

WHISTLIN' DIXIE
Book One in the Tempered Steel Series

Maggie Adams

CHAPTER ONE

Mac Coalson drove his black GMC truck through his hometown, the tiny riverside community of Grafton, Illinois, and onto the blacktop road that headed toward Jerseyville, the local county seat. He gripped the wheel firmly as he tried to control his anger. The last thing he needed was to wreck his new truck. March had been an icy month in the Midwest.

The vandalism of the past few months to the new homes built by his construction company was about to finally come to an end. And the little punks were going to pay. Big Time. All that damage, the mess, the financial strain on the company, all caused by a bunch of juvenile delinquents bent on a destructive binge.

A little over a year ago, the tiny community of Grafton, Illinois, had been sandbagging against the rising waters of the Mississippi River. Ben Yates, the local sheriff, had even brought prisoners from the area correctional facility to help. It hadn't mattered. The mighty Mississippi broke through and all but decimated the tiny village. Mac's construction company, along with several others, had undertaken the arduous task of clearing, cleaning and reconstructing whatever they could, alongside the villagers who lost almost everything.

How could these brats justify destroying what everyone, their relatives included, had tried so hard to rebuild? Well, one way or another, Mac was getting some answers tonight. He cruised into the police department parking lot, slammed the brakes and hit the cement parking block.

"Where are they?" he growled, blowing through the double doors of the small county jail and jangling the front bell. He brushed his hair off his forehead with an impatient gesture as his gaze locked on the portly man in a sheriff's uniform.

"Now, calm down, Mac." Sheriff Ben Yates tried to placate the large man bearing down on him. "Those kids didn't know what they were getting into. It was a dare; nothing more. They are not the main source."

"And you believe them?" Mac was incredulous.

"Yes, I do. None of them boys have any priors and their stories match."

"So they've been ruining my business and others on a childish prank, and you're just gonna stand there and defend them? Have you forgotten the reason my construction business has been so busy here?" Mac roared. His left eye began to twitch, a sure sign that his temper was about to be unleashed.

"I remember I saved your butt when the sandbags you were trying to hold onto with your feet washed out from under you and almost landed you headfirst in the rushing water, that's one thing I remember. So don't

take that tone with me, boy!” Ben’s wrinkled face took on a purplish hue as he wagged his stubby finger in Mac’s face.

Mac passed a weary hand over his eyes as he tried not to grind his teeth in frustration. “I’m sorry, Ben. This whole mess turns my stomach.” He sighed in defeat. “Who’s involved?”

Ben snorted as he acknowledged Mac’s apology with a curt nod. “The Riley twins, Becky Jamieson’s boy, Todd, and the new schoolteacher’s brother, Jamie Harris. And I’m warning you now, all the parents are here except for …” he trailed off, his eyes widening as the bell pealed once again on the front door of the precinct, announcing a visitor. Mac watched Ben hastily hitch up his pants and straighten his glasses. He turned to see what in the world the old guy was looking at.

“Excuse me, but I believe you’re holding my brother here? My name is Dixie Harris.” The soft, throaty drawl belied the spark of fire in the blue eyes of the petite woman as she closed the distance between them and held out her hand to Ben in polite introduction. She completely ignored Mac.

Mac’s gaze slowly raked the newcomer from head to toe. The woman was short, barely above five feet tall, he estimated, but she was definitely curved in all the right places. He took in the faded jeans that hugged her curves and the unzipped brown leather jacket that did little to conceal breasts that would overflow from even his large hands.

Sighing inwardly, his gaze returned to the expressive face with a studied interest. There was no denying the new kindergarten teacher was a beautiful woman. Her silver blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail that made her look almost childlike. The freshly scrubbed face, completely devoid of makeup, was a velvety mixture of rose petals and cream. The full pink lips she was unconsciously biting were moist and luscious, begging for a man’s kiss. An unexpected burn of sexual heat coursed through his body. Damn, but he should have made that school board meeting last fall.

At that instant, she turned slightly and noticed him watching her. Mac didn’t look away, even as her eyes narrowed and her mouth turned down in a frown at his rude appraisal. She deliberately turned her back on him.

