



Chapter Three

Katherine drove her ancient sedan into a space outside the abandoned real estate office and killed the engine. The one-story building sat on a popular stretch of Main Street. She grabbed the handle and banged her shoulder into the rickety door to pop it open.

“Ow!” She rubbed the aching bone.

A shiny, oversized SUV pulled beside her as Katherine exited the car. Her new employer checked her coral lipstick in the vanity mirror before joining her in the parking lot. Lanette gave her the once-over, tugged the lopsided hem of Katherine's T-shirt in place, and spread her arms to the building in front of them.

“Ta-da! Doesn't it scream campaign headquarters?”

A patriotic mural stretched to the left of the storefront window. It covered a large part of the brick wall. Katherine cringed at the picture of Lady Liberty with hot pink hair, dressed in a star-spangled dress and holding a glass jar full of pastel hearts with messages such as “You're sweet” and “Be mine.”

“The jar was my idea.” Lanette gave a proud nod. “I wanted to plug our annual Candy Hearts Festival with an old-fashioned Americana theme. The tourists love taking pictures here. How do you like it?”

Katherine's lips turned down. "I—"

"It's ideal." Lanette clapped her hands together. "The perfect place for our headquarters. I used to think the tax write-off wasn't worth the hassle, but I'm glad Harry and I bought it." She inserted a key in the door. It opened with a loud creak. "There's gobs of space for meetings and campaign whatever's."

Katherine swallowed her objections. She wouldn't have to stare at the gaudy mural when she was in the office, and the price was perfect. Free. One less expense to drain the campaign treasury they didn't possess.

She followed Lanette inside to a large, almost-empty room. A few pieces of battered furniture sat in odd spots, patches of cement floor peeked through holes in the cracked linoleum, and spiderwebs adorned the tarnished brass candelabra hanging from the ceiling.

"I know it's not in the best shape, but there's a bathroom in the back." Lanette clicked her tongue and pointed at a beat-up desk by the window. "Oh, that has to go. I've got a better one in my garage. I refurbished it myself with an electric sander. Gave it a classy, distressed style and stenciled rosebuds on the front."

Rosebuds? Katherine restrained her shudder. She'd never been the girly type. A three-legged chair leaned against the wall, and she slipped her gray purse strap over the top. "Don't bother. I've worked with worse."

"Suit yourself." Lanette took out her phone. "I'll get Harry to bring the rest of the furniture. We need somewhere decent to sit when we have our strategy sessions."

"You're going to make him bring the furniture for his rival's office?"

"Who else?" She tapped out a text on the screen. "He was my husband before he was the mayor."

She couldn't argue with Lanette's marital expertise. Katherine pulled a rubber band from her pocket and tugged her hair into a loose ponytail. Where to start? She spotted a closet, opened the door, and found a broom.

"I'll straighten the place while we wait."

Katherine worked for an hour, sweeping, dusting the desk, and swiping the cobwebs off the light fixtures. A major deep clean was required, but at least it no longer resembled a haunted house at the carnival. She pushed another piece of broken tile to the dust pile she'd gathered in the center of the room. A heavy sigh escaped her lips. Was she a campaign manager or a janitor? Her stomach growled, and she cast a glance at her employer.

Lanette stood at the wide window facing Main Street. "Where is that man? Probably talking up a storm with the boys in the barbershop." She slapped the sill. "No point waiting around. Let's go buy lunch and a few cleaning supplies."

The broom clattered to the ground as Katherine grabbed her purse. "You're the boss."



RYAN SCOOPED the last bit of broken tile into the dustpan and dumped it in the trashcan. He propped the broom in a corner and surveyed the room. Not the fanciest office he'd ever worked in, but it had plenty of space to coordinate volunteers. And it was smack dab in the middle of Main Street with a large glass window to generate interest from the passers-by. Always the most important thing.

He jogged out to his car. The stars-and-stripes painting on the wall caught his eye and made him chuckle. It perfectly summed up his expectations for this campaign. A political farce with sentimental speeches and a splash of Americana. He withdrew a box from the front seat, carried it inside, and deposited it on the desk.

