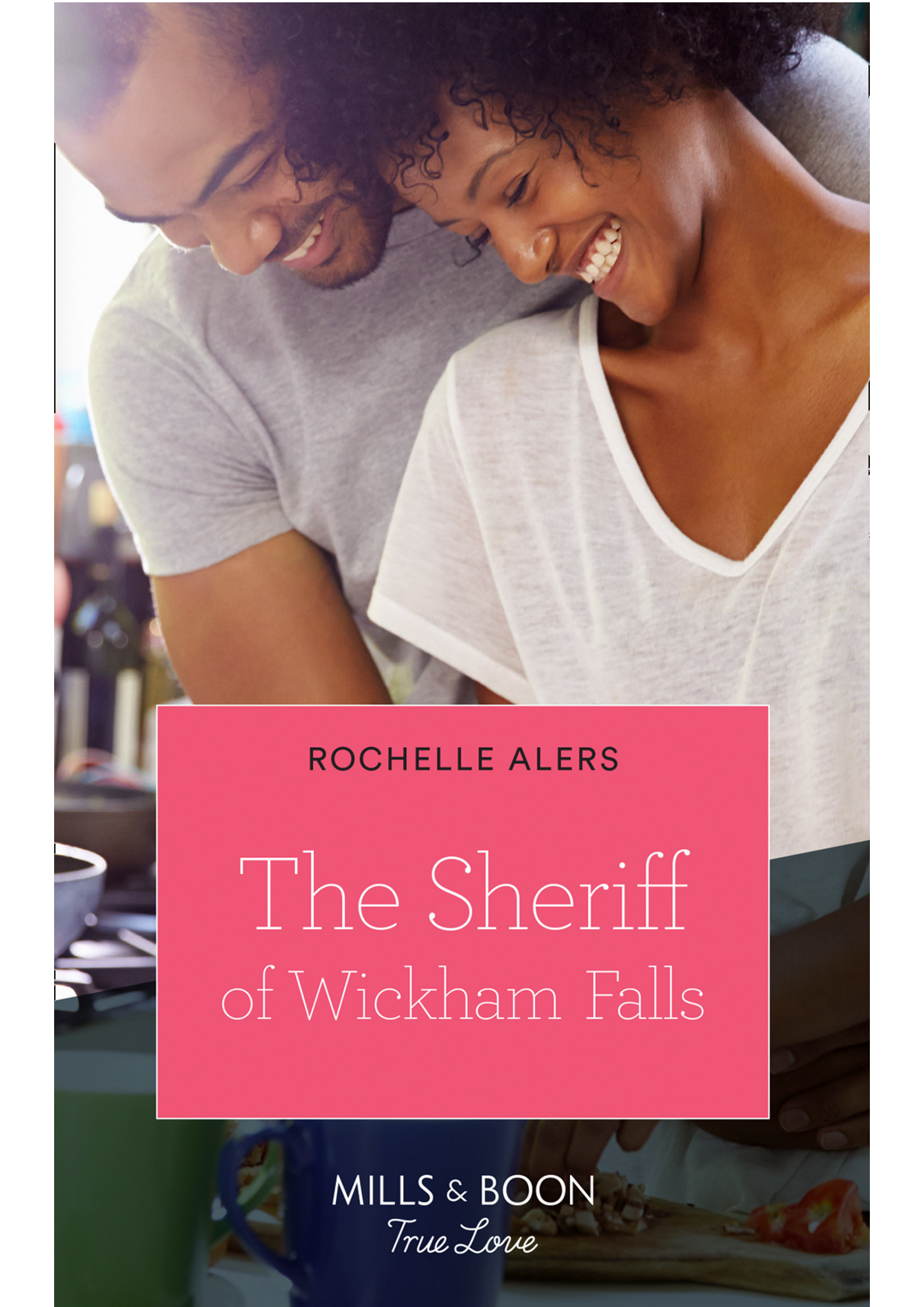


A photograph of a man and a woman smiling and looking down at something they are holding together. The man is on the left, wearing a grey t-shirt, and the woman is on the right, wearing a white t-shirt. They appear to be in a kitchen, with a stove and various kitchen items visible in the background. The image is used as a background for the book cover.

ROCHELLE ALERS

The Sheriff
of Wickham Falls

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Rochelle Alers

The Sheriff Of Wickham Falls

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Sometimes love is right next door Deputy Sheriff Seth Collier is content to serve and protect the citizens of Wickham Falls...until the sexy ex-marine meets his new next door neighbour. Dr Natalia Hawkins left the big-city for a small town practice. And while Seth is everything her nasty ex wasn't...Natalia's head says leave him in the friend zone. But her heart says this may be a second chance at love...