Ben brushed past Mac. “Hello, Miss Harris. We’re sorry to bother you like this, but your brother and some others were apprehended on private property. If you’ll follow me, I’ll take you to him.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, casting another glance from beneath her lashes at the stone faced man in front of her. “Excuse me,” she murmured as she tried to skirt around him. The keys on the sheriff’s belt loop jangled as he walked. She enjoyed the sound more than his poor attempts at small talk.

The trio emerged into a large waiting area in the back of the jail. Several empty cells were along one wall, but the boys were lounging on nearby benches on the opposite side of the room, where the parents had already gathered. Embarrassment, anger, and nervousness were just a few of the emotions reflected on their faces as the sheriff approached the group and explained the reason for their summons.

Dixie allowed herself a calming breath as she unclenched her fists in the front pockets of her jeans. She risked a fleeting look in the direction where her brother now stood talking to another officer. *Dear Lord in heaven what had her brother done?* Her view was suddenly blocked and all she could see was the man that had followed them into the waiting area. She darted a glance at his face, then swallowed swiftly. He regarded her in silence for several seconds, then gave her a small nod, which did nothing to alleviate her frayed nerves, and headed toward the boys.

Was he the father of one of the boys arrested? He didn't appear old enough to have a teenager. His black hair gave only a hint of gray, the same steel color of his eyes. His build was definitely fit. His shoulders were as broad as a linebacker, tapering down a firm back to long lean legs encased in worn jeans. And his butt... *Good heavens, what was the matter with her?* She was appraising a stranger while her brother was being arrested! She blushed furiously at her thoughts and prayed no one had noticed. Her pale complexion and vivid eyes always gave away her every thought, much to her disgust.

"Mac, you want to come here a minute? You can sign some papers to press charges, and then you're free to go on home. We'll deal with the boys and their parents. There's no need for you to be here for the questioning," the sheriff grouched.

"You're the man pressing charges?" Dixie turned to the dark haired man. His penetrating gaze shifted to her face, and she instinctively stepped back. The anger emanating from their depths was palpable in the air.

"Yes, I am. Vandalism is a stupid act of an ignorant mind, but in this case, it's personal. They've ruined the homes my company built specifically for the folks left homeless from the flood. And now, because of your brother and his friends, my company is working overtime to clean up the mess and keep our promises to these people. I believe they've been through enough without facing another delay. Excuse me." He raked her with a withering glance and started toward the one desk in the area.

"Wait!" She grabbed his arm. "There must be some mistake. My brother would never do anything to harm anyone."

He lifted one eyebrow. "Ben Yates has been sheriff here for over twenty years. We've got security cameras hooked up. He apprehended

them himself outside one of my partially constructed homes. Are you calling him a liar?"

"No! Yes, er, please, I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding. If you would let Jamie explain..." she trailed off as his eyes narrowed to mere slits.

"Your brother will have plenty of time to explain to his lawyer. If you don't have one, I suggest you get one. You're gonna need it." He removed her hand from his arm, sending her a look of contempt that made her cringe inside, but she was determined to make him see reason. There was no way her brother could have done this.

"Now wait just a gall darn minute ..." she cried, hurrying on her stiletto boots to catch up with him. The rude man ignored her, so she turned to Ben. Her chest heaved with righteous indignation as he, too, ignored her. "Sheriff, I demand to know exactly what my brother is being charged with."

"Sis, stay out of this," Jamie whispered as he approached her. He nodded to Mac. "His family practically built this town. That's Mac Coalson. I'm as good as convicted."

"Well," Ben scratched his gray whiskers and approached the boy. "That remains to be seen, young man. However, I suggest you keep quiet for the time being." He turned to Dixie. "Ma'am, your brother was trespassing on private property with the intention, we believe, of vandalizing it. Several incidents have occurred which have made us very suspicious of anyone trespassing in the new subdivisions under construction."

"That's not true, Sis. We didn't touch a thing. If someone would just listen, we would explain," Jamie announced loudly.

Dixie turned back to Ben. "Did you find evidence that it was definitely the boys?"

"As to that, we arrived before any damage was done," he mumbled.

"Well, it would seem to me that if you don't have any positive proof that my brother and his friends were involved in the vandalism going on around here, y'all are gonna have to let these boys go." Her temper was boiling and as a result, her southern drawl was more pronounced. She smiled in triumph as she nodded vigorously to the other parents, looking for support. Her grin faltered as Ben slowly shook his head in the negative.

