



## *Chapter Two*

Ryan tapped his clipboard against a shiny red fire hydrant as he scanned the main drag of Sweetheart. The blazing Texas sun glared on his head. He tugged the collar of his navy blue, Oxford shirt and fanned it from his neck.

High noon and nary a soul in sight. This job was supposed to be a restful change from the breakneck pace of New York City. But not this restful.

A feed-and-grain store, a Fifties-style diner, and an art gallery with a green-and-white striped awning stretched in front of him. The street was picturesque in that Christmas-television-movie kind of way. A well-manicured square with a statue of the town founder stood in the distance. It was the only figure in sight resembling a human being.

How was he supposed to take a benchmark poll without people? He popped an antacid in his mouth. The chalky substance dissolved under his teeth and sat on his tongue in a powdery film. Why didn't he bring a bottle of water?

The wind kicked up. An empty soda can rattled across the otherwise pristine road to where a sedan with a wicked dent in the door pulled to a stop. A woman sat behind the wheel.

Ryan made his way over as she climbed out. "Excuse me, ma'am."

She spun around with a glare. Oh, great! The touchy female from the community center. His stomach hollered for another antacid.

"Katherine, wasn't it?" He held up the clipboard and took a pen from his pocket. "I wonder if you could help me."

She slammed the door and crossed her arms over a black T-shirt with an Eighties rock band on the front. Her spine straightened, and her long, jean-encased legs braced against the pavement.

Time to ignore the resistant body language and plow ahead.

He pasted on his most endearing smile. "Since I'm new to Sweetheart, I need to get a feel for what people think. On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate Mayor Johnson's job performance over the past two years?"

"Should my score factor in the help his wife gave him?" Sarcasm dripped from her tone.

Ryan raised the clip on his board and trapped the pen underneath. "From what I hear, they make quite a team. It's a shame to split them up. Especially with the expansion plans the mayor has."

"Expansion plans?" Katherine uncrossed her arms. "I'm not sure what you mean."

Ryan smiled again. He'd caught her interest. Time to press his advantage.

"Mayor Johnson wants to announce it at his first official rally, but I can give you a little preview." He paused for dramatic effect. Might as well whet her appetite.

Her body tilted his way. "Preview of what?"

Ryan mirrored her posture. "The mayor lined all his ducks in a row before making it public knowledge. He's spent the last year and a half lobbying for funding from the governor, hiring architects, and picking out property. In twelve short months, Sweetheart will occupy a brand-new town hall."

The woman's mouth dropped. Oh, this was good. He'd won another vote for his client in a matter of seconds.

"A town hall?" Her gaze wandered to the side as she processed the information. "Won't that be expensive?"

"The mayor already arranged enough bonds to cover the cost. They can be paid off over a long period of time, and Sweetheart will enjoy a state-of-the-art facility with the latest computers, security, and—"

"How much?" Her eyes snapped to his.

"What?"

"How much money in bonds has he arranged?"

"The new building will house the sheriff's department, the town registrar, the mayor's office, and a meeting hall for the entire community. The expenses for construction and materials—"

"How. Much?" She spit the words from tightened lips.

Ryan hesitated. Without the architect's fancy renderings and projected drawings to sugar-coat it, the cost might seem high to a small-town girl.

"Fifteen million dollars, but the town will have thirty years to pay it off and—"

"Million?" She laughed. "Fifteen million dollars?"

"Trust me, ma'am—"

"Katherine." She jammed her hands on her hips. "And why should I trust you? This is your second day in town. I grew up in Sweetheart, and I know how long it took to drag this place out of the crippling debt the last mayor left it in. Now Harry Johnson wants to throw us right back in the hole?"

She stepped closer until his personal space was well and truly invaded. Was he imagining the heat exploding from her like a furnace? The belt buckle man at the meeting was correct. Someone hang a sign around this woman's neck.

*Beware!*



THE ANGRY WORDS rose in Katherine's throat and pricked at the roof of her mouth. Her lips ached to open and release every last poisoned dart in this pretentious man's face. Who was he to tell her what was best for her town?

*Gracious words, Katherine. Gracious ... Lord, hit the censor button for me.*

"Mr. Park—"

"Please, call me Ryan."

