under any woman's spell and most definitely not Tallie Bishop's. She was five-feet-two-inches of pure trouble. She'd been a pest as long as he'd known her, ever since she'd been a kid and traipsed around after him and her brothers when they went hunting and fishing. And, dammit all, when she'd turned sixteen and fancied herself in love with him, she'd nearly driven him crazy until he'd persuaded her that there could never be anything romantic between them.

"Don't protest so much," Clayburn said. "Folks will assume you've got something to hide."

"Thanks again for setting bail, odd amount or not," Peyton said, deliberately changing the subject. He was not interested in Tallie Bishop, most definitely not in the way Clayburn Proctor was suggesting. They were barely friends. He tried to look out for her as a favor to her brothers and because somebody had to do it. There was nothing more to their relationship than that—absolutely nothing.

* * *

Standing in the doorway, Peyton watched Tallie while she made the rounds up and down the pens in the animal shelter. When she and Susan Williams, the shelter manager, stopped by the pen that housed Solomon, the huge dog reared up against the wire gate, his head towering over the two women.

The moment Susan opened the gate, Solomon jumped down and loped out toward Tallie. Squatting beside the Great Dane, Tallie gave him a hug, then ran her hand down his back in a loving pet.

"Did you think you were doomed to life in this prison?" Tallie's voice held the same soft, even quality a mother uses when reassuring a child. "Well, Peyt and I have come to take you home, but you'll have to be on your best behavior because you'll be riding in Peyt's Jaguar."

Good God! He hadn't thought about that when he'd offered to drive Tallie and Solomon home. That dog was the size of a pony. Peyton felt like kicking himself. Why hadn't he let her call on someone else for taxi service? Why did he think it was his responsibility to make sure she got home safe and sound?

"Where's your truck?" Susan asked as they walked into the outer office area where a volunteer manned the reception desk.

"Mike picked it up at the Nolans' and took it back to the garage." When Tallie stopped, Solomon came to heel without a word from his mistress. "We didn't know whether or not I'd be spending the night in jail." Smiling, she cut her eyes in Peyton's direction. "Lowell let me bring Solomon along in the police car, and I certainly appreciate y'all taking care of him for me."

"Good gracious, Tallie, taking care of Solomon is the least we could do for our number-one volunteer," Susan said. "Mr. Rand, we're certainly glad you were able to get Tallie out of jail so fast. I just can't believe she'll have to stand trial for protecting a child and his dog."

"Well, Ms. Williams, Tallie did shoot a man." Peyton knew it was useless to point out Tallie's faults to any of her many admirers, and Susan Williams was no exception. "I expect once I present the evidence, Judge Proctor will go easy on her."

"As well he should," Susan said. "I just wish we could get Loretta to take those children and leave Cliff Nolan. If she doesn't, he'll wind up killing one of them sooner or later."

"Tallie, we really should be going." Peyton nodded toward the front door. "I've taken off all afternoon, but I need to get back to Jackson. I have a dinner engagement in Marshallton this evening."

"Sure thing." Tallie, her dog at her side, gave Susan a quick hug. "Thanks again. Come on, Solomon."

Just as Peyton opened the door and stepped outside, the telephone rang. When the volunteer informed Susan that the call was for her, Tallie followed Peyton outside. But before they made it to the car, Susan stuck her head out the door and called to Tallie.

"Wait up," Susan said. "Tallie, I need to talk to you for just a minute. It's important, or I wouldn't hold you up like this."

Tallie gave Peyton a questioning look. "Do you mind terribly? I promise I'll hurry."

"Two minutes." Peyton tapped the face of his Rolex.

"Stay, Solomon," Tallie ordered, then rushed to the entrance of the animal shelter where Susan stood waiting.

Peyton leaned against the side of his car, his tense body striving for relaxation. Reaching inside his coat pocket, he removed his sunglasses and put them on, then crossed his arms over his chest.

He didn't have time for this delay, whatever the cause. He'd had his secretary clear his calendar for the afternoon because he hadn't had any idea how long this latest "Tallie rescue" would take. But he and Donna had plans to dine with Marshallton's mayor tonight. Peyton wanted to get his old friend's thoughts on the possibility of running for governor in the next election.

Peyton glanced over at Tallie. The late-afternoon sun caught in her raven hair, giving it a blue-black luster. She kept her dark curly hair cropped short, in an almost boyish style, but there was nothing boyish about that baby-doll face, those long, thick eyelashes, that full pink mouth. Damn, why couldn't she have stayed skinny and flat-chested, the way she'd been at sixteen when she'd professed her undying love and he'd gently rejected her? Somewhere between the age of sixteen, when Caleb, the youngest of the Bishop boys, had left for college on a baseball scholarship and had asked Peyton to look out for his little sister, and the age of eighteen, Tallie Bishop had blossomed. Actually, she'd over-blossomed. Her body had filled out in all the right places, creating an hourglass-shaped body on a petite frame.

Peyton noticed the way her frayed blue jeans clung to her hips and legs. She wore a grease-stained short-sleeved chambray shirt, tucked beneath the waistband in the back and hanging loose in the front. Underneath the unbuttoned shirt, her full breasts strained against a faded yellow T-shirt. On a less well endowed woman, the clothes would have looked masculine. On Tallie, they looked damned sexy. And that was the problem. For the past eight years, men had been ogling Tallie, despite her tomboyish ways. She'd had her pick of most young bucks in the county, dating every good-looking Tom, Dick and Harry. On more than one occasion, she'd coldcocked some overzealous suitor. Trouble sought Tallie the way a moth seeks a flame.

