

Lone Star Sweetheart

Sweetheart Series • Book One

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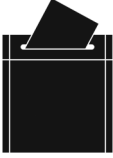
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Chapter One

How could she survive the night without a cookie? Katherine Bruno pulled her hair into a slapdash ponytail and eyed the empty snack table with disgust. The only redeeming feature of Sweetheart's monthly town meetings was the tantalizing assortment of homemade goodies she could dunk in her coffee.

Had someone forgotten to post the refreshment signup sheet? The community center's faux-wood panel walls closed in on her at the thought. If this wasn't the best place to drum up support for pet adoption, she would duck out the back way.

The animal shelter needed foster families. She'd planned to write an article for her job at *The Sweetheart Clarion*, but the editor fired her before she finished. Of course, he hadn't used such a negative term. He'd hemmed and hawed about flagging readership and online portals for five minutes until she asked him to cut to the chase. No sense dragging out the inevitable. It wasn't the first time she'd been fired, and, thanks to her uncontrollable tongue, it probably wouldn't be the last.

A cluster of men stood behind Katherine in assorted versions of plaid flannel and jeans. "It's indecent! How could a woman betray her own husband?"

What had put their sleeveless undershirts in a twist? She poured herself a steaming cup of java. Its heat seeped through the thin paper cup and warmed her fingers as she tried to ignore them.

“The mayor's wife has gone loco!” another outraged male proclaimed.

Katherine sighed. She needed a sugar fix. There wasn't even a pink packet of artificial sweetener to take the edge off the dark, pungent brew in her hand.

The incensed male chorus behind her grew louder.

“What makes Lanette Johnson think she can run the town of Sweetheart?”

Ah, the surprise second candidate in the mayoral race. She should have guessed. Katherine glared over her shoulder, but they didn't notice. The men were too busy casting judgmental looks at the mayor's wife as she walked past wearing a matching leopard print ensemble.

“Lanette was always bossing poor Harry around anyway. Does she have to try and take his job away on top of it?”

Their tongues clicked in unison. Katherine gagged, and not because of the over-roasted coffee.

“Gracious words,” she muttered under her breath. “Remember. Gracious words, girl.”

Easier said than done. She'd been a straight shooter all her life. Ready to tell it like it was. Until an unexpected conviction hit her one morning when she was reading the book of Proverbs. *Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.*

Had her words ever brought healing to anyone? Doubtful. She wanted to be a honeycomb, but her blunt speech was more akin to apple cider vinegar.

Katherine had purposed then and there to change her ways. She'd made it a whole month without breaking her resolution. Granted, she'd been sick in bed seven of those days with the flu. But if the men in this town didn't find a different subject soon,

she might be tempted to forget her pledge. The accomplishment of curbing her caustic remarks for four excruciating weeks was too groundbreaking to throw away.

Keep your mouth shut, even if it kills you.

She raised the cup to her lips and took a long, hard swig. The bitter liquid slid down her throat, burning a scorched path straight to her empty stomach. Leaning against the wall, she watched the men sputter worse than an old tractor.

Jud Watson finger-combed his sizeable salt-and-pepper beard. "She'd never get away with that if she was my woman. I wonder if he can sue her."

Katherine took another sip. Staying silent just might kill her.

"Sue her for what?" Willy Walker crossed his arms and rested them on a belly, which protruded over his king-sized silver belt buckle. "It's not against the law for a woman to run against her husband for mayor."

"But Lanette shouldn't treat poor Harry so awful. He's held the mayor's office for sixteen years. Why is she making waves?"

Katherine closed her eyes and rolled her lips inward. She inhaled the scent of her coffee like an aromatherapy candle. Frustration rumbled around her throat in an irritated growl.

Gracious words. Gracious words. Gracious—

Since when did a woman require permission from her husband to enter an election race? This wasn't the dark ages. If Lanette wanted to run for mayor, let her run for mayor. Katherine might not vote for her, but she certainly wouldn't stand in her way. Mayor Johnson could fight for his job, fair and square.