You can search the world over...

But sometimes love is right next door.

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Since 1988, national bestselling author **ROCHELLE ALERS** has written more than eighty books and short stories. She has earned numerous honors, including the Zora Neale Hurston Award, the Vivian Stephens Award for Excellence in Romance Writing and a Career Achievement Award from *RT Book Reviews*. She is a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., Iota Theta Zeta Chapter. A full-time writer, she lives in a charming hamlet on Long Island. Rochelle can be contacted through her website, www.rochellealers.org.

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Rochelle Alers

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THE SHERIFF OF WICKHAM FALLS

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The Sheriff of Wickham Falls is dedicated to
my three brothers and late father—
all of whom honorably served in the US military.

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[Chapter One](#)

Tap! Tap! Tap!

Natalia Hawkins opened one eye and then the other, and stared up at the ceiling in her bedroom; staccato tapping had jolted her out of her much-needed sleep, and she wasn't ready to accept that she'd moved into a house with a woodpecker living in a tree on the property.

Tap! Tap! Tap! Tap!

There it was again. After sitting up and sweeping off the sheet and lightweight blanket, Natalia swung her legs over the side of the bed. As soon as her bare feet touched the floor, she knew she would be up for the day. As a former ER doctor working in an overcrowded, understaffed Philadelphia municipal hospital, she was used to performing her duties on limited amounts of sleep.

She had believed Wickham Falls, a remote town in the Appalachian Mountains boasting a population of less than five thousand residents, was a place where she would no longer be jolted awake by honking horns from bumper-to-bumper rush hour traffic, the wailing of emergency vehicles' sirens or her name coming through the hospital's loudspeakers. She had left the noise of a large metropolitan city behind to get a peaceful night's sleep, only to be awakened by an annoying bird.

Natalia opened the blinds and bright early morning sunlight flooded the space. Her gaze lingered on boxes lined up against a wall that were filled with linens, blankets, clothes and shoes. There also were boxes in the smaller bedroom, the kitchen, bathroom, and living and dining rooms. It had taken less than six weeks for her to box up her life to leave behind all that was familiar to move

and become a small-town family doctor—something she had always wanted, even before graduating medical school.

Slipping her feet into a pair of fluffy yellow SpongeBob slippers that were a Christmas gift from her eight-year-old niece, she walked out of the bedroom and into the bathroom. Although the compact one-story house was larger than her condo in the luxurious high-rise building in Philadelphia, it did not have the open floor plan or panoramic views to which Natalia had become accustomed. That no longer mattered because as soon as she opened the door to walk into the house, it became her sanctuary. She did not have to gird herself for a confrontation with her fiancé who had managed to find fault in everything. After a while, Natalia preferred sleeping at the hospital rather than come home to a hostile environment that had become even worse instead of getting better. And thanks to his duplicity, Daryl made it very easy for Natalia to make a clean break with her place of birth to follow and fulfill her dream to live and work in a small town.

She brushed her teeth and then washed her face as she stared at her reflection in the oval mirror over the pedestal sink. Even though she didn't look any different than she had in years, Natalia knew she wasn't the same woman who'd gotten her wish to become a doctor, and fall in love with a man she had thought of as perfect. She was still dedicated to her profession; however, her personal life had been filled with angst and turmoil. Her fiancé abruptly moved out of the condo four months ago, taking her engagement ring and the dog he'd given her as a gift for her birthday.

Natalia wasn't as upset about losing her ring as she had been about Daryl Owens taking Oreo, the dark-brown-and-white toy poodle that had been her constant companion. She'd promptly contacted the building's management to change the locks on the unit because she didn't want Daryl to return and renew what had become a toxic relationship where despite living under the same roof, they argued constantly and hadn't made love in months. The first night Natalia went to bed and woke up alone signaled a new beginning for her. And it took only a few days to realize she had been reborn and she didn't have to monitor every word or action because Daryl would invariably challenge and ridicule her.

Walking out of the bathroom, Natalia returned to the bedroom to make the bed. Normally she would head for the kitchen to brew a cup of coffee but that would have to be put off until she unpacked the coffee maker. She'd carefully planned her day to go into town for breakfast, and then stop at the hardware store to pick up paint, brushes and rollers to paint the kitchen. Shopping for groceries to stock the refrigerator and pantry was next on her to-do list, followed by unpacking as many boxes as she could to make her new home appear lived-in.