"Sorry, ma'am, I didn't mean to imply that they were being charged for the vandalism. We simply wanted to question them about it. But there's still the problem of trespassing."

Dixie looked at Mac Coalson. She now knew where she had seen him. His picture was all over the local paper. The Great Savior of Grafton.

Everything she had read about this paragon who was determined to rebuild his hometown after the devastating flood was in direct contrast to the formidable figure attired in black jeans and a black sweater. His tall frame gave off an arrogance that was compellingly dangerous. The chilling glint from his silver eyes told her he was a force to be reckoned with. Still, she had to try. Her brother's reputation depended on it.

Summoning her most cheerful smile, usually reserved only for weeping children on the first day of school, she walked over to Mac. "I'm sure Mr. Coalson would be willing to drop the charges since no damage was done. After all, it's more important to catch the real culprits than to smear the good names of some decent boys."

"Like hell I will!" he growled as he covered the space between them in two strides. "Listen lady, I'm not gonna let these hoodlums get away with damaging another piece of property. If they walk, who's to say they won't be back tomorrow night to finish the job?"

"I say, that's who!" Dixie shot back, stepping up to glare at the large man and stiffening her five foot frame. So much for trying to reason with the devil. Apparently, Mac Coalson was a bully. He was bullying the sheriff, the parents, and maybe this whole town. She hated bullies. Being so small, she had always had her fair share of them.

Mac looked her up and down. "Honey, you may be good for a lot of things, but keeping a rowdy bunch of boys under control ain't one of 'em, so I'll thank you to stay out of this." He watched her eyes flash blue fire.

Dixie gasped at the intended sarcasm. "Those boys haven't done anything wrong except setting foot on your precious property. If you ask me, you're a more likely suspect for sabotage than these boys. You've got insurance and you're certainly ornery enough."

Dixie took an instinctive step back as Mac drew in a sharp breath at the implication that he could even be remotely responsible for the damages. Everyone in the room seemed to wait in suspense at what he would do. This man was known to have quite a fiery temper. And Dixie's anger had just poured gasoline on the fire.

Mac leaned down to snarl in her face. "Look, Blondie, face the fact that your juvenile delinquent of a brother got caught this time. Maybe a night in jail will set him along the straight and narrow." He appraised her once again with a derisive twist to his lips. "Of course, he might enjoy the peace and quiet compared to an evening of you, no doubt, harping at him."

Dixie suppressed the incredible urge to slap the arrogance right off his smirking face. Her fingers curled into fist. *If she wasn't standing in the middle of a police station....* He snorted as if to challenge her to do it.

“Now hold on, both of you,” Ben interceded, his arms extended in a conciliatory gesture. “No one is spending a night in jail. Trespassing doesn’t warrant that.” He looked over his glasses at Jamie. “What it does warrant is an apology. The posted fine for trespassing on private property is \$500.00. Since there’s five of you, that’s \$2500. That should put a dent in the damages incurred.” He slid an uneasy glance at Mac who had stiffened in disbelief.

“What?” he exploded then uttered an expletive and paced the room. “Ben has your mind turned to mush? A smile from a blue-eyed blonde and you’re babbling nonsense. I want that boy,” he pointed to Jamie, then waved a hand in the general direction of the others, “and his friends behind bars.”

Emboldened by Dixie, the parents began to protest.

“Now hold on a minute, Mac...”

“Listen to reason, would ya ..”

“You can’t be serious, ...”

Ben once again held up his hands for silence, but he was ignored as the parents rounded on Mac with angry protestations, Dixie Harris leading the uproar. Ben shouted for silence and when that too, was ignored, he blew his riot whistle shrilly. “Quiet! You’re all gonna get a chance. Harris, you go first,” he pointed to Dixie’s brother, who appeared to be the leader of the boys.

“Look, mister, I didn’t vandalize your houses. I’m telling you the truth,” Jamie exclaimed heatedly. “The others with me can tell you the same thing we told the cops.” Jamie glanced at the boys, who nodded. “It was supposed to be a joke. You see, there was this man ...”

Mac’s eyes burned like those of a great beast deprived of its prey as he stepped up to Jamie and listened to his tale. Dixie knew he didn’t believe a word of it, and Jamie’s insistence that there was another man involved made little sense, even to her. Her brother wasn’t responsible for the vandalism, however, just in using bad judgment. She was sure of that, and it was up to her to make Mac Coalson understand it as well.

