

Bluebonnet Season by Teri Wilson

Chapter One

If there was a better smell in the entire world than the scent of old books, elementary school librarian Belle Darling had yet to find it.

Her dog Peaches obviously agreed. Belle knew this for a fact—and not just because the eleven-month-old Cavalier King Charles spaniel was her canine soulmate, even though that was also an indisputable truth. Peaches displayed her olfactory love for the written word by touching her little heart-shaped nose to each new paragraph or illustration every time one of Belle’s students flipped from one page to the next. Clearly the dog was a genius who, like Belle, knew that a fragrance called Old Book Smell would’ve flown off the shelves of Sephora, if such a thing existed .

Or maybe the nose thing was simply a result of all the specialized work Belle had been doing with Peaches. Probably that, since Peaches was a reading education assistance dog in training. Over the past few months, Belle had taught the puppy to touch a book page on command. Peaches could also help a child turn a page with her paw. Training aside, the way her soft brown eyes seemed to light up every time she smelled a book convinced Belle that her dog was a true kindred spirit.

Take note, Sephora.

Of course, if such a perfume ever came to fruition, Belle would’ve been forced to place her fragrance order online since she lived in Bluebonnet, Texas. Her small hometown didn’t exactly boast a fancy cosmetic conglomerate in the town square among places like Cherry on Top bakery, Sundae House ice cream shop and Smokin’ Joe’s, the latter of which was a barbecue establishment run out of a silver Airstream-style trailer.

But Belle made do. She’d always been more of an Ivory soap kinda girl anyway.

“Look, Miss Darling,” Mason Hayes, the first grader sitting cross-legged across from Belle on the library’s plush blue carpet, pointed at Peaches. The Cavalier’s head rested on the open book Mason was reading out loud with her cinnamon-colored ears fanned over the pages, obscuring half the words. “Peaches fell asleep.”

A snort, followed by a rumble of Peaches’s muzzle followed.

“Would you look at that?” Belle winked at Mason. “You must’ve accidentally read her a bedtime story.”

The sound of the little boy’s giggles filled the quiet library, and Belle’s heart soared. The reading education assistance dog program at Bluebonnet Elementary, which she’d dubbed Book Buddies, was Belle’s baby. Still in its infancy, she’d yet to convince the school board to make it an official part of the curriculum. They’d given her the go-ahead for a single dog team to read with select children for one school year. At the end of May, she was scheduled to present her documentation to the board, and—fingers and paws crossed—next year, more Comfort Paws therapy dog teams would be allowed to join Book Buddies. Once the program was part of the curriculum, the number of struggling readers who could benefit from reading aloud to a dog would multiply.

Until then, Belle and Peaches were it. Period.

“Peaches is so soft,” Mason said, stroking the dog as he tried to read around her sleeping form. “I wish I had a blanket made out of her.”

Easy there, Cruella.

Belle’s lips twitched as she bit back a laugh. Mason was a bright and curious kid. Last week, he’d asked if he could draw a mustache on Peaches with a purple crayon. Much like the blanket suggestion, the answer had been a firm no.

“You’re right. Peaches is very soft. That’s only one of the things that makes her so special,” Belle said.

Mason nudged the dog’s ear out of the way and read the last line on the page. “The End.” He sighed. “Oh. I guess Peaches fell asleep because she knew the bedtime story was finished.”

“It looks like our time is up for today, anyway,” Belle said, scrunching her face. Each Book Buddies session lasted fifteen minutes—practically an eternity for the short attention spans of six- and seven-year-olds, not to mention a puppy who’d yet to have her first birthday. Reading time always flew by, though. The children were never ready for their sessions to end. “You’ll get to read to Peaches the same time next week, though, okay?”

“Okay. Thank you, Miss Darling.” Mason grinned at her, exposing a significant gap where he’d lost one of his front teeth last week—an event which he’d recounted to Peaches in gruesome detail. He lifted one of the dog’s ears and whispered, “Goodbye, Peaches.”

Peaches’s eyes popped open and she licked the side of Mason’s cheek with a swipe of her pink tongue while her tail beat a happy rhythm against the carpet.

“Peaches kissed me!” The little boy beamed as he clutched his books to his chest and skipped back to his classroom.

Belle ruffled the fur behind her dog’s ears. “Good girl, Peaches.”