An SUV pulled into the space out front. He watched as Lanette Johnson climbed from behind the wheel and Katherine scooted from the passenger's side with two overflowing paper bags in her arms. The women walked to the building's entrance. Were they checking out the competition?

"Ladies," Ryan met them at the door, "what an unexpected pleasure." He noted the way the afternoon sun highlighted the red tints in Katherine's brown hair and realized his words weren't mere flattery. Why was he so glad to see the rival campaign manager?

Perhaps glad wasn't the right word. Energized?

She peeked over the bags with a furrowed brow. "What are you doing here?"

He gestured at the space behind him. "Setting up my office."

Lanette squawked. "*Your* office?"

"Yes." His smile faded a bit. "Mayor Johnson told me to use this for his headquarters."

"That man!" Lanette stomped a pink, high-heeled cowboy boot. "He's getting sneaky in his old age. I bet he waited until we were gone before he called you."

Katherine bent and set the bags on the floor. She rose and drew herself to her full height. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Park, but we've already claimed this space for Lanette's campaign."

His outward demeanor stayed calm, but inside he was groaning. Was this going to be his life for the next two months? Sparring round after round with this spitfire until the election? When he returned to New York, he should ask for a raise.

Ryan quirked an eyebrow. "The mayor said the property was in his name."

"Oh, it's in his name, all right." Lanette unzipped her purse and took out her pink, bedazzled phone. "But he neglected to mention mine is right next to his." She dialed the cell and stormed to the exit. "Catch you later, Katie. I've got a husband to strangle."

The door slammed so hard it rattled the candelabra over their heads.

Katherine motioned to the ceiling. "Cobwebs decorated those lights until I wiped them off."

He gazed at the brass fixture. "Thanks for saving me time. I never did enjoy cleaning."

The muscle in her jaw popped as she waved at the floor. "This was covered with grime and broken tiles. Did you think a sweeping fairy came in and made the dust pile?"

"Again," Ryan grinned, "thanks."

He knew he was being shameless, but it was important to seize the high ground in a battle. If he wanted to blow a hole in the opposition's campaign, he needed to knock Lanette's manager off-kilter.

Ryan pulled his wallet from his pocket and opened it. "I'd be willing to reimburse you for your time. You did a nice job tidying up the place."

"Why you—" Katherine's cheeks turned a deep shade of red as her hands gripped into fists at her sides. "I'm not your maid, you addepleted sexist. And if you don't get out of my headquarters in one minute, I may do something I'll have to confess to the preacher on Sunday. Not that I'll be sorry for it." She took one step toward him.

He forced himself to remain still. She wouldn't resort to violence, would she? He'd been in big city campaigns where he had to watch his back, but with this woman, he'd have to watch his front, side, and everything else.

"Remember the old adage." Ryan tucked his wallet away. "Possession is nine-tenths of the law." He pointed at the campaign poster he'd attached to the cracked plaster wall.

A giant picture of Mayor Johnson beamed over the office like a beatific angel. The slogan *Harry has heart* filled the bottom in giant red letters. Red was a power color.

Katherine eyed the poster with a curled lip. She headed for the wall, but a ringing from her purse stopped her. Ryan's phone buzzed at the exact same time. They both found their cells and answered.

"Hello?" Katherine pulled the phone away as Lanette's irritated bellow echoed from the speaker.

"Hi, Mayor." Ryan marked every move she made. He wouldn't put it past her to try and rip the poster off the wall.

They stared each other down as they listened to the people on their phones.

"Are you crazy?" Katherine's volume rose to match her employer's.

Ryan plugged a finger in the ear closest to her and turned away. "Mayor Johnson, you might want to reconsider."

After several minutes of frustrated mumbling from him and loud protests from Katherine, they hung up.

She faced him with a frown. "You heard?"

He gave a short nod. "Seems like we're sharing."

Katherine snorted in disgust.

