

# Vintage Sweetheart

Sweetheart Series • Book Three

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*To my church family*





## Chapter One

How could she survive the reunion without a husband?

Deanna Day's eyes crossed at the engagement ring shoved an inch from her nose. Her old classmate, Maryanne Alberta, wiggled her fingers with a squeal. Other women descended on them from every corner of the small second-grade classroom. They crowded around with the appropriate measures of *oohs* and *aahs*.

"He proposed last night." Maryanne held her hand up to the industrial, fluorescent light. "If I'm dreaming, don't wake me! We've been long-distance dating for six months, but he only moved to town three days ago." She giggled. "My man said he couldn't wait any longer."

Lily Wayne jostled Deanna with her elbow. "You should check out online dating. It worked for Maryanne."

Deanna grimaced. "I already tried it once, and it was a complete disaster. I never make the same mistake twice. Besides,"—a smile crossed her lips—"I get plenty of dates, thank you."

“Yes, but none of them last. It’s about time you tied the knot like the rest of us.”

“Just waiting for the right man.”

Maryanne pressed the hand with the ring to her cheek in a pose worthy of a profile picture. “I want you to be as happy as I am, Deanna. You can find a Prince Charming, too. Someone who’ll appreciate all the things you’ve got going for you, like your”—Maryanne tugged the fabric of Deanna’s poofy, vintage, polka-dot skirt—“unique fashion sense. And your flair for the dramatic. Stop wasting your time on those community theater shows. You’ve got to snag somebody before everything starts to sag.”

“Maybe I’ll surprise you one of these days.” Deanna paused and slipped her cell phone from the hidden pocket of her skirt. “Excuse me, y’all.” She swiped at the screen and retreated to the large window at the edge of the classroom.

Holding the phone to her ear, she pretended there was an actual voice speaking and threw an occasional “hmm” or “uh-huh” to add believability. All that time she’d spent on the Sweetheart community stage was coming in handy. Perhaps this was an opportunity to talk with someone who might actually answer.

“Dear Lord,” she muttered, “why has my life turned out this way? Why does everyone else get the engagement rings? It’s not like I haven’t tried. You’ve seen how many dates I’ve been on. But it was always the wrong man. When are You going to send the right one?”

She traded the phone for a mirror from the same pocket and perused her appearance. The old-fashioned victory rolls she’d swept her hair into were holding firm, and her smile beamed. Not a trace of pique showed on her face. Her polished outer façade hid the fact that inside, she was a shriveled raisin. Was there a prescription for unhappiness? Something to take

the edge off the bitter, uninspired succession of sameness each new day brought?

New day?

Deanna scoffed. There was nothing new in her life. She'd lived in the same small town for thirty-three years. Residing in the same house where her parents had brought her home from the hospital. Sleeping in the same daybed she'd used since she was fifteen.

The October trees outside the window burned with autumn glory. Red and orange and harvest-gold colors painted an undeniable signal that change was coming. How she envied them.

Deanna didn't want to leave Sweetheart. She loved it here. But was it too much to ask for her life to finally enter a new season? The endless mediocrity of her existence pressed in on her.

"Deanna!" Lily called from a distance. "Come and see Emmalynn's new baby pictures."

Deanna cringed. Three deep, calming breaths. Inhale through the nose. Exhale through the mouth. She could do this for a few more hours. Hours? A tiny whimper escaped her lips.

She cast a glance around the familiar classroom—another testament to how far her life hadn't come. It felt like only a few years ago that she'd been sitting in one of those second-grade desks, with her best friend, Katherine Bruno, in front of her. And far away on the front row, the boy with the bluest eyes. Evan Colter. Always turning to point those addictive azure pools her way, as if he knew she'd be watching. And she was. She'd followed him like a puppy from the day they were born. Their mothers had delivered them hours apart in the same hospital. She'd pestered him with the same words from the time she learned to talk: "*Someday you're gonna marry me.*"

She'd spoken those words on the last day she'd seen him,

before Evan and his mother had snuck out of town without telling anyone. The memory pricked her. Deanna looked out the window again, wishing once more for escape.

“Hey, Dee.” Katherine slipped alongside, smoothing her knit shirt across her baby bump. “What are you staring at?”

“The past.”

Her friend squinted at the window. “Are you speaking metaphorically? All I see is the parking lot.”

“Stop teasing. You know I always get sentimental at these events.”

“Not just events. Everything. You even cry at animal shelter commercials.”

“Hey,”—Deanna nudged her ever so gently—“those abandoned puppy stories are heartrending.”

A large white truck with shiny silver rims pulled into the school lot and drove to a space at the end of a row. The driver’s door opened, and a man in jeans and a cream sweater emerged. The soft cable-knit fabric stretched over broad shoulders.

Deanna’s interest sparked. The benefit of living in a small town like Sweetheart was recognizing all the handsome men in her age range. But this guy was a stranger. His golden-brown hair dipped onto his forehead as he bent to brush the toe of his boot. Could he be the aforementioned future husband of Maryanne Alberta? She’d hit the jackpot.

He stalled at the rear of the truck and ran a hand down his short-trimmed beard, indecision evident in his jerky movements. He turned to the cab, stopped, and rotated again. His chest rose and fell. It appeared Deanna wasn’t the only one practicing her deep breathing exercises. Maybe this man realized the endless engagement stories awaiting him inside.

“Run while you can,” she muttered.

“Who’s that?” Katherine asked.

“I don’t know. But there’s something familiar about him.”

The stranger started toward the building again. As he passed the window, his gaze met Deanna’s. Her heart stuttered under her rib cage. She knew those eyes.

Azure blue.

“It can’t be,” she whispered.

“What?” Katherine leaned closer to the window.

The man halted. His posture tightened, and he spun on his heel, then headed back toward his truck.

“Wait!” Deanna hollered as if he could hear her through the glass. She bolted from the room, bumping into classmates in her haste. Racing through the hallway, she exited the main glass double doors and careened down the sidewalk.

*Clip-clop. Clip-clop.*

Why had she worn ankle-strap high heels? They were hindering her progress, but she couldn’t kick them off.

He was at his truck, his key in the lock. The door opened, and he placed one foot on the running board.

“Evan Colter!” she shouted.

He paused. Turned.

Deanna clip-clopped across the parking lot as fast as her ungainly shoes would allow. Stopping in front of him, she pressed trembling fingers to her chest and gasped for air.

Did he even recognize her? It had been twenty years since they’d seen each other. But what did it matter? He was here.

“Evan Colter,” she whispered. Joy shot up inside of her like an elementary school water fountain. Deanna threw her arms around his waist and clung tight. “Welcome home.”