The Cavalier scampered to her feet and trotted alongside her as Belle made her way to her desk to document each student’s progress over the past hour and a half. Six children participated in the Book Buddies pilot program every week, three from first grade and three from second. Belle kept meticulous notes documenting their progress from week to week.

All the children had made great strides since the start of the program. Since the students were still enrolled in their regular reading classes, measuring the exact level of impact that reading to the dogs had on their progress wasn’t possible. But the reading and homeroom teachers all agreed that Book Buddies played a major factor in the improvement of their students’ reading scores.

The only glimmer of doubt in Belle’s mind was Mason’s participation in the program. From day one, he’d been a great little reader. He flew through books that the other kids struggled with. But she’d left the selection process up to the reading teachers since they were the ones with firsthand knowledge of each student’s abilities. Belle couldn’t quite understand how Mason had ended up in a program designed for kids with limited literacy.

Guilt nagged at her consciousness. She needed to do something about that. She should at least talk to Mason’s teacher and find out if there had been some sort of mistake. He was such a great kid, though. And he *adored* Peaches. Book Buddies wouldn’t be the same without him.

I’ll deal with it later. Belle placed that difficult situation on her list of things to do after the school’s upcoming spring break. The list was getting longer by the second, but she only had so many hours in the day. Thank goodness she’d get a chance to catch up on the rest of her life when she had five blissful days in a row off work.

She thumbed through her Book Buddies binder until she reached the progress notes tab. When Maple, Adaline and Jenna—Belle’s best girlfriends and the other founding board members of Comfort Paws—had gotten their first glimpse of her Book Buddies binder, they’d teased her mercilessly. Granted, it contained twice the number of progress charts than she’d originally planned, separated by whimsical dividers that were color-coded by reading difficulty and grade level. But Belle liked office supplies and organizational tools almost as much as she liked old book smell. It was basically a tie.

Not that anyone was really keeping track...

“Miss Darling, I presume?” A shadow fell over the spreadsheet she used to record which books the students read each week—alphabetized by last name, obviously.

Belle recapped her highlighter and glanced up, gaze colliding with a smooth-as-silk necktie fashioned into a crisp Windsor knot.

She sat up a little straighter and directed her attention northward, toward steely eyes the exact hue of the sky over Bluebonnet just before one of its legendary Texas Hill Country thunderstorms. Something about the look on the man’s chiseled face made her feel like she was being chastised. For what, she had no idea.

She scanned the lapels of his pinstriped suit for a visitor tag. He wasn’t wearing one, which was a flagrant violation of school rules. Alarm bells started ringing in the back of Belle’s head.

All campus visitors were required to check in with the school secretary. Pinstripe Guy should’ve had a stick-on name tag fixed to that fancy suit jacket of his. He didn’t necessarily *look* dangerous, with his perfectly refined jaw and classically handsome features.

But anyone who’d seen a single episode of *Dateline* knew that looks could be deceiving.

“Yes, I’m Belle Darling and I’d love to help you, but this is my off hour.” *Half* hour, technically. Belle was awarded a scant thirty minutes for lunch each day, most of which she spent working on Book Buddies and

walking Peaches before downing apple slices slathered with peanut butter in the final five minutes before the library reopened. “The library is closed until one p.m.”

Belle ignored the man’s stony expression and pointed at him with a freshly sharpened number two pencil. “Also, you seem to be missing your visitor badge.”

His gaze narrowed, and the storms in his eyes darkened to an ominous shade of charcoal. Belle half expected a clap of thunder to rattle the colorful walls of the library. She almost reached for Peaches’s ThunderShirt—the calming compression garment the Cavalier wore during inclement weather. If there was one thing Peaches hated, it was a thunderstorm.

Brooding strangers, on the other hand, didn’t seem to faze her in the slightest. Peaches hopped off the dog bed Belle kept tucked under her desk, trotted over to the man and plopped into a perfect sit position at his feet. The little Cavalier’s tail thump-thumped against the carpet, and her mouth spread into wide doggy grin, seemingly oblivious to the scowl on his face. Then a single drop of slobber fell from her pink tongue onto the toe of one of his shiny wingtip shoes, and he finally deigned to meet Belle’s gaze again.

“The dog isn’t wearing a visitor tag,” he said with an arch of a single sardonic eyebrow.