She stepped between him and Jamie, intending to do just that. Looking up at Mac’s face as he listened to her brother, she noticed the deeply etched lines of fatigue and felt a twinge of sympathy. She reined in her temper. After all, he had a right to be angry at the persons responsible, but it wasn’t her brother. “I’m sorry for the trouble you’ve been through, but Jamie was not a part of it. I’ll get to the bottom of tonight’s escapades, let me assure you. And I do apologize for the inconvenience you have suffered tonight. I truly wish you luck in finding the real criminal.”

She touched his arm in a small gesture of comfort and felt his muscles contract. His flesh seemed to burn her hand through the fabric. Hastily, she withdrew from the contact as she met the fire in his eyes. Well, drat. Apologies were obviously not accepted.

She shivered as she remembered an artist's rendering of the Gates of Hell she had seen at a museum. Mac Coalson and Satan now shared the same look of bored indifference. No reason to continue with apologies, so she gave up. Turning to Ben, she offered a small smile. "Sheriff, where do I pay the fine?"

Dixie turned back to Mac as his deep voice rumbled like thunder over her head. "I appreciate your concern for my company, but you would do well to concern yourself with your future employment. After this year, I'll make sure you're not needed as a teacher in this area. I do apologize for any inconvenience this may cause you, and I wish you luck in finding a new position." Turning her words as well as his back on her, he signed the papers Ben offered him, curtly dismissing her.

Dixie's eyes widened in disbelief. "Influential you may be, but you can hardly expect to get away with that threat. I have witnesses!" She looked around, and then laughed incredulously, as everyone, including the sheriff, hung their heads and refused to meet her gaze. Well, it was obvious she wasn't getting any help from these people, despite the fact that they were on her side just a few minutes ago. Her brother had trespassed on the Coalson's private kingdom and now there would be a heavy price to pay.

Her temper flared again at the injustice of it all. "It appears we are at a stalemate," she began, "but please allow me to say that I think you are the most obnoxious, arrogant, chauvinistic man that I have ever encountered. I will dance with joy when I clear my brother's name and make you the laughingstock of the county. I promise you that." She punctuated the last sentence with little jabs to his chest with her finger.

Mac smiled evilly as he grasped her hand and brought it to his lips. "I look forward to the experience, little lady. And while you practice your dancing, you might want to brush up on your singing, because when I prove that your brother is guilty, you may wind up singing for your supper." He kissed her hand lightly, then turned to one of the parents, completely dismissing her. Dixie's tempered reached its boiling point.

Ben proceeded to hand the release papers to a sputtering Dixie. "I've talked to Judge Larkin and he agreed with me. Since your brother and these boys have no priors, we feel it's safe to let him go into your care." He slid a glance at Mac over the rim of his glasses. "And unless Mr. Coalson changes his mind, the court date is set for two weeks from today

at 2 p.m., unless we turn up some other evidence. If we do, we'll be in touch."

Dixie smiled at the older man. It couldn't be easy dealing with a tyrant like Mac Coalson. And the fact that her hand still tingled from his kiss was something she didn't even want to think about. "Thank you, Sheriff. I assure you, when I find out who is behind this mess, you will be the first to know." She flung her handbag over her shoulder, hitting Mac in the chest with grim satisfaction, then proceeded down the hall toward the entrance without a word of apology. "C'mon, Jamie. We're gonna find us a vandal."

Mac passed her in two strides and held open the door with a smirk that belied the gentlemanly gesture. After a moment's hesitation, Dixie passed through, her head held high and her nose in the air. As she walked to her car, she felt the eyes of that odious man on her, mentally stripping her bare and taking in her, uhm er, attributes. She glanced back in time to see the slow grin that lit his face. He winked. He had done it deliberately, and he wanted her to know it.

Dixie slammed the door to the white Jeep and started the engine. She would not glance at the doorway of the station again to see if he was still watching her, she wouldn't. *How could she have been attracted, even for a moment, to that, that, ooohh, horrible man?* The situation must have addled her brain, that's the only explanation. As she drove away, she sent her brother a fulminating stare. "Now, suppose you tell me what really happened tonight?"

