



Chapter Three

Evan stood off to the left of the punch bowl, an empty cup in his hand, and Deanna at his side. After her enthusiastic announcement to the entire room of his return, folks headed over to greet him in an awkward trickle. The response was tepid at best. Mrs. Beauregard hugged him and reminisced about how he was the best student she'd ever had. But a lot of people uttered a few polite commonalities and scurried away.

His old classmate Katie Bruno approached with a man he didn't recognize. She extended her hand. "Long time no see, Evan. I imagine it was hard for you to come back, but I'm glad you did."

The man beside her and Deanna groaned in unison. "Katherine."

Evan paused a second but then shook the brunette's hand and chuckled. "You haven't changed much, Katie. Still as blunt as ever."

"I apologize for my wife." Katie's companion placed his arm around her. "I think this second pregnancy has amplified her, shall we say, tendency to speak the truth."

“The truth is,” she jumped in, “I go by Katherine now. Katherine Park. This is my husband, Ryan.”

“Nice to meet you.” Evan shook the stranger’s hand. “How did you two get together?”

Deanna laughed. “They were mortal enemies in opposing mayoral campaigns. Lanette Johnson decided to run against her husband for the office, and these two were their managers. Now look at them. A baby at home and another on the way.”

“No kidding.” It sounded like Evan had missed a lot in the years he’d been gone. He’d known Harry Johnson became the mayor after Evan’s father went to prison, but somehow, the idea that abrasive Lanette had run against her own husband didn’t surprise him. “Who won?”

Deanna leaned close with a stage whisper. “Katherine won.”

“What?”

“She received the most votes as a write-in candidate and has been the mayor for over two years now. Do you remember the old Sweetheart Memorial Bank? She spearheaded the efforts to convert it into a new town hall. You have to check out what they’ve done with the place. It’s beautiful.”

Evan feigned interest in the details while his stomach churned like a fan belt on an old clunker. The mayoral twist of the conversation was dangerous. That was the position his father had held. The one his father took advantage of. Was the same thought running through all of their minds?

After a few minutes, the couple bid goodbye and walked away. Deanna refilled her cup at the punch bowl, and Evan cast a surreptitious glance around the room. A few people stared at him as they whispered. He could just imagine what they were saying.

Evan Colter. I remember him. Didn't his daddy rob the town blind?

You know the old saying—like father, like son.

Bless his heart. How did he have the nerve to show up here?

Deanna slipped in front of him, blocking out the rest of the room with her smile. “Have I mentioned how thrilled I am to see you? I may do a little happy dance.” She twirled in one spot. The old-fashioned dress she wore swirled to reveal a crinkly pink slip underneath.

Her unabashed enthusiasm was infectious. It quieted his stomach and allowed an answering grin to creep across his face. “Only about twenty times.”

“That’s it?” She tsk-tsked. “Expect to hear it at least twenty more before we leave.”

Evan laughed. “You always were the kind who made her point.”

“I promise you, I haven’t changed a bit.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” a male voice drawled.

The pair turned to find a lanky cowboy behind them. He wore a black Stetson, a long-sleeved pearl snap shirt tucked into a pair of crisp blue jeans, and a large, silver belt buckle with an engraving of a bucking bronco. He looked like he’d ambled out of a cheap late-night television western.

“Boone!” Deanna grabbed him by the arm and drew him closer. “You remember Evan. We attended school together.”

“Evan Colter.” The tall man stuck his thumbs behind his buckle and peered down his nose. “How could I forget?”

Evan didn’t relish having to stare up, but Boone topped him by a good four or five inches. It was probably the cowboy boots. Was he imagining the antagonism in the other man’s glare?

Evan held out a hand. “Good to see you again.”

Boone made no move to shake it. “Been a long time, Colter. What you been up to?”

He lowered his hand. “This and that. I live in Dallas now.”

“Good.”

“Boone, behave yourself,” Deanna hissed. “Evan isn’t familiar with your sense of humor. He might take it the wrong way.”

The man’s cheeks reddened, and he tugged at his hat. “Pardon me, Evan. Hope you enjoy your visit. How long are you plannin’ to stay?”

Something about the question goaded him. Or was it the eager tone Boone used when he referred to Evan’s departure? Either way, it brought out Evan’s ornery side.

“I’m not sure. It’s been a long time since I’ve been home.”

“Too long.” Deanna’s head bobbed like a fishing lure. “You should stick around awhile. A long while.”

Boone harumphed. Angling his body Deanna’s direction, a bright smile appeared on his face. “Are we still on for dinner Friday night?”

She quirked an eyebrow. “Only if you promise not to propose again.”

“Again?” Evan asked.

“You know what they say.” Boone hooked his thumbs in the waist of his jeans. “Third time’s a charm.”

“Not in my case.” Deanna poked Evan with a conspiratorial elbow. “How many times did I ask you to marry me? Fifty? A hundred?”

Evan rubbed his bearded chin as if it were hard to calculate. “Considering you used to end all your dinner prayers with ‘and please let me marry Evan when I grow up,’ I imagine it was more than a hundred.”

“My bedtime prayers, too. The Good Lord took pity on me and decided to fulfill my childhood dream.” She slipped her arm back around his. “To walk down the aisle with Evan Colter.”

“Wh—I—” Boone sputtered.

Evan cast an exasperated look Deanna's way. The answering twinkle in her eye told him she was enjoying the ticklish situation she'd orchestrated.

"Deanna Day!" A sharp voice exclaimed. An older woman with unnaturally red hair bustled up behind them. "Don't tell me you're finally getting married!"

Deanna whirled so fast the punch sloshed out of her cup and landed on her skirt. "Oh no," she wailed.

Evan crumpled his empty cup. The brazen interrupter made his bones freeze. He may have forgotten a lot of people, but he still remembered this woman. Even twenty years ago, Mrs. Biddle was the biggest gossip in town.