

Substitute Sweetheart

Sweetheart Series • Book Two

Shannon Sue Dunlap



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*To my fellow teachers at Beta Academy,
your hard work, creativity, and never-ending love for your students
has changed lives*



Chapter One

How could she survive the wedding without an interpreter?

“Y’all” and “Bless her heart” floated past her ears as Victoria Park walked through the reception and sat at the head table. She observed the festivities with the amused interest of a tourist in a strange land. The number of cowboy hats being worn indoors highlighted how far out of civilized society she’d traveled.

Her lightning-paced life in New York City felt a world away. Two days in the small burg of Sweetheart, Texas, had almost killed her. She was dying for a decent cup of espresso. But her exile crept ever closer to the end. One more night, then she’d climb in her rental car without a backward glance.

Victoria tugged at the poofy chiffon monstrosity she’d been forced to wear as the maid of honor. It was a cranberry-red, vintage swing dress with scratchy crinoline and a matching pillbox hat. She hated the outfit, and she didn’t feel much better about her new sister-in-law. Why had her clever brother fallen for such a pushy, opinionated woman?

Victoria’s father liked their new family member. For the life

of her, she couldn't understand why. He mingled among the wedding-goers with the comfort of a man who'd pastored a church for thirty-five years. If only she'd inherited his social skills.

"Hey, Vic!"

One of her fellow bridesmaids slid beside her. What was the woman's name? Anna something?

"Hello, Anna," Victoria said.

"De-anna." The cheery blonde smiled. "But close enough. Let's take a picture together while we're gussied up. I haven't looked this good in years."

Really? What was her normal fashion choice? Blueberry-colored burlap?

Deanna held her phone at arm's length, tilted her head, and snapped a picture. "Thanks. I hope you—" She shrank back until her body was half hidden behind Victoria's. "Uh-oh! There's Mrs. Biddle. She's the biggest gossip in town. I bet you twenty dollars she's headed over to ask me when it will be my turn to wear white. Take care."

She dashed away mere seconds before a short, middle-aged woman with hair dyed burgundy red chugged up to the table. The lady gasped from the exertion. Her purple sequined dress shimmered under the party lights.

"Oh, Deanna. Wait!" Mrs. Biddle slapped a hand on her sparkly hip. "She must not have heard me. I wanted to ask when I'll be getting a wedding invitation with her name on it. Only the good Lord knows who the other name will be. That girl jumps from man to man like a frog on a lily pad."

Victoria's lips twitched. Deanna had this woman's number. Good thing she'd bolted for safety.

Mrs. Biddle turned her full attention on Victoria. "You're the groom's sister, right? A college professor from the Big Apple? Single with no current prospects?"

The gossip hotline was alive and well in Sweetheart. How had this busybody found out so much? Her brother never shared personal information about his family. Could it have been her new sister-in-law?

Mrs. Biddle leaned in. “You and Andrew Zimmerman made quite an attractive pair walking down the aisle together. Any hope there?”

Victoria blinked, unsure how to answer the stranger invading both her space and her private life with all the subtlety of a steamroller.

The woman’s burgundy-topped head whipped to the left. “There’s Deanna. Excuse me, please.”

She bustled away, and Victoria released a breath. New York possessed its fair share of nosy people, but they usually cloaked their inquiries in a little more buildup.

Speaking of New York, how were things going at home?

She slipped her phone from the hidden pocket of her dress. No texts. Strange.

The board meeting was scheduled for this afternoon. Surely the university had made their final decision by now. Her contract was up for renewal. This time, she expected a much bigger offer than another teaching stint.

Applause broke out, and she laid the phone on the table. Her brother, Ryan, walked through the door, arm in arm with his new wife, Katherine. Victoria’s sister-in-law had become mayor at the notable young age of thirty. As a career woman, Victoria respected her drive. But in a town of five thousand people, how hard could it be to get elected?

Ryan led his bride onto the hardwood floor. An eighties girl-group anthem played, and Victoria squinted at the music. Hardly a romantic first dance. Maybe it’s how they did things in the sticks.

If she ever married, she’d choose a string quartet playing a

refined mix of Chopin and Beethoven. But there wasn't much chance of that happening. Romance wasn't on her agenda. She'd chosen a career path and never looked back.

Her outdated hat with the cranberry netting started to droop. She yanked the offensive accessory into place. Why did her sister-in-law pick such a ridiculous outfit?