And it wasn't just the men who couldn't take no for an answer that caused problems, it was Tallie's constant interference in other people's lives. He had to admit that she was a good citizen, working in her spare time as a volunteer fire fighter for Crooked Oak as well as a helper at the Humane Shelter. But more often than not, Tallie let her concern overshadow her better judgment. Case in point—filling Cliff Nolan full of birdshot. But there was always something. Her love for animals had gotten her into trouble with Lobo Smothers, an illiterate farmer suspected of illegal hunting and trapping. Tallie had been doing everything in her power to help the authorities catch him and put him in jail. Needless to say, she and Lobo weren't the best of friends. And there were her endless efforts

to get abused women to leave their husbands and start new lives. Cliff Nolan wasn't the only husband in Crooked Oak who had a bone to pick with Tallie.

What the hell was Peyton going to do about her if he did decide to run for governor? There was no way the woman would ever change, and having his name linked with hers in connection to one of her wild exploits was bound to damage his image.

His image? His old man had always cared about the Rand family's image, and it had been one of the things he'd despised about his father. If he did decide to enter politics, would he become more and more like Senator Marshall Rand? His father had died a lonely and unhappy man. Peyton didn't want to follow in his footsteps.

"Ready?" Tallie asked.

Peyton stared at her, unaware until she'd spoken that she had approached the car. "All finished with Susan?"

"Ah...yeah...just some shelter business." Tallie opened the passenger door, ordered Solomon inside and slipped into the seat.

Peyton didn't like the way she'd answered him. She was hiding something. Tallie was so damned honest, the truth showed on her face whenever she tried to lie. Pink spots stained her cheeks. Getting into the Jag, he started the engine. "What sort of business?"

"Huh?"

"What's up, Tallie?" Peyton backed out of the parking area. "If this is something that's going to cause me any more problems, then let me hear it now."

"What makes you think this has anything to do with you?" Sticking out her chin, Tallie crossed her arms under her bosom.

"If it's not something that could get you into trouble, then why won't you tell me?" Turning the car onto the highway, Peyton glanced over at Tallie and wished he hadn't. Her slender, crisscrossed arms had boosted her full breasts up and out, reminding him of how truly female she was.

"An anonymous caller told Susan that he had information about where Lobo Smothers had set up some traps, out toward Kingsley Hill."

Peyton groaned, then glanced over at Tallie. "Stay out of it. Give the information to Lowell and let him handle it."

"I could do that, but it won't do any good. Lobo Smothers always seems to be one step ahead of the law."

"Lowell Redman is just newly elected. Give him a chance."

"The last time I shared information with the sheriff's department, they arrived at the scene to find no traps, and no Lobo. I told you then that Lowell's got a rat working for him. I just haven't figured out who it is yet, but I will."

"Tallie, stay away from Lobo Smothers." Peyton issued the command in a tight, controlled voice. "The man is dangerous."

"All the more reason that he should be behind bars! Besides, rumor has it that Lobo is growing marijuana out there in the woods somewhere. If his abuse of animals won't stir the law into action, maybe his being in the drug racket will."

"Whatever Lobo Smothers is doing, let the law handle it! Dammit, woman, you're in enough trouble. In another week or two, you'll be going to trial for shooting a man full of birdshot. You do realize that if Lowell Redman wasn't a friend and if Clayburn Proctor didn't think you were a saint for saving his grandson's life, you could do some serious jail time for what you did."

"I was defending a poor, helpless child and a pitiful little dog from a monstrous brute." Solomon growled as if agreeing with his mistress.

"Tallie, I've been getting you out of trouble for years now, and I'm sick and tired of it. I've tried to talk reason to you, but you refuse to listen."

"There's no need for you to waste any more of your valuable time, Peyton," Tallie said, refusing to look in his direction. "Just drop Solomon and me off at the garage."

"Fine. I'm probably running late, as it is."

"Well, that's just awful, isn't it? You sure wouldn't want to keep Donna Fields waiting."

"No, I wouldn't want to keep Donna waiting. Ladies like Donna are accustomed to a certain kind of behavior from the men they date...like being punctual for dinner."

"Ladies like Donna?" Tallie turned in her seat, stretching the safety belt to its limit when she leaned toward Peyton. "A lady whose grandfather was governor and whose uncle is a federal judge? A lady professor with blue blood in her veins? My, my, a lady like that could do a lot for a man with political aspirations. Just think what a wife she'd make for someone with his eye on the state capitol."

Peyton glanced at Tallie and then back at the road. He knew she was trying to goad him into a fight. She was implying that his only interest in Donna was her suitability, and he didn't like to think he'd become so much like his father, he would consider marrying a woman just because she and her family could help him politically.

"Donna is a very special lady. I'll have to introduce you to her sometime." Peyton turned off the highway into the parking area for the garage and tow-truck company Tallie owned and operated with Mike Hanley and his sister, Sheila Vance.

"Spare me." The moment Peyton killed the engine, Tallie opened the door. "I doubt Donna Fields and I have anything in common. Someone with blood as blue as hers would probably be offended by a little ol' redneck like me."

Peyton laughed at the thought of introducing Donna and Tallie. The funny thing was, he had the oddest notion that once they met, the two women would actually like each other. "Don't count Donna short just because of who she is. She's not a snob."

Tallie got out of the Jag, then ordered Solomon to join her. "Well, you and Donna have a pleasant dinner tonight, and don't you worry about me. There's not one reason for you to bother with me again until my trial."

"I hope you're right," Peyton said. "I'll call you when Clayburn lets me know about the trial date."