Seriously?

What. A. Jerk.

“That’s because Peaches isn’t a visitor. She’s a volunteer who passed a rigorous background check. Hence, the working dog vest.” Belle pursed her lips and cut her gaze toward the red vest stitched with the words *Therapy dog in training* directly beneath the heart-shaped Comfort Paws patch. “And she is, in fact, wearing a tag on her collar if you’d like to check.”

The tag identified Peaches as a reading education assistance dog, in addition to being a therapy pet. Belle had studied long and hard for the written exam she’d taken online to get her and Peaches approved as a reading dog team. If she’d been awarded a tag like the one attached to Peaches’s dog collar, she probably would’ve worn it stapled to her forehead.

“You can visit the school secretary in the front office, and I’m sure once you present her with proper identification, Marta will be happy to give you a name tag of your very own.” Belle smiled sweetly at the stranger. A little *too* sweetly, probably. But she was trying to make a point. “Rules are rules.”

This was about safety. It was about the children. Not about the expensive cut of this man’s suit or the way her stomach felt like she’d done a loop-de-loop on the roller coaster at the Texas State Fair every time he looked at her with those stormy gray eyes.

That intense gaze of his flitted to the notebook on her desk that was situated immediately to the right of the Book Buddies binder. Belle’s *secret* notebook—the one with the red nondescript cover. She shoved the binder to the side to cover it up.

Narrowed eyes lifted to meet hers.

“Rules are rules,” he echoed with a stiff smile. “I’ll be back momentarily.”

He smoothed down his tie again before turning on his heel and stalking out of the library, spine ramrod straight.

Belle wondered if the tie thing was some sort of nervous tic, like the way she always wrinkled her nose when her anxiety spiked. She didn’t do it on purpose. It just happened, as if all the grainy, old reruns of *Bewitched* she’d watched as a kid were lying dormant somewhere in her subconscious. Except Belle’s nose wiggle was never accompanied by a cute tinkling sound effect, only the pound of her own heartbeat.

Peaches pawed at Belle’s shin, pulling her out of her reverie. She gathered the pup in her arms and kissed the cute chestnut spot on top of her dog’s head. “You’re right. Why am I wasting time thinking about a rude stranger when we have much more important things going on?”

Things like the contents of her secret notebook, which she hoped to finish during spring break. And things like the Bluebonnet Festival in the town square this weekend, where Comfort Paws was scheduled to have a booth about their upcoming training class for new therapy dog teams—their *inaugural* training class, which would be held in their brand-new training facility.

But even more important than the notebook, the Bluebonnet Festival or the Comfort Paws training class, the school board’s final meeting of the academic year was scheduled just six weeks from now. Time was running out for Belle and her fancy color-coded binder to secure the future of Book Buddies.

"We've got this. Right, Peaches?" Belle said, and the Cavalier responded with an encouraging swipe of her tongue against Belle's cheek.

Just then, the school intercom system squawked from its speaker on the corner of Belle's desk. "Belle?"

Peaches's ear swiveled forward, and her head tilted at the sound of the school secretary's voice.

"Hi, Marta," Belle said.

"Listen..." Marta's voice dropped to a murmur. "I probably shouldn't be saying anything, but I wanted to give you a heads-up about a visitor headed your way."

Belle had to lean closer to the speaker to hear Marta, and even then, she only caught about half her words. Still, it was enough to get the gist.

"I appreciate the heads-up, but I already met him, and I can't say I'm looking forward to his return. He wasn't exactly all sunshine and rainbows," Belle said with a snort.

"Yes, but he's—" Marta started, but then the antiquated intercom system erupted into a burst of static.

Belle backed away in her wheelie chair before her eardrum burst. Peaches leapt out of her lap to run for cover under the desk.

"Marta?" Belle yelled. Well, it was more like the librarian version of yelling—so basically a raised whisper. "Are you still there? I can't hear you."

Snatches of words punctuated by white noise came from the intercom. "Family...library...important..."

Well, wasn't that just as clear as mud?

"Marta, can you repeat that, please?" Belle banged on the speaker with the heel of her hand. The charms on her silver charm bracelet tinkled.

The intercom spit out one final syllable. Marta didn't seem to be whispering anymore. Her voice came through crisp and clear. "Nice!"