"Feeling weepy yet?" a rich baritone voice whispered in her ear.

Hints of a subtle, woodsy cologne tickled Victoria's nose. The best man, Andrew Zimmerman, settled on the chair beside her. His tall, muscular frame fit the Texas cowboy stereotype to a tee, and honey-brown hair flopped over his forehead in a relaxed style that contradicted his fancy tuxedo.

A genuine smile stretched across her face. "I never cry. I'm not the sentimental type."

The handsome elementary music teacher had played her partner in crime throughout the rehearsal, whispering explanations for the local customs, and making her laugh with funny anecdotes. Yet, in all those stories, he'd kept his words positive and kind.

He slumped and stretched his long legs out with a sigh. "Ready to burn the bridesmaid dress?"

"Show me the nearest bonfire," she murmured.

"You'll have to get in line." He loosened the bow tie around his neck. "I want to be rid of this formal straightjacket." He slipped the tie in a pocket and released the collar button of his starchy, white dress shirt.

Victoria glanced at her phone again.

Still nothing.

Andrew nudged her. "Planning your escape route?"

She tucked the phone away. "Not exactly. The board at the university where I work had their monthly meeting today. I've

been a professor for ten years, and they're considering me for a promotion. Associate dean."

His eyebrows rose. "Impressive. If the dean at my college had been half as beautiful as you, I might've skipped fewer lectures."

"I bet you were the class clown." She poked him with her elbow even as the tips of her ears heated.

Flirting wasn't part of her normal repertoire, but she was on vacation. Andrew had proved himself a witty, well-informed companion, and there was no harm enjoying her last few hours in Sweetheart bantering with the good-looking charmer.

Victoria removed the annoying hat and tossed it on the table. She smoothed a strand of hair into place. How did one go about attracting the opposite sex? It had been forever since she'd tried. Perhaps complimenting his job?

A rock-and-roll electric guitar played through the sound system. The riff swelled into an earsplitting crescendo.

Victoria pointed at the speakers. "The music isn't really to my taste. What's your opinion as a professional?"

Andrew grinned. "I don't use a lot of eighties rock with kindergartners. Pretty sure Katherine chose the song. She has a whole collection of empowered girl band T-shirts."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" She took a sip from her water glass and checked her phone one more time.

How late had the meeting run? Her friend on the board assured her she was a shoo-in for associate dean. The only thing left was the official vote. Then she could move into her new corner office and get to work on her real goal.

Dean.

The long hours she'd put in to get this far would seem mere child's play compared to what she'd have to sacrifice for the ultimate position. Who knew? This might be the last

opportunity she ever had to dance with a handsome man while she was young enough to enjoy it.

Forget her pride. She'd never see these people again. Why not make the most of the evening?

Victoria cleared her throat. "Despite the inappropriate song choice, I might consider dusting off my old moves." She gave an over-exaggerated batting of her lashes and faked a thick Southern drawl. "If the right gentleman asked me to dance."

Andrew hopped up and bent at the waist, extending a hand. His brown eyes warmed her like an extra-large cup of café mocha. "Say no more, fair lady. Would you do me the honor of electric sliding with me?"

She placed her fingers in his and stood. "Lead the way."



ANDREW'S LEGS CRANKED OUT A HEROIC RUNNING MAN, BUT HE couldn't compare to the groom's sister, Victoria Park. Her uninhibited abandon was a delightful surprise. She'd been a bit on the standoffish side when they were first introduced. Not unfriendly. *Buttoned-up* might be a better description.

Tonight, the sleek New Yorker shocked him with her endless supply of energy and antiquated dance routines. No matter how ridiculous the song, she found an appropriate move to match without hesitation or embarrassment. The captivating woman sparkled with confidence in her puffy red dress.

Victoria held her arms Egyptian style and poked them in either direction. Her shiny black hair swished. "I hope no one is recording this. It would make great blackmail material."

"You've got nothing to be ashamed of." Andrew copied her pose. "I haven't had this much fun at a wedding since ... ever."

She laughed and juttred her chin to the beat. "Ditto."

"Mr. Z!" His five-year-old student Sophie ran up in the same floral dress she wore to church every Sunday. After a recent growth spurt, the hem barely brushed the top of her skinny knees. Her tight, wiry curls bounced as she took hold of his tuxedo trousers. "I looked all over for you. Dance with me!"