"Fine." Leaving the door open, Tallie walked away, then stopped and turned around. "Thanks, Peyt. I...well, just thanks."

"Tallie?"

"Huh?" She walked back over to the Jag. "Let Lowell Redman handle Lobo Smothers."

"Yeah, sure."

"I mean it. You stay out of trouble."

"I'll try." She slammed the door.

Waiting until Tallie and Solomon disappeared inside the garage, Peyton pulled the Jag out onto the highway and headed toward Jackson. Something told him that he'd be seeing Tallie again before the trial. If she stayed out of trouble for two weeks, it would be a minor miracle.

Two

Peyton placed the stadium seats on the metal bleachers and assisted Donna into her place at his right while his brother Spence sat down on his left. Since his brother had married Pattie Cornell and become the instant father of two teenagers, Peyton had taken his role as an uncle quite seriously. J.J., Spence's stepson, was a varsity player on Marshallton High's baseball team, and Peyton tried to make as many Saturday-night games as possible, but this was the first time he'd asked Donna to accompany him.

Over the last ten years since Peyton had devoted himself to building a successful private practice, he'd given up more and more of his leisure time and had forfeited a personal life altogether. He'd dated a lot, but had never become seriously involved. Between work and his duties as Tallie's guardian angel, he hadn't found a woman willing to accept the limited time he had to offer a relationship.

Several months ago, he'd met Donna at a political fund-raiser. They had liked each other immediately, and when he'd asked her out, she'd accepted. She didn't seem to mind that he was dedicated to his career. She taught history at a local college and was devoted to her students. Although half the state of Tennessee already had them engaged, they considered themselves good friends, neither of them in a hurry to commit to anything more.

"I hope you aren't doing this just to be a good sport," Peyton said to Donna. "I know coming to a high school baseball game is hardly the ideal date."

"Don't be silly." Donna smiled, her cinnamon-brown eyes sparkling with warmth. "I really like your brother and his family. And this is a real treat. I've never been to a baseball game."

"Sweetbriar Seminary for Young Ladies didn't have a baseball team?"

"We had a volleyball team, but I didn't play and seldom went to the games. I lived with my nose stuck in a book. And in college, I was too busy keeping up my grades to waste time on anything except the football games Uncle James took me to when he visited his alma mater."

Peyton laughed, trying to imagine Donna as a college girl. At thirty, she was such a serious-minded woman that he had a difficult time thinking of her any other way.

Spence punched Peyton in the ribs. "You two ready to get something from the concession stand? It's our treat since we invited y'all to the game."

Pattie Rand leaned over her husband to touch Peyton's arm. "Why don't you and Spence take our orders and go for the food while Donna and I get better acquainted."

Although Peyton knew Pattie would give Donna the third degree while he and Spence were at the concession stand, he reluctantly agreed. The lines at the stand were long. Undoubtedly most baseball fans had decided to dine at the field tonight. The aroma of hamburgers and potatoes frying mixed with the milder smell of hot dogs and cotton candy, while the mouth-watering scent of roasted peanuts wafted through the early-evening air.

Peyton glanced around at the multitude of ball fields that comprised this section of the park, then past the enormous parking area to the lighted tennis courts, the outdoor Olympic-sized pool and the newly constructed recreation center.

"This is quite some place, isn't it? There was nothing around here like this when we were kids playing ball." Spence put his hand on his brother's shoulder. "We did good, don't you think, donating most of the old man's money to build this place."

"Yeah." Peyton knew how difficult it had been for Spence to agree to christening this modern recreational facility the Marshall Rand Memorial Park. Spence had hated the old man, and hadn't gotten along with Peyt for years because he'd once thought him a carbon copy of their father.

"Are you still considering running for governor?" Spence asked.

"You think it would be a mistake, don't you?" Peyton stepped forward a couple of inches when the snail-paced line finally moved.

"I think you'd run the risk of following in the old man's footsteps." Spence glanced down at the order list his wife had given him.

"I wouldn't be the kind of politician the Senator was." Peyton glanced around, checking to see if anyone seemed interested in their private conversation. Lowering his voice, he said, "I'd like to make a difference for the people of this state. There are so many things that need to be done, and I truly think I could accomplish a great deal."

"You're a smart man, Peyt, and I think a fairly honest man—" Spence grinned "—for a lawyer."

"Hey there, little brother, I resent that slur."

"Politics can change a man. He can start worrying more about his image than he does about the people who elected him in the first place. Marshall Rand never did anything that wasn't for the good of Marshall Rand." Spence followed Peyton a few steps closer to the concession stand as the line progressed slowly. "You're a better man than Father was, but you're a lot like him. You look like him, talk like him...you definitely inherited his way with words. Hell, man, you even picked up his bad habit of smoking cigars."

"I've cut back. I'm down to a handful a day, usually one after lunch and one after dinner, so don't start on me about my cigars. Tallie gives me enough grief over my smoking. I don't need any scolding from you."

"Now there's a woman who could keep a politician in line," Spence said. "Hey, any word on when she'll go to trial for shooting Cliff Nolan?"

"That shooting only occurred three days ago, and it seems to be the talk of the county." Peyton wasn't surprised. News always traveled fast in small towns and rural communities where everybody knew everybody and neighbors tended to keep tabs on one another. "Clayburn cleared some time on his docket for next week. He's bending over backward to be fair to Tallie and still stay within the law."

