

Chapter One

Children laughed and played in the sun-painted background while adults lounged on the green carpet of grass and the scattered white lawn chairs. Busy helping with the Red Oaks Christian Fellowship Men's Day picnic, Dominique Winston was smoothing one of the plastic tablecloths onto a wooden picnic table when an infectious, good-hearted belly laugh caught her attention.

Looking up at the unfamiliar sound, she saw a tall, handsome man in an expensive white designer shorts outfit laughing and talking with Deacon Jones. Long lashes curled over cocoa-brown eyes, and a trumpeting nose and wide mouth with pearly white teeth completed a face of deep velvet brown that stole her breath. That was one fine-looking man.

You've been bored for years. Here is a man to shake up your life and this town too! Dominique shook off the thought as she forced her gaze back to the tablecloth. There wasn't a wrinkle on it. She glanced around quickly to see if anyone had noticed her staring. Everyone's attention was otherwise engaged except for Mother Maybelle, who winked at her.

No. Not again. Turning away, Dominique bent over to pull catsup, mustard, and pickle relish from the cardboard

box at her feet and set them on the table. The brother looked like a player anyway, and she'd had more than her share of players five years ago, when she married Phil Crater, wealthy town playboy to the max.

She'd been crazy about Phil and thrilled when he proposed, picking her from the crowded field of women eager to please him, anyway they could. There'd been hints that he might have been keeping to some of his old habits, but Dominique had remained blissfully ignorant until she came home unexpectedly early one day and caught him in bed with Lainey Mikelson, the town sexpot.

Slamming the jar of pickles onto the table, Dominique caught herself. The past was the past and she'd learned her lesson real well. She wasn't about to repeat past mistakes.

Stacking the empty box with the others, she looked around for something else to do. Though several men had shown up to work the picnic, they weren't working very efficiently and most of the women were sitting in lawn chairs, letting the men folk do the work for a change.

Dominique prided herself on efficiency. She found a box of lemons and powdered lemonade mix, washed her hands, and went to work. Soon, she'd lost herself in the task and forgotten all about mister tall, dark, and handsome.

Carmen, one of Reverend Avery's kids appeared at her elbow. "Ms. Winston, Mother Maybelle says she's parched and dying for something to drink. Is the lemonade ready?"

Dominique paused to smile at her. "No, it isn't sugar. It'll be a few more minutes. Go check your daddy's van for some of that bottled water."

While the child trekked off to the van, Dominique cut more lemons and pressed them into the juicer. She could hear Deacon Jones and his friend laughing and talking with Mother Maybelle. With a swift, casual glance, she saw Mother Maybelle getting a big hug and kiss from mister tall, dark, and handsome. They obviously knew each other.

Finishing with the lemons, she poured the juice into the big cooler of water they'd brought and added sugar and some of the powdered mix. Stirring the concoction till everything blended, she cut the lemon hulls into pieces and put them on top.

"Dominique..."

She glanced up at the sound of Mother Maybelle's voice, nodded, and looked around for Carmen. The child was nowhere around. "I'll be right there." Dominique got a glass, added ice from a bucket, and filled it with lemonade.

"I can get that for you, Mrs. Carmichael," the stranger offered, his eyes brightening at the sight of Dominique.

"I've got it," Dominique said confidently, lifting the glass and heading for Mother Maybelle. Just the feel of the man's gaze on her had insides buzzing like a nest of bees. She worked hard to appear unaffected.

"Thank you, honey." The older woman accepted the glass with a thin, delicate hand graced with an enormous emerald

cut diamond that flashed outrageously. "Now honey, I want you to meet Blair Thomas. I've known his momma, daddy, and granddaddy for years and he's like a son to me. Blair, this is Dominique Winston, one of the brightest angels in our church. If something's going on, Dominique's right there in the middle of it."

Blair and Dominique stared at each other for a moment and then responded to each other with friendly smiles. Dominique shifted her feet, attempting to hide her shaking knees.

Blair held her hand several moments longer than necessary. "I'm real pleased to meet you Ms. Winston."

"It's good to meet you too." She thought she would fall into those cocoa brown eyes as her heart beat her chest like a bass drum. The last time she'd been affected like this was when Phil Crater focused all his charm on her. That thought freed her from the daze. Tugging with her hand, she managed to free it. She smiled brightly, to lessen the effect of what she'd done. "Well, I'm going to get back to work. Enjoy our picnic, Mr. Thomas."

"Please call me Blair," he corrected in a mellow voice that caressed her ears.

"Blair," she repeated, letting her mouth shape the name. Then she remembered her manners and acknowledged Deacon Jones. He simply smiled and nodded.

Dominique felt hot as she walked back to the picnic table, the weight of Blair's gaze still on her. Hadn't she

been wishing for a more exciting life? Somehow this was too much excitement. She forced air through her lungs. All this excitement and turmoil over a man was unnecessary.

Blair tried to keep his wandering gaze off Ms. Dominique Winston, but it strayed back time and again to the tall, slim beauty in the blue tailored shorts and top. He usually liked his women more voluptuous, but something about her had his hormones leaping. Was it the ring of confidence in her smoky southern drawl? Or the way her sherry-brown eyes seemed to size him up? She was someone he definitely wanted to talk to and he sensed interest on her part, but he also sensed a problem. "What's up with Dominique?" he asked his old college roommate and buddy, Scooter.

Known to the group as Deacon Jones, Scooter pulled him aside. "Man, she's single now, but she used to be married to the town player. She went through a lot with him. I'm not going into the dirty details. Let's just say that she's been super cautious every since and who could blame her?"

"Hmmm." Blair stroked his chin with a thumb and forefinger. "Maybe you could help a brother out. Fill her in on me and tell her that I'm one of the good guys."