Belle sat back in her chair and eyed the speaker, which was now as dead as a doornail. No static, no white noise, no red blinking light in the upper right-hand corner. Nothing.

Marta's last attempt at communication rang in Belle's ears.

Nice?

Clearly she'd no longer been talking about the visitor badge-adverse stranger. Belle could've come up with quite a few adjectives to describe the man, but *nice* wouldn't have been anywhere on the list.

Nice *looking*, maybe.

Belle's face went warm, and suddenly, he was back, standing across the desk from her with a fresh, new, adhesive name tag stuck to his lapel. She gave a start, and her heart began beating as fast as a nervous Chihuahua's.

She really needed to move her workstation farther away from the library door. People just appeared from around the corner as if from thin air.

"My apologies for startling you," he said. A hint of a smile played around the edges of his lips.

Sure. *Now* he smiled.

"You didn't," Belle countered.

A lie if she'd ever told one. Judging by the knowing smirk on his face, she wasn't fooling anyone.

She took a deep breath, fully ready to remind him that the library was still closed. Belle usually wasn't such a stickler about her lunch (half) hour, but something about this guy screamed *entitlement*, and she really needed to finish her Book Buddies paperwork on her own time. The rest of her afternoon was scheduled with back-to-back library visits from all the first grade classes, where Belle would be reading the children a book about a sassy cow who liked to eat bluebonnets, followed by craft time for the students to write their own bluebonnet stories.

"Thank you for checking in with the front desk, Mr...." Belle glanced at his name tag "...McAllister."

Every other word she'd planned on saying withered and died on the tip of her tongue. His name was Cash McAllister? It had to be a coincidence. He couldn't be related to *that* McAllister.

But the arch of his brow said it all, as did the knowing glint in those stormy eyes of his. His gaze darted to the sign above the library door, and Belle's eyes followed, as if she hadn't seen the plaque every day of her working life for the past five years.

Welcome to Bluebonnet Elementary School's Evelyn McAllister Memorial Library

Her throat went bone dry.

So *this* was what Marta had been trying to tell her over the intercom. A real, live, flesh-and-blood McAllister was in the building. Belle should be on her best possible behavior.

Marta's static-laden warning rang in her ears.

Nice!

As in, *Be nice. This man is the benefactor of your entire workplace, so you probably could've let the name tag thing slide.*

"How can I help you, Mr. McAllister?" Belle managed to squeak as Peaches emerged from beneath her desk and made a beeline straight for Cash McAllister and pranced gleefully at his feet.

At least one of them knew where their bread was buttered.

Whatever the man wanted, Belle would do it. If anyone held sway with the school board, it was him. Now that she thought about it, he might even hold a seat on the board. If memory served, the McAllister family had been granted a permanent spot on Bluebonnet's school board as a result of their generous, ongoing financial contribution to the district. None of the McAllisters had ever actually exercised the right to sit on the board, though, because it had been years since anyone in the family occupied the McAllister Mansion on Main Street.

What was he doing here, anyway?

At the moment, he was bending down to scoop Peaches into his arms. When Cash straightened, Belle's dog perched in the crook of his elbow and licked the side of his face. Peaches loved everyone, but for some reason, the sight of her lavishing affection on Cash McAllister felt like a betrayal.

"Is this the reading dog I've heard so much about?" Cash tipped his head toward Peaches.

Belle nodded, mind whirling. He'd heard about Book Buddies? Maybe whatever happened next wouldn't be so bad. Maybe he was here on behalf of the board to tell her the program had already been approved as part of the elementary school curriculum.

A girl could dream, right?

"Yes, that's Peaches, Bluebonnet Elementary School's very first reading education assistance dog." Belle squared her shoulders, beaming with pride.

"How much?" Cash said flatly.

Belle blinked. Surely she hadn't just heard him correctly. "Excuse me?"

"How much?" he asked again, enunciating each syllable with annoying precision.

Obviously, he wasn't here to give her good news about Book Buddies. A girl could dream, but in this particular instance, that might make her delusional.

Belle's fingers twitched. She had to stop herself from snatching Peaches straight out of Cash's arms as he held the Cavalier closer and gazed down at Belle as impassively as if he were inquiring about the cost of a carton of milk at Bluebonnet General.

"Name your price. I'd like to buy this dog."