"Tallie told us all about what happened. Pattie and I ran into her here at the ball field the night after she got out of jail." Spence looked from side to side, taking note of the people in line and the crowds out in the adjoining fields where the bleachers were filled with cheering observers. "She's probably here tonight. She comes with Sheila Vance to all of Sheila's little boy's games."

Peyton groaned. "That's all I need! I can't see a minute's peace for that woman."

"I don't feel a bit sorry for you. When she gets into trouble and calls you for help, all you have to do is refuse."

"You know I promised her brothers I'd keep an eye on her. They were well aware of what a little heathen she is. I swear, Spence, I never knew a woman could cause a man so much grief. I thought things would improve when she got older, but I think they're getting worse."

"I guess you know there are plenty of men who'd like to be in your shoes," Spence said.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the fact that, underneath those blue jeans and grease, there's quite a woman. Smart, caring, sensitive and pretty. You seem to be one of the few men around these parts who hasn't realized there's a sexy woman hiding behind that grease-monkey facade of Tallie's. Now, I wonder why that is?"

Peyton didn't want to answer his brother's question. To find the answer would involve some deep soul-searching where his relationship with Tallie was concerned, and that wasn't something he intended doing. He had too many mixed emotions when it came to that damned irritating female. A part of him wished that she'd simply disappear off the face of the earth. Then another part of him couldn't imagine his life without her—without thinking about her, worrying about her, taking care of her...wanting her.

The customer ahead of Peyton and Spence paid for his food, leaving them first in line at the concession stand window. Spence placed their order, then waved at someone two lines over. Peyton's

glance followed his brother's. The bottom dropped out of his stomach. Tallie Bishop, her hands filled with a tray of food and drinks, walked toward them, a warm smile of greeting on her face. Solomon stood at her side, and accompanying them was Mike Hanley, her muscle-bound business partner.

"Hi, there." Tallie rushed over to Peyton, Solomon following her. "You here to watch J.J.'s game?"

"Yes, Donna and I came with Spence and Pattie." Peyton wasn't sure why he wanted Tallie to know that Donna was with him. Maybe it was because of the way Mike stood so close to her, as if he was proclaiming ownership.

"Well, Danny's game will be over soon. I just might drop by and watch the rest of the varsity game." When Peyton made no comment, she turned to Spence. "Eric Miller is here, and he's been drinking. I thought about calling Lowell and seeing if he'd send over a deputy, but he'd just tell me he couldn't arrest Eric unless he caused a problem."

"I wish that man would stay home when he's drinking. He's such an embarrassment to Tony." Pulling his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans, Spence took out several bills to pay for his order and laid the money down on the counter. "If he gives you any trouble, Tallie, let me know."

"I can handle Miller if he starts bothering Tallie." Mike draped a protective arm around her shoulders.

"Who is Eric Miller and what's this all about?" Never taking his eyes off Tallie, Peyton reached out and picked up one of the cardboard food trays.

"Eric's son Tony plays varsity ball with J.J. Half the time, Eric shows up at the games three sheets to the wind," Tallie said. "He harasses the umpire, curses the players and creates problems for his son. At the first game of the season, Miller caused such a ruckus, he wound up spending the night in jail."

"Yeah, and even after he found out that Tallie was the one who called the sheriff, he wouldn't leave her alone," Mike said.

"What do you mean he wouldn't leave her alone?" Peyton asked.

"Well, it seems Miller has the hots for our Tallie. He's been giving her a rough time lately," Spence said. "The guy doesn't want to take no for an answer."

"Why didn't you tell me about Miller?" Peyton glared at Tallie.

"There was no reason to bother you." Tallie tightened her hold on her food tray. "Solomon acts as a deterrent. Believe me, even Eric Miller doesn't want to take him on. Besides, at that first game when he got really obnoxious, I called Lowell and he took care of things."

"Couldn't you avoid the man?" Peyton asked. "You could stay away from these games. You're not a parent."

"Neither are you! Besides, I'm not going to let the likes of Eric Miller keep me from doing whatever I want to do and going wherever I want to go."

"Well, that first game when you called Lowell, you could have stayed out of it and allowed the other fathers to handle everything, including calling the sheriff."

"They were too busy trying to drag Eric off the field," Tallie said defiantly. "They sort of had their hands full since the man is six foot two and weighs close to two-fifty."

Peyton took a deep breath, releasing it on a loud sigh. "This food is going to be cold if we don't get it back to Donna and Pattie," he told Spence, wondering why he ever bothered trying to talk sense to Tallie. She always had a rational explanation for everything she did, regardless of the consequences.

"Yeah, you're right." Spence turned to Tallie. "I'll keep an eye out for Miller. Come on on over when the Little League game ends. We'll introduce you to Peyt's lady friend."

"I'll do that." Thrusting out her chin and sticking her nose in the air, Tallie gave Peyton a see-if-I-care-who-you're-with smile.

Peyton grumbled under his breath as he and Spence made their way back to the field where the game had just begun.

"What's the matter, big brother?" Spence asked. "Don't you think it's time for the two women in your life to meet?"

"The two women in my... Tallie Bishop is not a woman in my life. She's a pest. A nuisance. A thorn in my side. But she is definitely not a woman in my life."

"Sure. Whatever you say." Spence grinned from ear to ear.

* * *

Thirty-five minutes later, Tallie waited with Sheila Vance for her son's coach to finish the after-game pep talk and instructions on when the Little League team would practice next. A cool springtime night breeze reminded the women that summer was nearly two months away. Tallie zipped up her black and yellow jacket.

"Are you planning to go over to the varsity game to meet Donna Fields?" Sheila asked. "I think Mike was hoping you'd leave when we did."

