



Chapter Three

Andrew grabbed a cup of coffee from the snack table. The lanyard with his ID slapped his chest as he picked a seat at the end of a row. Staff meetings—filled with boring details about standardized tests, online trainings, and attendance reminders—rarely had anything to do with him.

Music teachers experienced the best of both worlds by interacting with energetic, malleable young minds but avoiding the monotonous, administrative details a grade-level teacher performed.

“An emergency staff meeting?” Belinda Carlyle, the art teacher, sat beside him. “What is it this time? More pencils shoved in the boys’ bathroom toilets?”

He chuckled. “Maybe they’ve discovered another rat snake near the playground.”

“Hold on, everybody!” Ronnie Ford, the school secretary, fiddled with a computer at the front of the room and hooked a cable to the TV. “Let me get the internet feed working.”

She signed in to an online meeting app, and Mattie Kilgallen’s face filled the screen. Her curly brown hair frizzed

out on each side. Behind her was a headboard, a pile of pink, lacy pillows at her back.

“Hello, my dear friends.” Her familiar sunny voice rang out, and the teachers quieted. “I hope you’re enjoying the teacher workday before the kids come back. I wish I could be there in person, but it’s impossible. You might notice my unusual location. The doctor’s ordered me to stay in bed until the baby arrives.”

Voices buzzed.

Mattie held a finger to her lips. “Shhhhhhhh. I don’t have to be there to imagine how noisy it is. Don’t worry about me. If I follow the doctor’s instructions, the baby and I will be fine. But just like when a teacher takes a day off, I needed a substitute. And the mayor found a remarkable person.” She waited an overlong minute with a mischievous grin. “Her new sister-in-law, Victoria Park.”

The buzz started again.

Andrew’s eyes widened, and he scanned the room. No sign of the beautiful woman he’d kissed at the wedding. Was this some kind of prank?

The video image of their principal plumped the pillow behind her. “I’ll be forever grateful she agreed to pinch hit for me. Ms. Park is unable to attend the staff meeting, because she’s flying back from New York. She’ll be on campus later today, and I want you to give her a warm Sweetheart welcome.”

Andrew zoned out for the rest of the video call. The meeting ended, and teachers clumped in tiny, chattering groups. He wandered out to the playground for a little peace and settled on a swing. It creaked beneath his weight as he kept his gaze trained on the parking lot.

Waiting.

His brain zipped through the details Mattie had given

them. Delectable Victoria Park was the new interim principal. He shook his head, processing the news. After the wedding, a strange sense of melancholy had overwhelmed him. Almost bitterness. Why had God brought such an amazing woman into his life for a short two days?

Pumping a fist at the sky, he laughed. "I said I wanted more time with her, but I didn't know You were listening."

The woman who'd made his heart beat at *molto presto* was moving to Sweetheart. They'd be interacting every day in the school halls. Was this the modern-day equivalent of a miracle?

A beat-up gray sedan with a dented door drove into the lot. Andrew recognized the car and stood. The honeymooning Mayor Park must have loaned it to her sister-in-law. He loped across the playground as Victoria climbed from the car with a large cardboard box. She wore a black pinstripe suit with shiny, patent leather high heels. Her silky hair was styled in a bun at the nape of her neck. What a shame. He preferred how it looked, framing her soft cheeks.

He reached her side and held out his arms. "Victoria! Welcome."

She squinted as if trying to place him.

He took the box from her. "You didn't wear your bridesmaid's dress. I thought you were so fond of it."

Her eyes grew round.

"I work here." He motioned to the school building. "Remember I told you at the wedding I taught music?"

From her blank expression, she'd forgotten. Obviously, his presence hadn't been an inducement to take the job. A small blow to his ego, but the joy of seeing her helped him recover.

He smiled. "Let me show you to your office."

They walked together from the parking lot. Andrew pointed out various school aspects to familiarize her with the

campus. When they entered the main double doors, curious heads poked out of classrooms as they passed.

“Don’t worry,” Andrew called down the hallway. “I’ll introduce her at lunch.”

He stopped beside the door marked Principal. “Here it is. They announced a special potluck at noon when you can meet the staff. That gives you an hour to get settled. Have I covered everything?”

She took the box from his arms and nodded.

“Great.” He studied Victoria’s still-shocked face. Was she feeling shy? “Don’t be nervous. Everyone’s anxious to meet you.”

Andrew patted her elbow and walked away. It might take her a while to get her bearings. The poor thing hadn’t said a word on the way in. She must be terrified.



VICTORIA DUMPED HER THINGS ON A WELL-USED, FLORAL COUCH BY the lone office window and flopped onto the swivel chair behind the desk. She collapsed on the top, burying her head in her arms. The gorgeous groomsman she’d allowed herself to cut loose with at the wedding was now her subordinate. Look where her uncharacteristic lapse in judgement had led. To complete and total mortification.

Why had she kissed him?

Her behavior was unprofessional, unacceptable, and humiliating.

Could she regain his respect after he’d seen her do the Macarena? And not just him. Had any other teachers witnessed her uninhibited exhibition at the reception?

In a small town, the probability was high.

She bonked her head against the desk and moaned. “Why? Why? Why?”

She had lost the associate dean position at the university, but she refused to lose her dignity. Victoria would show Sweetheart Elementary what she was made of and how hard she could work.

She sat up and grabbed a pen and paper. First things first, present the teachers with a polished first impression. Second, have the custodian give her a full tour of the building and make note of any necessary repairs. Third, study the lunch menus to—

Her itemized list reached twenty before she found a stopping point. Perhaps it would be better to concentrate on the teachers today. They were the most pertinent cog in the machinery.

She straightened her shoulders, stood, and tugged the hem of her pinstripe suit coat. If she wanted to erase any memory in her coworkers’ minds of a poofy-dress-wearing principal doing the Cabbage Patch, she must present the complete opposite image.

Stalking from the office, Victoria entered the hallway and marched to the first classroom. She knocked on the door and entered. A short man in jeans and a sweatshirt sat with feet propped on the desk, a half-eaten granola bar in his hand.

Victoria allowed her gaze to travel the length of his relaxed torso. She gave a tight smile. Time to show the staff she wasn’t a flighty airhead.

“Good afternoon. I’m Victoria Park, the interim principal. I hope jeans are only allowed on staff workdays. If not, we’ll need to adjust the dress code.”

The teacher lowered his feet. He stood at attention. With a twitchy hand, he brushed at the granola crumbs on his collar.

Excellent.

SHANNON SUE DUNLAP

She could sense the respect already.