Ryan walked to the antiquated desk by the window. Rummaging through the box, he drew out a pad of yellow sticky notes and wrote. He peeled off the paper and stuck it to the aged blotter on top. She eyed it with suspicion, stomped over, and read the words.

Property of Ryan Park.

Katherine swiped the note and held it in front of his nose. "What's this?"

"A friendly reminder." He leaned away. "I find working relationships are easier to maintain with clearly defined boundaries."

He scribbled on another piece of paper and placed it on the rolling chair. "Mayor Johnson told me to use anything I found in the office."

She propped her hands on her hips. "And where am I supposed to sit?"

His gaze darted around the room. It landed on a folded-up card table and a three-legged chair shoved in a far corner. He pointed. "Help yourself."

Katherine's mouth popped open and snapped shut again. She sucked air through her gritted teeth and closed her eyes. He'd bet his life she was counting to ten. His breath stuttered from his

nose, but he tried to hold it in. Laughter would make the situation worse.

She was cute when she was mad.

Her lids raised, and she spoke slowly. "This property is as much Lanette's as it is her husband's. If we're both using it, we'll have to share the resources."

Ryan wrote as he answered. "That's going to be awkward. Mayor Johnson and I have this place booked for the next month. Strategy meetings. Canvassing planning. Volunteer coordination. I'm afraid there aren't enough supplies for both of us." He slipped the note from the stack and stuck it on the whiteboard.

Clang!

Katherine kicked the metal trash can by the desk. "I'm sure you've noticed, Mister Park, I'm a little short in the patience department. Thanks to you, I've already broken my resolution about holding my tongue, so I might as well let it all out."

He spotted a bevy of golden flecks in her green eyes. Were they always there? Or did they only ignite when she was angry?

She stepped right under his nose as if to give him a better look. "You're soft in the head if you think I'll let you steal this election like you stole my desk."

"Your desk?"

"You may boast the political experience and the big-city contacts, but I've got something you can't buy in a million years."

He raised an eyebrow in response and waited.

"I've got a lifetime in Sweetheart to draw from. Until you've breathed the same air as these people for thirty years, you can't begin to understand the way they feel."

She was right.

Although he'd never admit it. Insider knowledge was priceless, but he could handle it. Ryan raised the pen and tapped her nose, wanting to see the sparks in her eyes one more time. They exploded as he'd hoped.

"Thanks for the warning." He scribbled another note. "I'll keep my guard up."

He tore off the paper and pasted it to the lip of the metal trash can.

Property of Ryan Park. Please refrain from kicking.

"Now, if you'll excuse me. I need to place an order for handbills." He walked to the exit as she followed closer than a tailgater on the New Jersey Turnpike. Maybe the tenacious Katherine would take the hint if he opened the door.

She didn't.

He flexed his hand on the knob. "Can we continue this later? Sweetheart needs to hear about the progressive plans Mayor Johnson has for his town."

"I'm not finished."

Ryan took out his wallet and withdrew a business card. "Please give me a call later."

He slipped it in her fingers, edged outside, and shut the door with a gentle click behind him. Despite his calm exterior, Ryan's heart jerked like a jackhammer. Working in the political field, he was used to confrontation. Yet something about the woman had upset his even keel. But what?

Maintaining a safe distance was difficult when they shared a workspace. Should he spin the close quarters to his advantage? It was obvious from their first encounter at the community center the woman was attracted to him. If she hadn't caught him spewing sexist nonsense to the men at the meeting, Katherine might still be admiring him with all the fervor of an infatuated teenager. If he worked hard to mend their social fences, he could make her fall again. And a woman with a crush was a distracted woman—thinking about romance, not campaigns.

Ryan looked at the closed glass door. Katherine stood on the other side, glaring at him. He turned his smile on full voltage and leveled it at her. Her eyebrows raised in confusion. He held his thumb and pinky to his ear in the gesture people who were born before cell phones used.

Call me, he mouthed.

Bewilderment spread across her face. He waved with both hands and turned to hide his laughter. Whether this flirtation won her over or merely confused her didn't matter. A winning political strategy used every trick in the book.