"Ever since Mike's divorce, he's had some crazy notion that the two of us would make a great team. I've tried to tell him that being business partners and friends is all there is ever going to be between us." Tallie ran her fingers through her short, windblown hair, lifting her curly bangs off her forehead.

"Give him time and he'll get the picture." Sheila buttoned her beige cardigan sweater. "Even if Mike can't be the man, I wish someone would come along and wake you up to the fact that Peyton Rand is not the only man in the world."

"I know he's not the only man in the world. It's just that—well, he was the first man I fell in love with...and there hasn't been anybody else."

Releasing her indrawn breath on a loud huff, Sheila shook her head. "I don't understand you, Tallie. If you want Peyton, why don't you go after him? Use your feminine wiles on him."

"I didn't say I wanted him." Tallie kicked at the ground with the tip of her black tennis shoe. "Besides, I don't think I have any feminine wiles. Growing up with only a grandfather and three big brothers, I didn't learn much about being female."

"Pooh! You don't have to learn to be female. It's just something you are. And believe me, honey, you're all female. What you have to do is go over there and show Peyton Rand that you're more woman than that Donna Fields could ever be."

"How do you suggest I do that?"

"First, admit that you want Peyton Rand."

"I *don't* want him." When Sheila looked at her skeptically, Tallie shook her head. "I can't want him. He's all wrong for me, and I'm all wrong for him. You know as well as I do that if he runs for governor, he'll need a wife like Donna Fields. Someone sophisticated and educated. Someone with the right background."

"Don't sell yourself short," Sheila said.

"I'm not," Tallie said. "I know that I'm smart and hardworking and have more friends than a person has a right to, but I know my shortcomings just as well. Peyton and I just aren't right for each other."

Mike, who'd been waiting at the fence for Danny, walked the boy over to where Sheila and Tallie were talking. "Ready to go, ladies?"

"Tallie's staying to see the rest of the varsity game." Accepting the baseball glove her son handed her, Sheila put her arm around him. "I need to get Danny home for a bath and then bed so we won't be late for Sunday school tomorrow."

"Are you sure you want to stay?" Mike asked Tallie.

"I'm sure," Tallie said. "I've heard so much about Donna Fields that I think it's high time I met her."

Mike shrugged, then turned and walked away with Sheila and Danny, who both gave Tallie farewell waves.

Taking time to shore up her courage, Tallie waited a few minutes before strolling over to the field where the varsity game was being played. She spotted Peyton sitting next to an attractive redhead, who sported a rust leather coat almost the same color as her dark auburn hair.

Standing at a distance, Tallie glanced back and forth from the action on the field to Peyton. Peyton wasn't exactly sitting in the stadium seat; he lounged in a relaxed position, sort of sprawled out, half sitting, half lying. Feeling her heartbeat quicken, Tallie cursed her stupid weakness. The very sight of Peyton Rand excited her. Of all the men she knew, why did the most unsuitable one have to be the one who gave her butterflies in her stomach?

She and Peyton came from such diverse backgrounds. He from a wealthy, political aristocracy. She from a family of poor blue-collar rednecks. He was a brilliant, sophisticated lawyer; she was a country girl who drove a tow truck. He was a man who played by society's rules, and she had spent her entire life breaking all those rules, living by her own set of ethics.

So what if she and Peyton Rand were doomed as a couple? That didn't mean that Donna Fields was the right woman for him. It wouldn't hurt if she just went over and checked Donna out. After all, she couldn't call herself a true friend if she let just any woman come along and snag the man she'd always dreamed would someday be hers.

Readjusting the collar on her jacket, Tallie took a deep breath, inhaling and exhaling very slowly. Solomon crawled under the bleachers and lay down in the dirt when Tallie made her way upward, finding an empty spot directly below Peyton and Donna. She spoke to Spence and Pattie, exchanging pleasantries while she settled into place.

Tilting her head slightly, she leaned back toward Peyton. When he didn't respond, she sat up straight, glancing out across the field to the scoreboard. "I see Marshallton is behind by two points. What we need is for J.J. to hit another home run the way he did at last Saturday's game."

"I don't know if we could put up with him if he hits another homer," Pattie said. "For days, he had such a big head, we threatened to disown him."

"The boy has a right to be proud. He's a good player. One of Marshallton's best," Spence said.

"Spoken like a proud stepfather." Peyton wondered what it would feel like to have children, even stepchildren with whom you shared a close relationship. In the last few years, he'd given marriage and parenthood more than one passing thought. After all, he wasn't getting any younger, and it never hurt a politician to have a family.

Turning around in her seat, Tallie stared at Donna Fields. "Hi, I'm Tallie Bishop, an old friend of Spence's and Peyt's."

Donna's big brown eyes widened. "Ah, so you're Peyt's little Tallie."

Tallie wasn't certain what the other woman meant by her comment. Obviously, Ms. Fields knew more about Tallie than Tallie knew about her. "I'm not sure that I'm—"

"I've had to cancel more than one engagement with Donna because of you." Peyton slipped his arm around Donna's shoulders. "She's been an absolute sweetheart by being so understanding."

"How absolutely...sweet of her." Tallie glared at the auburn-haired beauty, who flashed her a brilliant smile, not a trace of animosity in her expression.

"You're somewhat like Peyton described you," Donna said. "But he forgot to tell me how pretty you were."

Now why had that woman gone and said something nice to her? Tallie wondered. She'd been bound and determined not to like Donna Fields, and here she was all friendly and nice and... Tallie wanted to hate her, but she knew right off that that was going to be impossible.

