



## *Chapter Two*

**Y**es. She hated her new sister-in-law. It was certain now.

Victoria sat on the charcoal-gray couch of her brother's living room as Katherine Bruno Park paced in front of her. A pair of energetic Yorkshire terriers followed her through the room, making wide laps around the train of her wedding dress.

"It's Providence!" The white satin swooshed as Katherine waved her arms. "The doctor put Mattie Kilgallen, our elementary principal, on bed rest for the last trimester of her pregnancy. Totally unexpected. And no one wants to take her position for the second semester of school. Too much work for too little pay."

Victoria spoke slowly as if to a child. "So why try to make me do it?"

"You got fired." Katherine's tone was matter of fact. "You need a job."

"I need a job in New York." Victoria flipped her hand palm up. "Where I live."

“Consider this an extended vacation.” Katherine stopped pacing. “I imagine January in New York is way colder than here. It will do your lungs good to get out of the polluted city and breathe fresh air. You might even find you prefer Sweetheart. Your brother did.”

Love had turned his brain to mush. But Victoria had no such inducement.

Perhaps logic would work with her overenthusiastic relative-by-marriage. “I assume there’s some sort of license or certification the state of Texas requires to be a principal. I don’t qualify.”

Katherine batted the argument away like a tennis ball. “We’ll give you an almost-principal title.”

Ryan, wearing jeans and a light sweater, appeared from the bedroom. He wheeled a hard-shell suitcase into the room and kissed his bride on the cheek. “You mean *interim principal*?”

“Right.” Katherine nodded. “That sounds more official. Interim principal. For all intents and purposes, Mattie will still be the official principal while she stays home in bed, but you’ll be at the school running things. If anyone asks why we chose you, we say you’ve taught at a New York university for the past ten years. You’re more than qualified to run a small-town elementary school.”

Victoria rubbed the spot between her eyebrows. “There’s a world of difference between a college campus and a kindergarten.”

“It’s not just kindergarten. The school goes up to second grade.”

“Why is the mayor recruiting me?” Victoria shifted on the couch, and the netting of her crinoline scratched her legs. She yanked at the abrasive material. “Doesn’t the school board handle this kind of thing?”

Her brother chuckled. “Trust me. Katherine stuck her nose in everybody’s business even before she was elected mayor.”

His wife swatted at him. “If Sweetheart has a problem, it’s my job as a good citizen to help find a solution.”

Victoria crossed her arms. “I have a life in New York. An apartment. Not to mention an office at the university I’m supposed to clean out by Monday.”

Katherine plopped on the cushion beside her. “So fly home, pack enough clothes for a few months, and make quick work of cleaning out your office. After what they did to you, they can hardly expect you to mop the floors. Right?”

Victoria couldn’t argue. Ten long years of early morning classes, late-night tutoring, filling in for sick coworkers, and every thankless task no one else wanted. Her goal had been to gain the associate dean position by the time she turned forty. Now, with only two days until the second semester commenced, she’d be lucky to find a community college job.

Her brother sat on her other side and took her hand. “Look, Vic. I realize it isn’t the ideal circumstance. But this could be good for you. You’ve been working too hard. Those lines near your mouth are starting to get deeper.”

She snatched her hand away and patted her cheeks. “Thanks loads.”

Ryan poked her. “I understand your reluctance. The rural society is unfamiliar territory. It will take you a few weeks to overcome the culture shock.”

“Hey”—his wife leaned in their direction—“we speak English in Sweetheart. This isn’t a foreign country.”

He shushed her and jerked his head at Victoria.

Katherine stood with a huff. “I’ve got to change. Can’t wear my wedding dress on the plane.”

His gaze followed her with fond amusement as she left the

room. Victoria watched her once cynical brother react like a teenager in the throes of his first crush. She didn't understand Ryan's affection for the temperamental woman, but she envied the happiness he'd found. Was it just Katherine? Or was it this place?

Sweetheart.

Should she give the town a chance as he had done?

"Yes." Ryan nodded. "I think Sweetheart is worth the gamble."

He'd always been able to read her mind. She twisted her lips at him, refusing to answer.

He counted on his fingers. "Fact one, you are unemployed. Fact two, the school needs a principal. Fact three, you'd be helping out your darling baby brother."

She raised an eyebrow. "How does my moving to Podunk help you?"

"If you agree to be the interim principal, Katherine will calm down and focus on the honeymoon. If you don't, my bride will spend at least half the trip brainstorming who she can get to fill the position. Even if she's not saying it out loud, her mind is always whirring."

"And you signed up for a lifetime of that."

"It was my pleasure." He threw an arm around her shoulders. "Because when she points all that passion at me, it makes everything worth it. I hope you get the chance to experience the same joy someday."

She shook him off and stood. "No thanks. Love isn't in my five-year plan."

"Neither was being fired," Ryan said, "but here you are." He took her by both hands. "Life throws a lot of surprises at us, both good and bad. It's nicer when you have someone by your side to walk with you through the rough spots. Come on, Vic." He swung her arms back and forth. "Do it for me."

Victoria gritted her teeth. Her darling baby brother played dirty. She'd never been able to deny him anything.

She pulled her hands from his, covered her face, and groaned. "Does this mean I have to wear a cowboy hat?"