



Chapter Two

Evan's arms remained trapped under the embrace of the petite blonde who'd chased him down in the parking lot. He didn't have to ask who she was. He knew.

Deanna Day.

They'd grown up together. She'd followed him around since they were old enough to walk. And from the time she could form sentences, she'd declared to anyone who would listen that she was going to marry him someday.

The fact that she was the first person to greet him seemed almost ordained. He'd expected to see her, but he hadn't expected her to practically tackle him to the pavement.

The last time they'd met, she was thirteen years old. Deanna hadn't grown too much since then. Her short arms didn't quite reach all the way around him. A patch of moisture seeped through the material of his sweater. He ducked his head to get a closer look.

Yep. Tears soaked her cheeks. She was still a softy. He might have hugged her if she hadn't been holding him so tight.

"Hello, Dee."

She sniffled and held him tighter, if that was even possible. “Evan Colter, I’ve missed you like crazy.”

He hadn’t cried since he was sixteen years old. But Evan found himself swallowing a knot in his throat. Could it really be this easy?

On a whim, he’d searched for the town’s newspaper on the internet. To his surprise, *The Sweetheart Clarion* had an online version, and the lead story told about the retirement of the local, longtime second-grade teacher, Mrs. Clara Beauregard. The school was throwing a party-slash-reunion in her honor and had invited all the students she’d taught through the years. He’d agonized for weeks about whether or not to attend. Mrs. Beauregard had always been one of his favorite teachers. And it was a great excuse to visit his old hometown. But a part of him had quaked at the thought.

Would people dredge up the past and his father’s misdeeds? Would they tell Evan he wasn’t welcome in this town anymore? Would they throw him out?

If Deanna’s reaction was any indication, he’d worried for nothing. Why hadn’t he returned sooner?

Evan squirmed his arms free from Deanna’s death grip, took her by the shoulders, and gently pushed her away a few inches. “Hey, you’re getting my best sweater wet.”

She sniffled and stared at him with watery eyes. “I can’t help it. I’ve prayed for years that you’d come home, and here you are—in the living, breathing flesh.” She released him and smacked his chest hard. “What took you so long?”

“Sorry.” He rubbed the stinging spot. “I didn’t have the guts to come back.”

She didn’t ask him what he meant. It must have been obvious. The gloomy specter of his scandalous past followed him.

Deanna pulled him toward the school. “Let’s go inside and tell everyone the good news.”

He skidded to a halt. “What good news?” His arm stretched between them as she continued to pull.

“That it’s time to kill the fatted calf. The prodigal has come home!”

Prodigal? A fitting moniker for his world-weary soul. But he wasn’t so sure the good citizens of Sweetheart would throw him a party when he walked through the door.