"Thanks for the compliment," Tallie said. "I'm afraid Peyt hasn't told me anything about you, but I've drawn my own conclusions. You're not quite what I was expecting."

"What exactly were you expecting?" Donna asked.

"Tallie..." Peyton narrowed his eyes, glowering at her, his expression filled with warning.

"Oh, calm yourself, Peyt. I'm not going to say anything to embarrass you. I like her." Tallie held out her hand to Donna. "It's very nice to meet you, Ms. Fields."

Donna accepted the friendly greeting, shaking hands with Tallie. "It's very nice to meet you, too, Tallie. And please call me Donna. I have a feeling you and I are going to be friends."

"Yeah, something tells me that we are." In that one moment, in a flash of brilliant female intuition, Tallie knew that Donna Fields wasn't in love with Peyton. Love wasn't there in her eyes when she looked at him, or her voice when she spoke to him, or in her touch when she placed her hand on his arm.

Peyton didn't like this new turn of events. His gut instincts had told him that, once they became acquainted, Tallie and Donna would like each other, but he hadn't counted on it happening so fast. Both women shared qualities that drew others to them, and he had to admit that Donna's friendliness, her concern for others and her warm, caring nature had reminded him of Tallie. But that was where the similarities ended. Donna would be an asset to any man; Tallie would drive a sober man to drink.

While the game continued, Tallie and Donna talked, discussing various subjects, but somehow their conversation kept reverting to Peyton Rand. The man himself appeared oblivious to everything the two women said about him. Pattie joined their conversation from time to time, but most of her concentration centered on her son, the team's pitcher.

In the bottom of the sixth inning, the score tied five to five, Tony Miller came to bat. When the umpire called his third strike on the boy, Eric Miller marched over to the fence and yelled out a condemning obscenity.

"Oh, good Lord, I wish that man would stay home," Pattie said.

Peyton took a good look at this Miller fellow. He was about the same height as Peyton, but outweighed him by at least thirty pounds, most of which were contained in his enormous beer belly. The very thought that this middle-aged, foulmouthed drunk had made sexual advances to Tallie made Peyton furious. If the man ever touched her...

Tallie stood, stretching her arms out on each side, allowing the feeling to return to her numb backside. "I've got to make a pit stop. Do either of you need to go?" She glanced at Donna and then at Pattie.

"Yes." Grinning at Tallie, Pattie stood. Donna shook her head no. Tallie and Pattie made their way down the bleachers to the ground. When Solomon saw Tallie, he crawled out from his resting place and followed the two women toward the recreation center.

"Wonder why she called me Peyton's 'little Tallie'?"

"What?" Pattie asked.

Tallie waved and spoke to several people they passed on the path to the rest room. "Wonder why Donna Fields referred to me as Peyton's 'little Tallie'?" she repeated.

"I think it just slipped out before she thought about what she was saying. Peyton didn't seem to approve, did he?"

"Peyton Rand would like nothing better than to see the last of me." Tallie pushed open the door marked Women, then held it for Pattie. "Stay, Solomon."

"Peyton talks about you all the time, you know." Pattie waited in line with Tallie.

"Yeah, I'll bet he does. He probably tells you what a holy terror I am and how he's always having to get me out of trouble."

"I think Spence and I know almost everything about Tallulah Bankhead Bishop. From the time you were a kid following your big brothers around, to your recent arrest for shooting a man with birdshot. You're Peyton's favorite subject, and the strange thing is, he's not even aware of it."

"Don't you get sick and tired of hearing about me?"

"The question is don't you think Donna Fields would be sick and tired of hearing about you after three months?"

"What makes you think he talks to her about me?" Tallie asked.

"I'd bet my last dime he does." Pattie smiled at Tallie. "If Donna thought she and Peyton had a future together, she'd have every right to be terribly jealous of you, and she isn't. Didn't you notice?"

Just as Tallie started to reply, two women emerged from the stalls, leaving them free for Tallie and Pattie. By the time they came back out and washed their hands, the bathroom had cleared and they were its only occupants.

"She's not in love with Peyt, is she?" Tallie dried her hands on brown paper towels.

"Donna told me that she thinks Peyton is a wonderful man and she enjoys his company." Punching the air dryer, Pattie rubbed her hands together. "But no, I don't think she's in love with him. She's a widow, you know, and I believe she has some unresolved feelings for her dead husband."

"Do you think Peyt's in love with her?"

"No."

"Then why...I mean...well..."

"Why have they become an item?" Smiling, Pattie sighed. "Peyton is thirty-six and considering running for governor, so it's only natural that he'd think about needing a wife. He hasn't realized yet that although he and Donna are good friends, they'd be terrible as lovers."

"Then Peyt and Donna aren't...I mean..."

"Donna Fields is not your competition, Tallie."

"What do you mean? If I've given you the impression that I'm interested in Peyton, in that way, then—"

"There's no need for you to lie to me," Pattie said, opening the rest-room door.

Following Pattie outside, Tallie signaled to Solomon. "I guess I've wanted Peyt since I was sixteen and realized I was in love with him. But I'm the worst woman in the world for him. He's told me himself that all I am to him is trouble."

"I'm not so sure about that." Pattie walked beside Tallie and Solomon as they made their way back toward the ball fields. "Considering what Peyton's told me about you, I admit that you might prove a liability to a politician. On the other hand, you're a champion of some very popular causes, and people seem to like you."