Mac watched Dixie and her brother whip out of the parking lot. She was the most exasperating female he had ever encountered. Such a tiny slip of a woman standing up to him and giving him *what for*. It had been somewhat amusing until she had accused *him* of the vandalism. Then he had gotten pissed.

Mac had been silently amused as the little scenario played out before him. Ben, trying his best to act like a big city law enforcer, citing this case and that to the parents of the kids; the Harris kid playing the belligerent teen, all righteous indignation and stiff pride; and Miss Harris was obviously the tragic heroine of this little play. But her remarks about insurance fraud definitely cast him as the villain; and for some obscure reason, he hadn't cared for that one bit. Not to mention the fact that the damn kids *were* trespassing.

He followed the red taillights as they receded into the night, grimly aware that the sexual awareness of her had not abated and he was getting hard. He could still feel the touch of her fingers on his arm. Hell, this was totally crazy. The absolute last thing he needed was to get sidetracked by

some sexy blonde. People were counting on him. He couldn't allow himself to get distracted, even if he hadn't been *this* attracted to a woman in quite a while.

"She kinda makes your blood boil, don't she?" Ben asked as he came up behind Mac and handed him a cup of coffee.

Mac acknowledged the question with a shrug. He was usually so calm and controlled. Granted, there were extenuating circumstances here, but he had never been known to lose his temper with a woman. Usually, he retreated into his icy politeness routine. But, he had admired the way she stood up to him, blasting him with her fury. At least, until she had pissed him off royally by accusing him of the vandalism.

Ben smiled slightly. "Yes sir, she's enough to make a man's blood boil." He peered at Mac who was still staring out into the night, sipping absently at the horrible coffee. "Question is, precisely why does she make your blood boil, my boy?"

He cackled when Mac rolled his eyes at him.

CHAPTER TWO

The next afternoon, Mac was in his office, mentally calculating the approximate supply costs of a new condominium proposal, but his mind just wasn't on his work. He gazed at the whitewashed walls of his office, smiling softly at the muted footsteps of one of his brothers overhead in what had once been the hayloft of the old barn. Now it housed the offices of three of his younger brothers. He swung around in his chair to the plate glass window behind him, where he could see the activity of the people he employed.

Yes, the old barn he had bought and rehabbed for his company offices might not be the image most contractors wanted to cultivate, but it suited Mac just fine. Solid and strong, it had withstood the ravages of time and weather. Around here, that was an important factor in building anything.

He swore under his breath as he once again reflected on the events of last night. He didn't care that Ben hadn't found any evidence to convict those boys; they were guilty as sin in his estimation. And if they ever did find anything to pin them to the crimes, those boys would be lucky if the whole town didn't lynch them. Tempers ran high in a town devastated by disaster.

He looked further out and down the hill to see the lazy activity of Main Street. Grafton was nestled between the banks of the Mississippi River and the Piasa Bluffs. It was a quiet village that had been a popular tourist spot complete with antique shops and quaint family restaurants featuring home style food and friendly hospitality. The twenty mile bike trail that meandered through the woods and ran parallel to the Mississippi River was a favorite attraction, as well as the Barge Bar, which boasted rides on a renovated steamboat or a pirate ship.

But all that had changed with what was known now as the Damn Flood. Not as epic as the Great Flood of 1993, which had completely devastated towns all along the Mississippi as the muddy river breached dams and flooded thousands of acres, but it was bad enough two years ago to close down the entire town of Grafton. Flooding and wicked storms had left the community a quagmire of mud, snakes, and mold. Most buildings had been torn down rather than face the exorbitant costs of renovation, but several townspeople were determined to save the old, beautiful limestone homes and businesses, including the Catholic Church. Mac was one of those people, but it was a damn monumental task.

"Mac, Miss Harris is on the line again. Do you want to take it? She's called every hour since early this morning. She says it's imperative that she speak with you," Dottie Hayes intoned through the intercom system.

As his secretary and right hand, she was a formidable figure. Even at sixty, the only consolation she made to her age was what she called her sensible shoes. She referred to her gray hair, age spots and wrinkles as proof that she had lived in this life, not just existed in it. She was a lot like his barn, sturdy and dependable. That's why Mac relied so heavily on her.

"Tell her I've left for the day. With any luck, she'll believe you," Mac answered wearily.