She fluffed up her pillows and positioned them against the wrought iron headboard, and had just opened the windows to let in fresh air when she heard a string of explosive expletives. Peering out the window, she saw a man holding his hand as he continued to spew curses, this time under his breath.

Instinct galvanized her into action as Natalia raced to the front door to see if the man had been seriously injured. She met a pair of light brown eyes in a face the color of golden-brown autumn leaves. He was tall, at least six inches above her five-five height, and powerfully built as evidenced by the white T-shirt stretched over a muscled chest and broad shoulders.

"Please, let me see your hand."

* * *

Seth Collier stared at the woman who seemingly had appeared out of nowhere. The pain in his left thumb intensified, throbbing as if it had its own heartbeat. "Who are you?" he asked her.

"I'm a doctor, and it appears as if you've injured your hand."

"You don't say," Seth drawled sarcastically. He'd accidentally hit his thumb with the hammer when attempting to drive the last nail into the post for the birdhouse, fearing he had broken it. His gaze went from the face of the slightly built woman with a short natural hairstyle and a flawless complexion that looked like chocolate mousse to her chest. He had an unobstructed view of firm breasts in a floral tank top she had paired with red cotton lounging pajama pants. He averted his eyes before she caught him ogling her like a voyeur.

“Do you want me to look at your hand? There is a possibility that you have broken a bone.”

Seth extended his hand at the same time he bit down on his lower lip; the pain had intensified. He couldn't remember the last time he'd injured himself while wielding a hammer. His general contractor father had taught him everything he needed to know about handling tools, but it was apparent he had temporarily forgotten the very important safety precautions. Seth blamed the accident on inattentiveness rather than fatigue. He'd left Savannah, Georgia, before midnight after spending a week with his mother and sisters, to drive back to Wickham Falls to arrive home at dawn. As soon as he pulled into his driveway, he saw the white BMW SUV parked next to the house that had been vacant for a year. His neighbor, who had planned to rent his house because he was out of the country, had asked him to watch his property. Not only was Seth surprised that someone had moved in, but as one of Wickham Falls' deputy sheriffs, there was very little that went on in the town that he wasn't aware of.

The second thing he noticed was the birdhouse he had put up once he'd moved back to The Falls was down again. Seth knew the boys who lived in the house on the street behind his tended to jump the fence rather than walk around the block, and in doing so knocked over the birdhouse. He had held off talking to their grandparents, who had taken in the boys while their parents were going through a contentious divorce, but now he knew he had to warn them about trespassing and vandalizing his property.

“Does that hurt?”

“No,” he said, as the doctor massaged his fingers. It wasn't his hand but his thumb he'd injured, and thankfully he was right-handed or he wouldn't be able to perform his duties. Seth had another two days before he was scheduled to return to work.

“Try opening and closing your hand,” she said in a quiet voice. Seth complied. “Lucky for you, you haven't broken any bones. I'm going to spray your thumb with a solution that will temporarily numb the pain. You hit your thumb rather hard, so you're going to experience some swelling. I recommend you apply ice several times a day to keep that down. Don't move. I'll be right back with the spray.”

Despite the discomfort in his thumb, Seth found that he couldn't pull his gaze away from the sensual sway of her hips in the cotton pajama pants. He walked over to where she had parked her vehicle. The parking sticker from a Philadelphia medical center attached to the windshield with a caduceus verified she probably worked at a hospital. A hint of a smile touched the corners of his mouth. In that instant, having a medical professional as a neighbor was very convenient, otherwise he would have to wait for Dr. Henry Franklin to open his office or drive six miles to the county hospital.

The pretty physician returned, this time wearing an oversize T-shirt with a faded University of Pennsylvania logo. So, he mused, she was an Ivy Leaguer, blessed with both beauty and brains. Seth hoped she hadn't noticed him staring at her breasts. He did not want her to believe she had moved next door to a pervert.

She sprayed his hand with an icy liquid, which miraculously alleviated the pain. “Now don't forget to ice it.”

Seth flexed his thumb. Smiling, he said, “How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing, unless you wake me up again before seven in the morning with that annoying hammering.”

Seth managed to look contrite. “I'm sorry about that. The kids who live on Woodfield Road hopped my fence and knocked over the birdhouse. I was attempting to repair it.”

“You could've waited until later in the day to repair it,” she admonished in a quiet voice.

He stared at her back as she turned and walked away. “What's your name, miss?” he called out. She stopped, but did not turn around. “Dr. Hawkins.”