"I can't believe this conversation." Stopping abruptly, Tallie turned to the other woman. "I dreaded meeting Donna because I knew she'd be everything that I'm not, that she'd be perfect for Peyt and that I'd hate her because she'd be such a haughty, nose-in-the-air snob. But I like her, and now you're telling me that she isn't my competition, that she and Peyt aren't lovers, that—"

"I'm trying to convince you that you're the right woman for Peyton Rand?"

"Hush, Pattie, don't say that out loud."

"Why not?"

"Because it isn't true. After meeting Donna tonight, I know she really is perfect for a man like Peyt and I most definitely am not."

"There's only one problem. Peyton and Donna are not in love. She may be perfect for a man *like* Peyton, but not for Peyton."

"Peyt and I are like oil and water, you know." Tallie caught sight of Eric Miller's hulking frame moving toward her at a rather rapid pace for an overweight man who was weaving around like a toddler just learning to walk. "Oh, no," Tallie groaned.

"What's wrong?" Pattie asked just as Eric staggered up between them, his big body accidently shoving into Tallie, unbalancing her momentarily.

"Hey there, sexy gal. You interested in going out to my truck with me for a little drink?" Eric swayed toward Tallie, his breath reeking of alcohol.

"I think you've had one too many little drinks," Tallie told him.

Slipping his arm around Tallie's waist, Eric pulled her up against him. "I don't know why you keep saying no. It ain't like you've done got a man."

Struggling against his powerful hold, Tallie glared up at Eric. “Let me go, you damned fool. Don’t you know Solomon would rip your throat out if I gave the order.”

As if on cue, Solomon snarled, baring his sharp teeth. The hairs on his back bristled.

“I ain’t scared of no damned dog. I could probably break his neck.”

“Tallie, I’ll go get Peyton and Spence,” Pattie said, walking away hurriedly.

“No, don’t,” Tallie called, but Pattie didn’t respond. “Eric Miller, you’re a menace to society.”

“You ain’t gonna sic that dog of yours on me, and we both know it.” Eric squeezed Tallie so fiercely, she cried out. “If you’re gonna be mine, sexy gal, you’d better learn to like it rough.”

Tallie counted to ten. He held her so tightly, she could barely breathe. If only she could manage to loosen his hold on her, she could aim her knee at his groin. He was right, she didn’t want to sic Solomon on him, but if she couldn’t free herself, she might have no other choice.

“Look, you overgrown baboon, if you don’t let me go, I will sic Solomon on you!”

Eric lowered his face downward until his nose touched Tallie’s. “Give me a little taste of what I want.”

That was it. She’d had all she was going to take. Just as she opened her mouth to give Solomon an attack order, she felt Eric’s hold on her loosen. Glancing behind Eric, she saw Peyton Rand, his big hand gripping Eric’s shoulder.

“Let the lady go.” Peyton’s voice held a cold, deadly edge.

Eric lumbered around, glaring at Peyton as he jerked himself out of the other man’s hold. “Who the hell are— Oh, yeah, you’re that fancy-pants lawyer Tallie’s so hung up on, ain’t you?”

“I’m the man who’s telling you that if you ever lay a hand on Tallie again, you might not live long enough to regret it.”

Eric chuckled, the sound loud and filled with nervous bravado. “Are you threatening me?” Eric puffed out his chest, his big gut only inches away from Peyton’s firm midsection.

“I’m stating a fact. Leave Tallie alone or, if I can’t put you behind bars, I’ll handle you personally.”

“Yeah, you and what army?”

Tallie stood there staring at Peyton as if she’d never seen the man before in her life. What was he doing? Did he even realize the implication of what he was saying? It wouldn’t look good if the papers picked up this story: Potential Gubernatorial Candidate Threatens Man’s Life Over Woman.

“You didn’t have to come running over here to protect me,” Tallie said, planting her hands on her hips. “I was about to sic Solomon on him.”

“Stay out of this, Tallie,” Peyton told her.

“Stay out of this?” Tallie noticed Spence coming up behind his brother, followed by Pattie and Donna Fields.

“Need any help, Peyt?” Spence asked.

“I think I can handle this,” Peyton said. “What do you think, Miller?”

“I think I ain’t fool enough to take on two men.” Eric turned, his heavy-lidded eyes resting on Tallie. “Next time, I’ll wait for a more private spot to sweet-talk you.”

When Peyton reached for Miller, Tallie ran between the two men. “Go on, Eric, get out of here!”

“Ain’t that sweet. You’re worried I’ll bloody up pretty boy’s face,” Miller said.

“No, I’m afraid Peyt will knock your brains out and get arrested for murder.” Tallie grabbed Peyton’s clenched fist. “Let him go.”

With a grin on his fleshy, blotched face, Miller walked off, swaying slightly as he made his way toward the parking lot.

Grabbing Tallie by the arm, Peyton pulled her down the walkway, away from the small crowd of onlookers, including Donna, Spence and Pattie. Following along peacefully, Solomon sniffed the air.

"What do you think you're doing?" Tallie jerked away from him just as they rounded the corner of the concession stand.

Peyton moved toward her, his gaze riveted to her face. He shoved her up against the back wall of the concession stand and splayed his hands out on each side of her head as he glared down at her. "What the hell am I supposed to do with you?" His voice shook. His hands trembled.

"That wasn't my fault," Tallie said. "Besides, I didn't ask for your help. It was Pattie's idea to tell you what was happening. Solomon and I had everything under control." She peered around Peyton to where her dog sat a few feet away, sniffing the trash cans. "Just as soon as the trial is over, I'll never ask for your help again."