"No, thank you. Listen, Mr. Park, fifteen million dollars may be chicken feed in New York, but that amount is astronomical to the citizens of Sweetheart."

He tucked his clipboard under his arm and nodded. "I understand your concern. But the long-range benefits will far exceed the expense. Sweetheart needs a better place to hold town meetings than a dilapidated old community center, which hasn't been refurbished since Nixon was president."

"True, but—"

"And from what I understand, Mayor Johnson hasn't taken a salary once in the sixteen years he's held office. How could you doubt the intentions of such a man?"

"It's not his intentions I doubt, it's his intelli—"

*Beep.*

Katherine pulled her phone out. Was this God's subtle way of helping her keep her mouth shut?

She read the text, then looked at the handsome newcomer who waited with a patient but practiced smile.

"Excuse me, Mr. Park. I'm supposed to meet someone, and she's wondering where I am." Katherine gestured to the *Ma Cherie Salon* in the strip of stores beside them.

"No problem." He flourished a hand in the direction she indicated. "We can finish our discussion later. A good hairstylist is hard to find."

"It's not a—" She clamped her lips shut. Why did it matter what he thought? "Forget it."

Katherine held her head high as she stomped away and

yanked open the salon's thick mahogany door. The scent of jasmine invaded her nostrils. A row of empty massage chairs filled one wall, and sixty-eight-year-old Elise Walker sat at the manicurist's table with her silver-gray hair in rollers. Her high-pitched voice raised another octave when she spotted Katherine.

"You're here!"

"Hello, Elise. I got your text. What did you want?"

"It wasn't for me. Lanette! Come and see who walked through the door."

Lanette Johnson exited the side room in a purple terry cloth robe. A white piece of material flattened her short blonde bob and wrapped around her face, holding the sagging flesh up to her chin. She clapped twice as she approached Katherine.

"There's the girl I'm looking for."

Katherine recognized the militant gleam in the shorter woman's eyes. She'd spent the better part of her adult life avoiding Lanette's battle plans. The mayor's wife had two gears: full speed ahead and that's-not-fast-enough-kick-it-up-a-notch. The possibility of buying a ticket on her stressy-go-round made Katherine's blood pressure quiver.

She backed away. "Whatever new project you're cooking up, I don't have time."

"From what I hear," Lanette pulled at the tight, elastic band on her chin, "you have all the time in the world since the *Clarion* let you go."

Elise *tsk-tsked* from the manicure table. "So sorry, dear."

The small-town gossip mill was alive and well. News of her unemployment had probably traveled halfway to Dallas. The sudden craving for a chocolate chip cookie hit her.

"On the contrary." Katherine scooted another step. She wasn't above making a run for it if the persistent woman refused to take no for an answer. "Half the envelopes in my mailbox are bills. I'll be busier than ever hunting for a new job to pay them off."

"Then hunt no further." Lanette opened her arms wide. "I

witnessed your little clash with Harry's fancy political consultant last night. Those old buzzards think I'm deaf, but I heard them chewing me down as I walked by. Not that it mattered. I've got a particular reason for running for mayor, and I won't let a little gossip stop me."

"Good for you." Katherine resisted the urge to ask what Lanette's particular reason was. Better to know as little as possible, so she didn't get sucked into the whirlwind. "If you'll excuse—"

"Harry sent all the way to New York for Ryan Park, so he must be good. I admit it threw me for a loop when I found out. How was I going to compete with a professional? Then I heard you put him in his place as nice as you please," she raised her French-tipped fingertips heavenward, "and it hit me like the 'Hallelujah Chorus.' Katie, I realized you're perfect."

Perfect? Katherine savored the strange new compliment. People usually listed what she needed to fix about her prickly personality. Maybe she should hear this perceptive woman out.

"Perfect for what?"

"To help me beat my husband in this year's mayoral race. Katherine Bruno, I'm hiring you to be my campaign manager."

Static filled her brain. "Your what?"

"Whatever that Park guy is doing for my husband, you'll do for me. Get the word out. Drum up votes. You're a go-getter, Katie. If you're on my side, nobody can beat us. My husband will rue the day he scorned my advice."