“Thank you, Dr. Hawkins.” When she didn't acknowledge his offer of gratitude as she entered her house, he muttered “you're welcome” under his breath.

Things usually moved at a snail's pace in The Falls, but it was apparent it had only taken less than two weeks for him to get a new neighbor. And when Natalia identified herself as a doctor, Seth wondered if she was going to take over Dr. Franklin's practice or join the staff at the county hospital.

After walking back to his driveway, he picked up the birdhouse and rested it against the side of the house. He wanted to delay putting it up again until he spoke to the grandparents of the teenage boys who used his backyard as a shortcut. Recalling Dr. Hawkins's recommendation that he apply ice to his thumb, Seth opened the side door and went inside to follow her instructions.

* * *

Natalia parked the SUV in front of the hardware store. Downtown Wickham Falls reminded her of many of the bucolic East coast towns that were settled when the States were still British colonies. Vehicles were parked diagonally to maximize space along the four-block-long business district. Both sides of the three blocks were lined with mom-and-pop shops, a local bank, a supermarket, the post office, the fire department and government buildings that included the town hall, courthouse, sheriff's department and jail. Dr. Franklin's medical office was a one-story building flanked by a law office and a barbershop.

During her first trip to Wickham Falls in early March when she interviewed with Dr. Franklin, she had noticed there were no chain drugstores, big-box warehouses or fast-food restaurants. Not having easy access to delicatessens or coffee shops had her second-guessing whether she wanted to relocate to a town where she would have to get into her car and drive miles to find the nearest strip mall. It was only after contacting a local realtor and touring the town that Natalia was able to appreciate its quaint charm. It no longer mattered that railroad tracks dissected Main Street, or that there were only two stoplights: one in front of the fire department, and another near the school campus.

The woman had shown her two vacant homes that were up for sale, but Natalia knew she wasn't ready to purchase a house, and then she asked if there were any that she could rent perhaps with the option to buy after a year. And within minutes of walking into the one-story, refurbished, furnished home with stark-white walls and updated appliances, she knew it would suit her needs. The owner had secured a two-year post teaching English at a Japanese university and had decided to rent the house in lieu of selling it. He'd been gone a year, which now allowed Natalia the next twelve months to decide on a permanent residence.

It was nine o'clock and the business district was waking up. Shopkeepers were sweeping and then hosing down sidewalks in front of their businesses. Natalia realized it would take her a while to get used to a lifestyle that seemed to move much slower than she was used to. She'd had to drive to a restaurant off the interstate for breakfast, because Ruthie's, the local eating establishment, did not open to the public until eleven.

She walked into Grand Hardware and saw a man who looked like a department store Santa Claus without the red suit. His bright blue eyes sparkled like polished blue topaz when he smiled.

"Good morning, ma'am. How can I help you this morning?"

Natalia returned his friendly smile with one of her own. "I need two gallons of high-quality latex, semigloss paint, several brushes and some rollers with extension poles, a pan and liners, tape and drop cloths."

The rotund middle-aged man with snow-white hair and a matching mustache and beard patted his belly over a bibbed apron. "What color are you looking for?"

The kitchen was a stark-white, a shade she found much too sterile. "Let me see your paint samples." It took her less than five minutes to select a color labeled Harbor Mist. It was a pale blue-gray, a shade that would complement the stainless-steel appliances and bleached pine cabinetry. "Do have paint that can cover stains?"

"That means you need one with a primer. It will eliminate you applying more than one coat."

Forty minutes after walking into the hardware store, Natalia had selected everything she needed to give the kitchen a new coat of paint, while Johnnie Lee Grand talked nonstop about the preparations for the town's upcoming Memorial Day parade until he left her to wait on another customer.

She loaded her purchases in the cargo area of her SUV, and then drove down the street to the supermarket. An hour later, the shopping cart was nearly overflowing with items to stock the pantry and the refrigerator-freezer. Natalia generously tipped the young man who bagged and stacked the bags neatly in her vehicle. She was more than impressed with the selection of fresh meat and poultry in the butcher department. She could not remember the last time she would have structured her work hours where she would be able to come home and prepare dinner for herself. Natalia rarely ate fast food, and the hospital's cafeteria menu, although deemed nutritious, rarely varied from day to day.

The downtown area was bustling with activity when she left the supermarket and headed back to the house. It was May 1, and while winter was just loosening its brutal grip on Philadelphia, spring was in full bloom in southeastern West Virginia. The daytime temperature was in the low seventies, trees had put forth their leaves as did flowering plants their colorful yield. The cacophony of bird chatter as they flitted from branch to branch had become music to Natalia's ears.