"Coward," Dottie replied before she ended the conversation. Of course, she had heard all about the fight at the police station last night. The town may look a little worse for wear but the gossip lines were up and running as usual.

Mac scowled as he picked up his pen and checked the partial list of supplies needed to repair the damage to the most recent vandalization on the house near Otter Creek, but his thoughts once again turned to Dixie Harris.

He remembered how angry and embarrassed she had looked when their eyes had met as she left the building. After he had calmed down, he realized that her speech had been sincere. But although she felt badly about the vandalization, she was equally determined to see her brother's name cleared. He couldn't blame her. It was hard enough being young and new in a small town without adding scandal to your name.

He could see the headlines of the local paper already – NEW TEACHER'S BROTHER LINKED TO VANDALISM OF LOCAL CONSTRUCTION COMPANY HOMES. He also knew the gossips over at Kate's Café would have a field day. The incident last night was already being picked apart and embellished until very little of the real truth remained.

He grimaced as he took a swallow of the cold coffee sitting nearby. "Just put her and her petite but perfect body in the back of your mind," he mumbled under his breath. But how in hell was he supposed to do that when she kept calling him every hour? *No doubt trying to plead on her brother's behalf.* Well, no amount of begging or pleading was going to change his mind. No matter how appealing the thought - and Mac acknowledged that the thought, indeed, held definite appeal.

He could just see her standing in his office, her lovely shape poured into some short, tight, red dress that was silhouetted against the setting sun outside his windows; her blue eyes awash with tears as she begged him not to press charges against her brother. Her shiny blonde hair would be down around her shoulders with a lock curved invitingly on the tops of her breasts. She would glide around the desk, thrusting her breasts out as she sidled closer to him, all the while stating she would do anything,

ANYTHING, he asked if would let her brother go. She would go down on her knees between his legs, moistening her lips with her tongue as she glided her hands up his thighs to his....

The thundering of a lumber truck pulling out of the lot broke through Mac's dream, causing him to splash the rest of his coffee down the front of his shirt. "Enough!" He slapped a palm on his desk. *You don't need to complicate the situation with thoughts of sex. At thirty five, you don't need the frigging daydreams. There are plenty of women around here just waiting for you to point your finger and they'd come running. You don't need Dixie, spitting fire, Harris. She hates you for trying to nail her brother for the vandalism. She wouldn't give you the time of day, much less anything else!*

And with that lecture firmly in mind and his raging hormones once again under control, he adjusted himself, and turned all thoughts of Dixie Harris and office seductions from his brain. Picking up the supplies list, he got down to work as the sun began its slow descent toward dusk.

Dixie tapped her fingers against the wheel. All day wasted trying to talk to that obstinate man and she was no closer to communicating with him than she had been this morning. "Well, Grandpa Harris always said that if the mountain won't go to Mohammed, Mohammed can go to the mountain," she mumbled to herself as she pulled her white Jeep into the parking lot of the Coalson Construction Company. Gazing at the fresh brick-red paint on the barn, she contemplated the man she was determined to see sometime today. After all, her family's good name and her brother's reputation depended on it.

Well, the man was definitely a mountain. All of six feet and then some, she surmised. 'Course being only five foot nothin' herself, almost everyone seemed large. Still, he was a handsome man with all that black wavy hair and shining eyes. She'd be lying to herself if she didn't admit that. Too bad he didn't smile more often, but it was highly unlikely the Devil smiled unless he had garnered another soul.

It was the gall of the man that made her gnash her teeth in frustration. She knew a brush off when she heard one. "Refuses to take my call, eh? Too busy to be bothered? In a meeting?" she mimicked the litany of excuses that his secretary had given to try and appease her. Hopping out of the Jeep onto the pavement, she brushed a wisp of silver blonde hair away from her eyes with an impatient gesture. She hardly noticed the cold wind biting into her cheeks. She was so fired up with temper she'd forgotten her coat.

Dixie managed to content herself with waiting until the last excuse had come. Totally infuriated, she had grabbed her car keys and raced to the construction company office. She intended to prove that Mac Coalson was a liar and a coward, and the proof was sitting directly in front of her as she crossed the parking lot. The large black GMC truck with the Coalson Construction Company logo and address sat there. The license plate proudly proclaimed that this particular truck belonged to the “CCC BOSS”. Mac Coalson was not “gone for the day” as his secretary, who Dixie nicknamed “the old dragon” in one of her more furious moments, had claimed. “Well, just look out Mr. Mackenzie Coalson because whether you like it or not, here I come!”