He glanced at Victoria and back to the youngster. "Sorry, Sophie. I already have a partner."

"Oh." Her small mouth drooped.

Victoria observed the little girl's bereft expression and raised a hand. "Hold it. This young lady searched for you." She took a step away and extended both arms with a bow. "I don't mind sharing."

Sophie giggled.

Andrew squatted down to meet the child eye-to-eye. "I've got something important to finish with this lovely lady. Can I come find you in a few minutes?"

"Promise?" She poked out a pinky.

He kissed his thumb and hooked his pinky with her tiny one. "Promise. See? I sealed it with a kiss."

An appeased Sophie took off, wound around the dancers' legs, and disappeared into the crowd.

"Who was that?" Victoria asked.

"One of my students." He puffed out his chest. "I'm her favorite teacher."

"You should protect your preferred status instead of making her wait. What was so important?"

The music changed to a dreamy ballad. Andrew pointed at the ceiling. "A slow dance." He placed his hand behind her back. "With you."

She moved naturally into his arms, and he settled her close. The top of her silky, black hair tickled his chin. Her soft frame

pressed against his, and he found himself wishing Victoria's stay in Sweetheart wasn't temporary.

Might as well wish for the moon. This sophisticated woman belonged in the big city, as her habitual checking of her cell phone reminded him. But he could enjoy her company for a few more hours.

An older man in a suit and bolo tie danced by with his wife. "You got a mighty pretty partner there, Andrew."

"Thanks, Mayor." Andrew saluted.

Victoria's gaze followed the couple as they moved away. "I thought my new sister-in-law was the mayor."

"She is." He danced in a lazy circle. "That man held the office before Katherine, and folks were used to calling him Mayor Johnson. It's kind of an honorary title, like they give former presidents."

"I see." Victoria relaxed. "If that's the case, I have a grudge to settle with him."

"How do you figure?"

"Wasn't he the one who hired my brother to come to Sweetheart? If he'd never offered him the job, Ryan wouldn't have met Katherine. I'm trying to comprehend what they found in common."

"I guess love doesn't have to make sense. Sometimes it just happens."

She blew a skeptical puff of air from her lips. "Oh, please. Don't tell me you believe the movie propaganda. Real life doesn't come with a soundtrack. Love is a choice."

Her statement intrigued him. It echoed his own prosaic beliefs on the subject. A kind of everyday, unromantic idea of love that didn't fit well with weddings and fairy tales.

"Interesting. Tell me more."

"My brother didn't take one glance at Katherine and forget his job, his family, and his life in New York. He chose to be with

her, to give up everything for a chance at happiness. For all our sakes, I hope it works out. I'd hate to have dressed as a fifties baby doll for nothing."

Andrew chuckled. "You'd look good in anything. Even a feed sack."

She shook her head. "I feel like a reject from one of those old Hollywood musicals."

"Would this be time for the big dance number? Glad to oblige."

He lifted his arm and spun her in a circle and out the open double doors onto the porch. String lights stretched in rows over their heads. She followed his lead, mirroring his steps in a perfect, graceful rhythm.

Andrew paused mid-twirl, one hand at her waist and the other holding her delicate fingers. Her soft palm molded to his—a perfect fit.

He cleared his throat. "I think it's fair to warn you the ambiance is getting to me."

She answered with a low, melodic laugh. "How do you mean?"

"In this light, you're so beautiful, I want to forget we're almost strangers."

Her eyelashes fluttered. Not in a provocative style. More like a burst of surprise. But she didn't pull away. It took her a second to respond. "And if we weren't strangers?"

He drew a deep, steadying breath and leaned down. His lips touched hers, gentle but firm. Her mouth softened without hesitation. The encouragement wrecked any polite pretense, and he pressed her closer. Victoria's arms wrapped around his neck in a welcoming embrace.

Something buzzed against Andrew's side, interrupting the perfect moment. He shifted back a bit. "Unless you've got restless leg syndrome, your phone is vibrating."

“Hmm?” Her eyes refocused. She jerked away and slipped the cell from a hidden pocket in her voluminous dress.

She swiped at the screen, and her face brightened. “It’s here. Finally!” Victoria tapped on the phone and read the text. The smile faded. Her hand dropped to her side.

“What’s wrong?” He noted a slight sway in her body and took her by the elbow. “Are you okay?”

“I’m—” She looked up, pupils dilated. “I’m fired.”