I think I'm really going to like living in Wickham Falls, she mused as she maneuvered into the driveway to the house on Stewart Avenue. Most of the homes along the street sat on one-square-acre parcels that were larger than those in other areas of the town. And of all of the houses on the avenue, the one she occupied was the smallest.

She'd just exited the SUV when she saw her neighbor sitting on his porch. "How's the thumb?"

He rose and leaned over the porch railing. "It's still swollen, so I'm taking your advice and icing it."

Natalia smiled. "That's good."

"Do you need help unloading your car?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you."

"I think you do," he countered when she set several bags on the ground.

"I'm really good here." Her protestations were ignored when he came down off the porch and stood next to her.

"Why don't you go and open the door and I'll bring everything in?"

Natalia tilted her head and stared up at the man with balanced features and large golden-brown laughing eyes. Stubble on his strong, square jaw enhanced his overt virility. She had viewed more naked men than she could count since entering medical school, yet there was something about her neighbor's physique that reminded her of the perfection of the male human body. And it was obvious he worked out because she couldn't detect an ounce of fat on his torso under the white T-shirt.

"It's all right, Mr.—"

"Collier," he said, interrupting her. "The name is Seth Collier. And yours? Because as neighbors I shouldn't have to refer to you as Dr. Hawkins."

"It's Natalia. I can take the bags. I don't want you to reinjure your thumb."

Seth smiled, exhibiting perfectly aligned white teeth. "And if I do, then you can tend to me again."

Natalia returned his smile. "If I treat you again, then I'll have to send you a bill."

"That's okay because I do have medical insurance. Now, please go and unlock your door so I can bring in your groceries." He peered in one of the bags. "You need to put your perishables in the fridge before they go bad."

"Okay."

She walked up the porch to her house and unlocked the screen door, and then the inner door. Seth had brought in four bags, setting them on the floor in the living room, when she walked past him to bring in more.

“What are you painting?” he asked when he placed the paint cans next to the bag with the brushes and rollers.

“The kitchen.”

Seth crossed muscular arms over his chest. “Who’s going to do the painting?”

“I am.” Natalia picked up the bags with the dairy products and headed for the kitchen.

Seth followed, carrying two bags in each hand. “That’s not a small job.”

She smiled at him over her shoulder. “I know. It should take me a couple of days before I finish. I didn’t have to buy a ladder because I found one in the utility closet near the back door.”

“You could finish a lot sooner if I help you.”

Natalia gave Seth a lingering stare. She did not find him off-putting or even threatening, but she wasn’t used to strangers offering their services within hours of her meeting them. “Don’t you have a job, Mr. Collier?”

“It’s Seth, and yes, I have a job. Right now I’m on vacation, so I’m trying to be neighborly and also appreciative for you treating my hand. If you hadn’t, then I would’ve had to wait for Dr. Franklin to open his office before he could see me, or drive six miles to the county hospital and spend half the morning in the ER. You’re new to The Falls, and I want to let you know that folks here always help out their neighbors.”

She nodded. “You’re right. I am new here, so it’s going to take a while before I get used to your way of doing things. And how can I repay you if I allow you to help me?”

A hint of a smile tilted the corners of Seth’s firm mouth. “I’d like a home-cooked meal.”

A laugh slipped through Natalia’s parted lips. “You want me to cook for you?” Seth nodded. “How do you know if I can put together a palatable meal?”

His eyebrows lifted a fraction. “You didn’t buy all of this fresh food just to look at it. Otherwise you would’ve selected prepackaged meals.”

“What about your wife or your girlfriend, Seth? Do they cook for you?”

“No, because I don’t have a wife or a girlfriend. My cooking skills are passable, and when I don’t cook for myself, then I’ll occasionally eat at Ruthie’s or the Wolf Den. I’m certain you passed Ruthie’s on your way to the supermarket, while the Wolf Den is a sports bar located between here and Mineral Springs.”

Natalia began emptying the bag with milk, butter, eggs, yogurt and cheese. She could not begin to imagine why a man who looked like Seth wasn’t married or involved with a woman.

“What exactly do you do when you’re not on vacation?”

“I’m a deputy.”

She blinked slowly. “You’re a US deputy marshal?”

“No. I’m Wickham Falls’ deputy sheriff. And what brings you to The Falls?”