With that promise reinforcing her determination, she stuck out her chin, took a fortifying breath and marched across the sidewalk, squinting against the late afternoon sun. She yanked at the heavy oak door, and the force of the cold March wind combined with the weight of the door nearly knocked her off her feet, but she was on a mission and hardly gave pause as she stormed through the office lobby and down the hall toward the door marked “*MAC COALSON-PRESIDENT*”. She quickly sidestepped a startled employee, sailed right past the “old dragon” before she could grab her, opened the door and slammed straight into the “mountain” himself!

Mac had just stepped up to the door with some revisions for Dottie when it was flung open and a sweet-smelling bundle of femininity launched herself right into his arms. He instinctively dropped his papers and wrapped his arms around an impossibly small waist. Closing his eyes, he inhaled her fragrance, willing his mind to memorize the feel of the woman in his arms. He knew immediately who he held, and his entire body reacted to her softness.

After a few seconds, he tightened his grip and opened his eyes, knowing who he would see. She was already struggling against him which only intensified his arousal. Dixie Harris was staring at him like he was the big, bad wolf. Maybe he was. He certainly felt like ravishing her. One minute he was fantasizing about the seduction of this particular woman, and the next thing he knew, she was wrapped around him like she belonged there. The moment was worthy of an episode of “*Twilight Zone*”.

He couldn't help but grin as his eyes traveled over her expressive face. Her sweet mouth was opening and closing like a fish out of water, and her pretty face was beet red. He could feel her chest heaving against him through her simple sweater dress as she frantically tried to break his hold and pull out of his embrace. He looked down and sure enough, he could see the rounded beauty of her breasts with just a hint of pale pink lace

from her bra. He hardened even more. Reluctantly, he loosened his grip and allowed her to step away from him.

“Oh, m’gosh. I’m so sorry.” Dixie was totally flustered. All her righteous indignation flew out the window to be replaced by complete mortification. How on earth was she supposed to continue now? She stepped back, to give herself some room to breathe; the man seemed to suck all the oxygen from the room, but quickly stepped back to brush the few wrinkles she had made from his gray suit jacket. Good manners came before righteous indignation in her mind.

She looked up suddenly and caught his grin. Her nervousness increased along with her anger, and, much to her annoyance, she began to babble. “I, um, I just wanted desperately to talk to you and since you wouldn’t answer my calls, well, I’m afraid my temper got the best of me, and I, well, I just reacted, that’s all. Grandpa Harris always did say I had the Devil’s own temper and I guess he got the right of it. Oh dear, let me help you with these papers.”

She bent to gather the notes, talking all the while, “You see none of this would have happened if you had just answered my phone calls like a polite person would have done, but I guess that can’t be helped now, can it? Still, I think you should at least allow me to explain why I’m here, and then we can put all this unpleasantness behind us.” She flashed him a weak smile that faded as she noticed that his eyes were focused on her bottom while she was trying to talk some sense into him. Anger warred with her embarrassment, and with shaking hands, she thrust the papers at him, almost dropping them again in her effort not to make contact. “Here”.

Mac made a quick grab at them, accidentally brushing his knuckles across her right breast. She gasped and jumped back, only to stumble on her high heels. Mac managed to save her further injury by grabbing her arm to steady her.

“Let me go!” She wrestled from his grasp, embarrassment making her voice sharp.

“Honey, you should be thanking me instead of yelling at me. I saved you from falling on your delightful little fanny.” His silver eyes twinkled as he pinned her with his gaze.

Dixie’s anger returned full force. “Just what century are you from, Mr. Coalson? Or are the women around her so shallow and lacking in self-esteem that they feel your particularly insulting brand of charm is cute? I assure you I don’t. Now I would like to get down to business if you don’t mind.”

She secured her purse around her like a shield as she finished her tirade. There, that should put the chauvinistic pig in his place. Just because

his picture was in the dictionary under tall, dark and handsome was no reason for his insulting behavior. Feeling rather smug, she was surprised to notice that Mac Coalson's broad shoulders were shaking and his head was in his hands. Was he crying? Good grief! What next?