The men continued, blissfully unaware of how close they were to being verbally shish kebbed. She squeezed her lids tighter as their clucking bounced against her ear drums.

"I heard Harry's hired some hotshot political consultant from New York."

"Lotta good that'll do him. What does a New Yorker know about Sweetheart, Texas?"

“Not much.” A smooth, unfamiliar voice joined the discussion. “Do you mind filling me in?”

Katherine's lids popped open, and she observed the owner of the chocolate-textured baritone. Talk about honeycomb. This man's voice could sweeten her coffee for a year. Dressed in a tailored white button-down shirt and black dress pants, his lean frame stretched a head taller than the other men. Jet black hair combed in a professional side part. Dark eyes that sparkled—whether from amusement or disdain, she wasn't sure. And a serene expression showing no embarrassment at being gossiped about by strangers.

He drew a hand from the pocket of his slacks and held it out. “Let me introduce myself. Ryan Park. I prefer baseball over basketball. Eat way too much red meat and tend to be a little OCD about my office space. I'm the hotshot consultant. Although, I'm not sure I deserve the distinction. We'll see how good a job I do.”

The men cleared their throats in an awkward chorus. Feet shuffled as they shook his hand, one by one, their gazes not quite meeting his.

“No offense meant,” Willy mumbled as he tugged on his belt buckle.

“None taken.” The newcomer waved away the apology. “I'd be curious too.”

Curious couldn't begin to describe Katherine's emotions. She stared with her mouth open like a kid finding the deep-fried bubblegum stand at the state fair. Her feet moved forward without asking permission. She dashed to the group and stuck her hand out, the coffee cup still clasped in her other.

“Katherine Bruno.” Since when had her voice been so breathless? “Welcome to Sweetheart, Mr. Park.”

“My friends call me Ryan.” His strong fingers wrapped around her own. “What do you prefer—Kathy, Katie, Kate?”

“I prefer Katherine. Thank you for asking.”

Was this what romance novels meant by love at first sight?

She'd scoffed at the idea in the past, but her heart bounced like it was on a pogo stick. Any moment now, the angel choir would launch into song.

"Did you really come all the way from New York for our mayoral race?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She didn't relish being called ma'am. Katherine smoothed her messy ponytail at the nape of her neck. Perhaps she should have brushed her hair before the town meeting. But how was she to guess a gorgeous stranger would appear? Temporary retreat might be the best option. A quick dash to the restroom for damage control and a little lip gloss.

Katherine stepped away with reluctance. "I hope to see you around, Ryan."

"Count on it."

His easy smile warmed her from top to toes. She tottered a little as she turned. Had he meant anything in particular? Or was he being polite? Love at first sight could go both ways. Katherine paused to grab her gray messenger bag from a nearby chair.

Please, God. Let there be a comb in here.

Her hand still tingled where it had come in contact with her destiny. She shook her fingers, slipped her purse strap over her shoulder, and searched for a trash can to toss her cup.

Willy Walker's hearty voice boomed behind her. "Tell me, Mr. Park. Can you help our Harry-boy? His wife's a tough opponent."

"Please, call me Ryan. And trust me. I'm here to make sure the mayor's office stays blue instead of powder-puff pink."

Katherine side-eyed the group. The men guffawed, and she bit the inside of her cheek. She'd give him one pass. Think of what beautiful children they could make together.

"After all," he hooked his thumbs in his pockets, "there's a natural order to things. The mayor can run the town, and his wife can run the Ladies Auxiliary. Everybody wins."

Katherine's hand cooled. The five-second fantasy was nice

while it lasted. She took the last swig of her coffee, crushed the cup, and tossed it in a trash can. Who needed sugar?