"Is that right? Are you going to be able to stay out of trouble with three men in this county ready to do you bodily harm? Cliff Nolan wouldn't hesitate to beat the hell out of you, that goon Miller seems the type quite capable of rape and there's not a doubt that Lobo Smothers would kill you or anyone else who gets in his way."

"I've got a gun. I've got a dog. I'll take care of myself. It's not like anything is actually going to happen to me, you know."

"Are you stupid, woman? Dammit, you are. Nolan, Miller and Smothers are all dangerous men. You need a keeper. Your brothers knew that when they asked me to watch out for you."

"I do not need a keeper!"

Gripping her shoulders tightly, Peyton gave her a sound shake. Beads of perspiration dotted his forehead and upper lip. He wanted to break her in half. He wanted to shake her until her teeth rattled. He wanted to turn her over his knee and spank her until she promised to behave herself. But more than anything, he wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss the breath out of her. The very thought of anything happening to Tallie scared the hell out of him.

"Promise me that you won't go near Cliff Nolan's family or get yourself involved in any scheme to try to catch Lobo Smothers. And if Eric Miller comes near you again, call Lowell Redman immediately."

It took every ounce of willpower she possessed not to throw herself into Peyton's arms and ask him to hold her. She could sense the anger inside him, but she sensed something else, too. He was afraid for her, genuinely afraid.

"I will be on my best behavior from now until the trial. I promise." She couldn't bear to think she might be the cause of any negative publicity for Peyton. After all, the very fact that he was representing her at her trial would probably make the newspapers, at least locally. She didn't want to do anything else that might create problems for him if he did decide to run for governor.

Peyton eased his hold on her shoulders. He should release her immediately, but damn, he couldn't let her go. Not yet. Touching Tallie was a mistake. He knew better. Just the feel of her tense little shoulders beneath his big hands aroused him. His mind had told him over and over again how wrong he and Tallie were for each other. Unfortunately, his body had ideas of its own. But he couldn't allow his lust for her to overrule his common sense. She was ten years too young for him. Her brothers were his friends. He didn't dare let her know how he felt or she'd jump to all the wrong conclusions. No sir, he wasn't about to take advantage of Tallie when all he wanted from her was sexual release.

"Try to stay out of trouble, will you, for both our sakes?" Stepping away from Tallie, Peyton dropped his hands to his sides. His stomach tightened into knots when he looked at her. Those big, pale brown eyes, that full, pouty mouth, that stubborn little chin. Damn, why couldn't he feel this way when he looked at Donna?

"I never mean to cause trouble for you, Peyt."

"I know, Tallie. I know."

"I guess you'd better get back to your date and let Spence and Pattie watch the rest of the ball game," Tallie said.

"I suppose you're right." Turning around, Peyton hesitated before walking away from her.

"Oh, Peyt."

He glanced over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

"I like Donna. She's a very nice lady. She's just perfect for you."

"Yeah, you're right. She is perfect for me," Peyton said. She's everything I could want in a wife. There's only one problem. She doesn't turn me inside out the way you do, little heathen.

Tallie watched Peyton walk away, back to where Donna stood by the bleachers waiting for him. He was where he belonged—with a woman he could be proud of, a woman his intellectual and social equal, a woman who could help his political career, not rip it to shreds.

Three

Sprawled out in the fat, navy-blue leather chair, Peyton sat alone in his Jackson apartment, a glass of Scotch in one hand, a half-smoked cigar in the other. He'd taken Donna home forty-five minutes earlier, after making a total fool of himself by coming on to her. She'd gently but forcefully told him that they were not going to have sex. He supposed he should be grateful to her for having more sense about the matter than he did, but damned if he could, considering his state of arousal. It had been quite some time since he'd been with a woman. In the past, his casual relationships with women had afforded him protected and uncomplicated sex. Donna was a different matter. She'd told him in no uncertain terms that she wasn't about to play stand-in for another woman. When he'd told her there was no other woman, she'd laughed in his face.

Donna was a smart lady. Too damned smart. She'd figured out right away that his interest in Tallie Bishop was a lot more than big brother protector. Of course, he had denied that wanting Tallie and knowing he couldn't have her kept him in a state of sexual frustration most of the time.

During the past ten years, he'd been able to keep his desire for Tallie under control, first by telling himself she was just a kid, and then by making sure he always had a willing bed partner in his life. But things had changed in the last few years. Tallie wasn't a kid any longer, and his bed partners had, by his own choice, become few and far between.

The problem was that he wanted Tallie, but he didn't dare allow himself to love her. Although she'd make most any man a good wife, Peyton couldn't see Tallie as first lady of the state. She wasn't the kind of woman who'd make a good political partner. No, Tallulah Bankhead Bishop might be the sweetest, prettiest, most desirable woman he'd ever known, but she wasn't suited to the kind of life-style he'd chosen for himself.

And he was as ill suited to Tallie's life-style as she was to his. He could never be the kind of man she needed. He was far too set in his ways, far too entrenched in his family's traditions to break free. He was not the rebel his younger brother had always been. No, Peyton Marshall Rand played the game by the world's rules. He was an expert at unemotional combat. He knew what it took to win and was willing to pay the price. That's why he never lost.

Controlled by her emotions, Tallie Bishop lived by her heart's desires, always championing the underdog, always trying to right all of life's wrongs. Never considering the outcome, she jumped into situations with both feet.

If Tallie hadn't once fancied herself in love with him, he might have already thrown caution to the wind and bedded her. But he couldn't take the chance that she'd really fall in love with him and he'd wind up breaking her heart. Tallie deserved better than a brief affair—an affair he could use to work her out of his system.

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