"Look," she sighed, "I didn't mean to upset you ..."

Dixie's apology was abruptly cut off as booming laughter echoed off the walls and Mac raised his head. He was laughing at her!

Mac hadn't understood half of what she had been saying, she was talking too fast, sometimes mumbling under her breath, but he loved the sound of her voice. That soft southern drawl of hers had quite a twang when she got going, and he thought it was charming. Hell, he thought she was charming as she tried to dust him off, pick up his papers, and reprimand him on his lack of manners all at the same time. But the coup de grace was that she sincerely believed he had been wounded by her little feminist speech. Miss Harris was turning out to be quite a surprise.

Whack! "How dare you laugh at me!" Her voice sounded hoarse but the stinging in his cheek was what left him speechless. The little hellcat had hit him!

Dixie felt like a fool. Her and her damn temper. She had actually hit the man; hauled off and smacked him in the face. And now she didn't know what to do. She knew she was staring, but she couldn't stop. He was looking at her with those fabulous eyes widened in shock. They suddenly narrowed, and he reminded her of a panther at watch over its prey, content that there would be no escape.

Her common sense - or maybe her instinct for survival - kicked in and told her to get out while the getting was good. The door was still open. She took a step toward it. Even as that thought occurred, he slammed it shut, cutting off her only escape. She continued to stare at him, frantically thinking of something to calm him down.

Mac took a step toward her and she backed away. She hated that she showed her fear, but retreat was best, her mind told her. "I'm sorry," she stammered as she continued to walk backwards, and he continued to match her step for step. "But you shouldn't be lookin' where you ain't got any business lookin'. And I was trying to be nice, and then you laughed at me. And I only did what any self-respecting woman would do, and ... WOULD YOU PLEASE STOP?" she shouted as she backed up to a chair and tried to ward him off with her hands. He was within inches of her and coming closer. She knew he wasn't stopping. "Okay, fine! I'm not sorry, so there!" she shouted defiantly, crossing her arms like a ten year old in a fit.

Mac threw back his head and laughed, the sound once again booming off the walls. “You remind me of a kitten I once had. Always spitting fire and clawing at me when I tried to pick her up, but after a few soft strokes, she began to purr.”

Was that a sexual innuendo? Dixie wasn't sure. She'd had limited, as in *no* experience with men. He rattled her brain that was for sure. He started walking around the desk, still chuckling, motioning for her to sit in the chair with one hand while he wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes with the other. This man confused the living daylights out of her. He laughed when he should be angry and growled when offered compassion.

“Now, Dixie, perhaps we can start over. I'm sorry I didn't get back to you, but I'm extremely busy, and I assumed you were just going to try to get the charges against your brother dropped. It's not happening.”

Dixie heard his harsh words but refused to be intimidated. She had seen him laugh just a second ago. Granted, he was laughing at her, but she knew the hard man before her had some redeeming qualities. He was trying to save his town, after all.

She took a deep breath. “If you will just listen to me, this mess can be cleared up.” She swallowed hard as his mouth tightened and he rolled his eyes, but he motioned for her to continue.

“Jamie was telling the truth about the man. He explained to me that this guy came up to them at the gas station and asked if they would like to make a few bucks playing a joke on a friend. He told them he just wanted them to go on the property and leave this envelope for his friend to find. He had bet his friend that he could get past the security measures because his friend was bragging about how tight security was now with the vandals and all. Jamie didn't want any part of it at first, but then, well, the other boys insinuated that he was chicken. You know how young men are, very proud of their manliness, or whatever.” She rolled her eyes and flipped her hand in the air to show just what she thought of such idiocy.

“Anyway, they accepted the job, and the man gave them directions on how to get to the houses. They were just supposed to climb the fences and leave these envelopes taped to the doors. Then they were to meet the guy back near the old church on Baker Road, and he would pay them. The boys had just arrived at the first house when the police grabbed them and took them to jail. Sheriff Yates has the envelopes; he said there was nothing in them. By the time Jamie was released and we went to look for the man, he was gone.”

Mac leaned forward in his chair and pinned her with his angry gaze. His deep voice took on a deadly edge. “You're telling me you went out on Baker Road in the middle of the night to find some sleazy man who tried

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