Scooter chuckled. "Brother, I know you're a man of your word, but you love the ladies too. I've never heard you talk about settling down."

"Is that what Dominique is looking for?" Blair asked, watching her set the plastic cups on the picnic table.

"I can't speak for her," Scooter told him, "but I did detect a little energy when you two met and shook hands. If you're honest with her, she can make her own decision about whether she wants to see you or not. I'll see what I can do for you."

They shook hands on it.

Blair watched Scooter work the crowd as he helped with the picnic, but grew impatient waiting for Scooter to talk to Dominique. He saw that she'd left the lemonade table, and was busy cutting the bar-b-que'd ribs into manageable pieces. Too anxious to wait, he decided to go and talk to her.

He usually knew what to say to women to get their attention, but his mouth was dry as he approached Dominique. "Can I help you? Get you something?" she offered, an intense look in her sherry brown eyes.

Blair gave her a warm, flattering smile. "Actually I was hoping I could help you. I'd like to talk to you, get to know you."

She stiffened, the warmth in her smile cooling. "I don't really need any help."

He stood there awkwardly, her statement hanging in the air. She obviously didn't want to be bothered. He started thinking of graceful ways to walk away.

Blinking, she wet those soft, kissable lips. "Excuse me," she said, some of the warmth seeping back in her voice.

"I didn't mean to sound so rude. What did you want to talk about?"

"I'd like to know more about you, but we can talk about me, and what I do."

"Let's talk about you," she drawled softly, "How do you know Deacon Jones and Mother Maybelle?"

Blair relaxed as he began to describe how he knew his friends. "Deacon Jones was my roommate at Grambling State, and Mrs. Carmichael used to visit the people down the street from my parents all the time. I used to live in Rally, Georgia."

"Small world, huh?" She continued to cut the meat and place it in a large pan. Her glance met his for just a moment and sent a charge rushing through him. "What about you, Blair? What brings you to Red Oaks?"

"I'm taking a little break from work. I design and racecars. Sometimes I even win. I've been get so deep into my work that I haven't had a vacation for some time. Scooter came to my last race and invited me down to spend some time with y'all."

Dominique's eyes widened. "Scooter?"

Blair grinned. "Deacon Jones."

She laughed, a light, musical sound that he could listen to all day. "I'm going to have to remember that one."

He laughed too, making the moment seem more intimate.

"So Blair Thomas, champion race car driver and designer, how long are you going to be in Red Oaks?"

"I planned to stay about a month, but I don't have anywhere I really have to be until the exhibition race in Atlanta. That's in six weeks."

"That's long enough to get comfortable and get to know everyone." She said.

He nodded. "And I intend to spend time getting to know everyone. I'm flexible and I believe in good friends and good times. That's means I'm staying as long as I'm having fun."

Some of the intimacy and warmth left the connection between them. Blair scanned her face, wondering what he'd said wrong.

"Hey, aren't you Blair Thomas, the race car driver?"

Blair turned to see a pretty young woman in tight black shorts and a body-molding top. "Yes, I am."

"Well, I'm Sissy Slade and I'm just thrilled to meet to you." She offered a sleek, long-fingered hand.

"The pleasure's mine." He replied, shaking it.

"Is that gorgeous black Thunderbird out in the parking lot yours?" she asked, eyes wide with admiration. "Ooh," she said at his nod, "Will you show it to me? I just love sports cars."

"Of course, but give me a few minutes. I was talking with Dominique." Blair saw that Dominique hadn't skipped a beat. She was still cutting meat and stacking it on a tray.

Sissy greeted Dominique and the woman shared a polite interchange.

"So, Dominique, how long have you been in Red Oaks?"

"All my life, except when I went off to college."

"Dominique's parents own those Winston Banks," Sissy put in, "And I've lived here all my life too."

Blair feasted his eyes on Dominique. Yeah, he could believe she was an heiress. She had beauty and class. "So where did you go to college?"

"Spelman." Her lips slowly curved upward.

"I didn't get to go," Sissy informed him breaking in on their conversation, "but I've been thinking of taking some classes at the community college. What do you think?"

"I think that any sort of higher level learning is a good thing in this day and age." He wanted Sissy to go away. His sixth sense told him that only the way to get rid of her was to show her his car. "Dominique, I'm going to show Sissy my car, then if you're not too busy, maybe we can sit in the shade or go for a walk."

"Maybe," she repeated. Her sherry brown eyes were dreamy.

Blair hurried off with Sissy, surprised when they picked up three other 'car enthusiasts" along the way.

Watching them head into the parking lot, Dominique thought about what he'd said. Blair Thomas would be in town

as long as he was having fun. Hadn't she had enough of men who were only around as long as it was fun? *That's unfair*, she admonished herself. She didn't know anything about the real Blair Thomas, even if there were now no less than four giggling and grinning women traipsing out to the parking lot with him.

Hmmmp! Dominique finished cutting the meat. That man was one who probably had his pick of the women. She found the aluminum foil and covered the meat. Then she glanced around past Blair Thomas and those silly, giggling women to note that "The Men's Day Picnic" was remarkably short of men.

Mother Maybelle appeared at her elbow. "I want you to know that that Blair Thomas is a fine, fun-loving young man."

Dominique let her glance stray to the parking lot, where several of the women were piling into Blair's car. "I can see that," she said.

Leaning closer, Mother Maybelle said, "Chile, you needs more joy in your life and a man like that'll help you find it."

Dominique shook her head. "I've had enough of men who love to play so much that they can't stop."

Maybelle's eyebrows furrowed. "You needs a little play time, girl. You ain't had no fun since you caught Phil Crater dropping his drawers."