

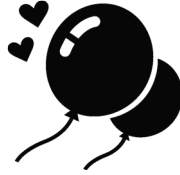
Inspired by *The Merry Wives of Windsor*  
by William Shakespeare

*The Merry Wives of*  
**SWEETHEART**

a novella by  
Shannon Sue Dunlap



# ONE



*“Better three hours too soon than a minute too late.”  
(Ford, Act 2, Scene 2, The Merry Wives of Windsor)*

The tempo of Augusta Page’s fingernails matched the second hand on her wristwatch. She drummed her red manicure on the windowsill. Frustration welled inside of her, along with a laundry list of questions.

Why was her daughter so late?

For the meeting?

For life?

For love?

She tuned out the wave of noise behind her. The community center echoed with the sound of thirty women talking at once. They passed their phones in an endless carousel of wedding photos and grandbabies. If Augusta was forced to admire one more picture of a toddler holding a sign marking how many months they’d been on the planet, she’d scream.

Her untapped potential to be the best doting Nana in Sweetheart, Texas, was going to waste. When would it be her turn? If she had anything to say about it, soon.

Augusta brightened as a familiar blue hatchback drove into

the parking lot. Time to get this happy ending on the road. She stuck her hand behind her back and beckoned her best friend.

“Ronnie! She’s here.”

Veronica “Ronnie” Ford hurried over and shoved her long-limbed frame beside Augusta. The two women peered out the glass. In the distance, a tall blonde in jeans and a long-sleeved coral top walked toward the entrance, carrying a large tray of finger sandwiches.

Ronnie whistled. “Are you sure Anne doesn’t suspect anything?”

Augusta’s lips quirked. “She has no inkling of the good news we’re about to spring on her.”

“Spring is right.” Ronnie cringed. “I hope this announcement isn’t four years overdue.”

Augusta swatted her. “My baby has wasted more than enough time pining for her first love. Now that he’s back in town, it’s time to wrap the pair up and deliver them to the minister.”



ANNE PAGE FROZE with her fingers around the doorknob. Balancing the sandwich tray on her hip, she gave herself a thirty-second pep talk. Any visit to the Sweetheart Ladies Auxiliary required a boost of mental fortitude. The members sported hearts the size of Texas, but their curiosity was continental.

“What are you afraid of?” Anne gnawed on her lower lip. “You’ve known these women since birth. Just drop off their order and leave.”

Easier said than done. Did the by-laws contain a special clause declaring everyone who entered the auxiliary meetings must receive their fair share of meddling? Anne hated being meddled with. Her brain flicked through all the aspects of her life the members might try to improve. She’d better have a quick response ready.

“Yes, I’m still a waitress at the café. The flexible hours work well with my college schedule.”

*Uh-oh.* Was it dangerous to mention her perpetual quest for a degree?

“I only changed my major twice. Now, I’m certain dental hygiene is the field I want.”

Actually, there was still a smidgen of doubt. No need to bring that pesky detail up.

“I don’t have a boyfriend. But I’m baking a cake for the Candy Hearts Festival auction. Who knows where the opportunity might lead?”

Anne knew exactly where it would lead. Nowhere. The town’s annual Valentine’s festival brought visitors from every corner of the state. And the big finale was the cake auction when hopeful gentlemen bid on the home-baked desserts of the women they fancied. But the man she wanted to purchase her cake wouldn’t be in attendance.

The face of her high school boyfriend flashed through her mind, triggering bittersweet memories. The first time he’d bought her cake at the age of thirteen. Summer stargazing from their special perch in the corn fields. Him standing under the window serenading her with a guitar.

An unwelcome picture intruded in the happy montage—him driving toward the interstate without a backward glance. And not a word since then. He lived a mere one hundred and sixteen miles away in big city Dallas, but it might as well be a thousand.

She stomped her foot. “Stupid Connor Fenton.”

No use wasting precious brain space on someone who was never coming back. She’d waited four long years. Time to move on. The cake auction was the first step.

Anne took a deep breath, turned the knob, and pushed the door open. The outdated wood panel walls of the community center encased a buzzing company of busybodies. A chorus of high-pitched voices greeted her.

“There you are!”

“Look who’s here!”

“Food. Finally!”

Anne’s own mother met her at the front, wearing a sleek aquamarine pantsuit, with her blonde hair and understated makeup done to perfection. “What took you so long, darlin’? I was starting to worry.” She accepted the sandwich tray with the poise of a beauty pageant winner and slid it onto a table near the entrance.

A scan of the room revealed friendly, curious faces turned their way.

“It’s a typical workday. Lots to do.” She took a baby step to the door. “In fact, I’d better get back to the café. Susanna needs my help.”

“Don’t be silly.” Her mom captured Anne’s arm in a death grip and steered her to the table where her friends sat. “Your Aunt Ronnie was just asking about you. I’m sure you can spare two minutes to fill her in.”

“On what?” Anne muttered. She followed her mother, sank into a metal folding chair, and nodded at the middle-aged women. “Hello, ladies. Did your meeting go well?”

“Excellent.” The mayor’s wife, Lanette Johnson, slapped her hands against the garish pattern of her leopard print pants.

The *former* mayor’s wife, Anne reminded herself. It was still hard to believe her old babysitter, Katherine Bruno, was the new mayor. She was only in her thirties! And even bossy Katherine found a handsome New Yorker to fall in love with her. It seemed everyone was getting on with their lives.

Except for Anne.

Ronnie Ford rested her flannel-covered elbows on the table. She and Anne’s mother were as different as night and day. Plaid and chintz. Oreos and escargot.

How had the two ever ended up being best friends? So close their children considered each other cousins, even though no real blood ties existed.

“Hi, sugar.” She grinned. “Still baking a cake for the Candy Hearts Festival?”

“After you got on to me, I didn’t dare skip it.” Anne squirmed in her seat.

Lanette Johnson leaned into their conversation. “Are you participating in the auction? Good girl! It’s been years since you entered.”

“Guess so.”

No guessing required. She knew exactly how long it had been. Four years. The last time Connor was in Sweetheart. She crossed her fingers under the table, praying Lanette wouldn’t raise the subject.

Aunt Ronnie’s eyes twinkled. “I bet you’ll bring the highest bid. A pretty, young thing like you. No end of eligible men wanting to enjoy your company over a slice of cake.”

Anne’s mom patted her shoulder. “Sure as you’re born. Two qualities our family is famous for are delicious cake and sparkling conversation.”

“Sparkling?” Anne made a face. “I hope I can live up to the Page reputation.”

“Don’t fret.” Lanette reached across the table to pat Anne’s other shoulder. “There’s one man who’ll bid no matter how burnt the cake is. I imagine he spent all those years in stuffy, commercialized Dallas daydreaming about winning you back.”

Dallas?

Her heart stopped. Was that physically possible? But it did. The muscle froze for half a second and restarted double-time.

Lanette couldn’t mean ... him. Who else lived in Dallas who would relate to this conversation?

She cleared her throat. “I ... I’m not sure I understand you, Mrs. Johnson. Who are you certain will bid on my cake?”

“Why, didn’t you hear?” Lanette’s face lit with joy as it dawned on her she would be the first to deliver a tantalizing piece of news. “Connor Fenton is in town. Your old sweetheart came back to Sweetheart.”