She did a 180-degree turn and barged into the cluster of testosterone. "I doubt the mayor could've even found his blue office without his wife directing him all these years. *Mister Park.*"



RYAN PARK'S inner warning bell rang. The last time he'd heard it was when his boss asked him to take the Sweetheart job as a personal favor. It seemed the mayor of this tiny burg was an old college buddy of hers, and she wanted to lend him the best on her roster. How could he argue? He had a perfect record: seven candidates, seven wins.

So here he was. Podunk, USA.

His goal was to make the small-town exile as quick and painless as possible. He'd do a bang-up job and avoid any obstacles, no matter what or who they might be. The steel spark in this lady's green eyes told him she was looking for trouble.

He hadn't meant for her to hear his chauvinistic comment. It was crafted for the good ol' boy's network around him. The last thing he needed was an angry feminist on his case. Time to smooth some ruffled feathers. What was her name again?

"Katherine." It was a fact people responded to the sound of their own name, and he used his most conciliatory tone as he said it. "I apologize if I offended you. I didn't mean anything derogatory against Mrs. Johnson. I understand she's a wonderful woman."

The tall brunette who reached almost to his nose snorted. "Lanette is bossy, opinionated, and entirely too fond of creating new projects and recruiting others to do the dirty work."

Ryan hesitated. Was she defending the mayor's wife or not? "I don't—"

"But she's also the driving force keeping this town afloat.

With her help, Sweetheart got out of the red for the first time in decades. She built our annual Candy Hearts Festival from a backwater, one fire engine parade into a well-advertised celebration that tourists from around the state come to enjoy. The event's revenue makes up half of our yearly budget." Katherine glared at the men around her. "Yes, she's pushy as all get out, but at least she moves us in the right direction."

"Now, Katie," one of the plaid-covered gentlemen said. "He didn't mean anything by it."

She rounded on him. "And you didn't mean anything, Willy, when you called Lanette indecent?"

"I—we—we just got a little riled up." Willy retreated and raised his hands in front of him. "You of all people should relate."

"Harsh words may be my trademark, but at least I say them to your face." She stuck her chin out. "You won't find me tacking a gossip sign to someone's back while they're not looking."

Ryan's practiced smile sank into a more natural smirk. If there was one thing a political consultant valued and seldom received, it was honesty. He got the feeling he'd never have to wonder what this eloquent firecracker was thinking. Give her a microphone and a makeover, and he could run her for state senator. Time to employ his most tried-and-true strategy—flirtation.

"Katherine." He laid his hand behind her shoulder, too low to be impersonal, but not low enough to be considered harassment. Only enough to fluster her and make her lose her focus.

She whipped around—eyes wide.

"It's obvious how much you value Lanette." He lowered his voice and moved a centimeter closer. "Would you consider helping me? I was hoping to convince Mrs. Johnson to drop her campaign and support her husband's re-election. Their teamwork made Sweetheart the thriving place it is today, and she's an integral part of his success."

Was that a quiver under his fingers? He must be getting to her. This was going to be easier than he thought.

He turned his smile up a degree.

Her lips quirked in response. She leaned near enough her soft breath brushed his earlobe.

"This kind of trick may work in the big city, Mr. Park. But I was raised on my uncle's ranch. I recognize the smell of manure." She brushed him off and headed for the door.

The cluster of middle-aged gentlemen around him snickered. The one with the unnaturally large belt buckle slapped him on the back.

"Wooo-eee. You've only been in town a few hours, and you already met the sharp end of Katherine Bruno's temper. Did you get on the Almighty's bad side, son?"

"How do you mean?" Ryan watched the furious figure stomping away.

"You've heard of that story *The Taming of the Shrew*? Folks suspect Katie's father named her after the main character. She can slice the skin right off your heart with one lash of her tongue. 'Best beware her sting.'"

Ryan's eyebrows dipped.

A local quoting Shakespeare?

Add that to the potent set-down he'd received from the pretty shrew, and he might have to revise his campaign strategy for Sweetheart. Apparently, they weren't a bunch of gullible hicks he could sweet talk into following his lead. He slipped a hand in his pocket to grab a roll of antacids.

This was going to be harder than he thought.