"What do you mean, he—"

"Let's take a seat and plan our campaign strategy." The older lady grabbed her with the strength of a woman who had been bossing around an entire town for sixteen years.

Katherine's feet skidded against the tile floor. Why was Lanette wasting her time with crazy propositions?

"What do I know about politics?" She tried to shake her off—unsuccessfully.

"I don't need someone political. I need someone with grit.

Someone who won't melt in sympathy when my husband turns those big puppy dog eyes of his on them. You're smart enough not to fall for his homespun charms when he tries to talk you out of joining me."

"But, but I like Mayor Johnson."

"So do I." Lanette sank into the nearest recliner. "Liked him so much I married him." She wiggled her shoulders deeper into the leather cushions and hit the massage button. Buzzing sounded. Her body jiggled as the chair went to work. "But someone has to teach my man a lesson, and you're the gal to help me do it."

Katherine grabbed a piece of foil-wrapped chocolate from the candy bowl on the counter and sat on a sofa by the wall.

Lanette leaned forward, her polished fingernails clasped on her knees. "I wasn't kidding when I said I needed you, Katie. Sweetheart is in a whole heap of trouble if we don't do something."

"Trouble?" Katherine stopped unwrapping the candy.

"My husband got this idea in his head that we require a new town hall. The plan sounded good at first—until I saw the tab. He wants to spend—"

"Fifteen million dollars." Katherine's eyes rolled up under her lids.

Lanette's head tilted. "How'd you know?"

"A little birdie from New York told me."

"He's another unnecessary expense," she scoffed. "I love my husband dearly, but when it comes to money, he's a featherbrain. With my help, we've kept the town in the black for the past five years, but even I can't figure out a way to pay off fifteen million dollars. So, I decided to run for mayor. I don't desire the job, but someone has to stop Harry before he ruins us all."

It made sense. Lanette really didn't want to be mayor. And Katherine really didn't want to be her campaign manager. But did either of them really have a choice? She finished unwrapping the chocolate, popped it in her mouth, and sighed.

"Everyone thinks I'm a big-mouth troublemaker. How could I ever help you convince—"

"Whoa." Lanette pounded the chair button, and it stopped rocking. "Don't sell yourself short, honey. You were raised by your uncle, and we all remember what kind of man he was—mean as spit and driven by money. If you hadn't learned to holler, he would have forgot you existed."

Unexpected prickles hit Katherine's eyeballs. She blinked and looked away. Was it possible she could help save the town from another disastrous debt? Plus, she needed a way to pay next month's rent. She sighed again.

"Hang on, Lanette. I should speak to somebody first." She rose from her seat and headed for the exit.

"Wait, darlin'," Lanette called after her. "Are you going to help me?"

"Yes!" Katherine bellowed without turning around. She might be giving in, but she didn't have to be happy about it.

She swung open the heavy wooden door and squinted in the sunlight. Humidity radiated off the sidewalk. Sweat coated her cheeks in an instant. How fitting. Wasn't she stepping into the fire?

Katherine spotted Ryan Park a short distance away, writing on his clipboard. She took a deep breath and marched over.

"Excuse me, Mr. Park." She stood in front of him, her arms akimbo. "I came to warn you I just accepted the position of Lanette Johnson's campaign manager."

"I beg your pardon?" His sleek, black eyebrows dipped.

"I've heard politics is a dirty business, but I hope we can keep this a clean fight. I'm willing if you are." She held out a hand. "What do you say? May the best man or woman win?"

The morning breeze hit her as she waited for his response. Was it her imagination, or did she see a flash of pity cross his face? He must consider her an uneducated rube, but he'd find out soon enough what she could do with a little brainpower and a lot of guts.



He laughed and took her fingers in his. “Challenge accepted.”

Katherine steeled herself against the electric sensation where his skin touched hers. He was her opponent, and everyone knew you didn’t fraternize with the enemy. She shook his hand once. Hard. And let go.

Time to join forces with Lanette. Her brain spun as she turned away from the opposition. Slogans. Marketing. Campaign Headquarters. So much to do. And only the good Lord knew what awaited them.