Natalia opened the French door refrigerator and then moved several open boxes of baking soda to the back before she stored the perishables on shelves and in drawers. “I’m here to assist Dr. Franklin.”

Seth applauded. “Well, it’s about time he hired someone to help him out. Folks have been known to spend hours in his office waiting for him to see them just for a follow-up visit.”

“That’s because he’s very thorough,” Natalia said in defense of her new boss. She’d watched him examine one of his patients who had come in complaining of back pain.

“Thorough and very, very slow,” Seth countered. “When do you want to start painting?” he asked.

“Today,” she confirmed.

“If we work together I’m certain we can finish today.”

Natalia wanted to tell Seth that she still had to unpack boxes, but didn’t want to appear ungrateful. “If I’m going to spend the entire afternoon painting, then I can’t cook for you.”

“That’s not a problem. I’ll take you to the Wolf Den tonight and you can cook for me tomorrow.”

Natalia did not want to believe her neighbor had mentioned taking her out to eat as if it was something they'd done before. And she hoped he didn't think of it as a date, because she wasn't ready to date any man, even one as attractive as her next-door neighbor. "You're really on this kick for me to cook for you."

"I told you it's been a while since I've had a decent home-cooked meal."

Despite his obvious arrogance, Natalia did not want to believe she had hit the jackpot when it came to a neighbor. Not only was he tall, dark and deliciously handsome, but he was also willing to donate his time to help her paint. "Do you usually moonlight as a painter in your spare time?"

Throwing back his head, Seth laughed loudly. "Not quite. My dad was a local handyman." He held up his left hand when Natalia opened her mouth. "Don't say it," he warned softly.

"Don't say what?" she said as she struggled not to smile.

"You were going to mention my hitting my hand instead of the nail."

"That's called an accident," she said, rather than tease him about his mishap with the hammer. "Give me about twenty minutes to put everything away and for me to change my clothes, and then we can begin painting. I'll leave the door unlocked for you."

Her eyes met Seth's. The magnetism coming off him in waves held her captive until Natalia dropped her gaze. She could feel pinpoints of heat stinging her face and she was grateful for her darker complexion to conceal what would've been an obvious blush. And she also prayed he hadn't caught her staring at him like a starstruck groupie coming face-to-face with her idol.

Seth gave her a mock salute. "I'll see you later."

Natalia exhaled an audible breath of relief when Seth walked out of the kitchen. She had relocated to Wickham Falls to become a small-town doctor, and had no intention of falling under the spell of her sexy neighbor.

Chapter Two

Seth wasn't certain why he had volunteered to help Natalia paint the kitchen because he knew her treating his hand had little to do with it. However, he did appreciate her concern, which told him she hadn't hesitated when she believed he'd seriously injured himself. And he had been truthful when he told her that folks living in Wickham Falls looked out for one another.

He'd spent the first eighteen years of his life in The Falls and the next eighteen serving his country as a marine. Now, at thirty-eight, he was back to stay. Unlike some kids who couldn't wait to grow up to leave, it had been different with Seth. Perhaps it had something to do with reconnecting with his parents and sisters, because each time he was granted leave it was to come back to his hometown.

He walked into his house and descended the staircase to the basement. In the two years since his honorable discharge, Seth spent most of his spare time working on the house where he had grown up. He had updated the kitchen and finished the basement. He'd also had a company put on a new roof and replace worn shingles with vinyl siding.

Seth knew he had disappointed his late father when after graduating high school he refused to join Adam Collier's general contracting business. But, the elder Collier understood his son's wish to embark on a military career because of the stories he'd told Seth about serving in Vietnam, as well as Seth's grandfather fighting in Korea.

Seth opened the door to a storeroom and selected an extension pole for a paint roller, a pan and several pan liners, a pair of safety glasses and a package of respirators to prevent the inhaling of paint fumes. He checked the shelves and made a mental note to restock several items the next time he went to Grand Hardware. Like most residents in The Falls, Seth made a concerted effort to shop locally, although he could save a lot more money by shopping in the stores off the interstate.

Ten years ago, members on the town council embarked on a shop locally campaign to sustain the viability of the independent stores in the business district. Every couple of years, they voted

down proposals to allow national chains or franchises in Wickham Falls, much to the delight of local business owners.

Gathering what he needed for the painting project, Seth returned to the first story. The throbbing in his left thumb was an indication he had to ice it again. He retrieved an ice pack from the freezer and placed it over his hand. He'd hoped the swelling would disappear before he was scheduled to return to work. The sheriff, an ex-marine drill sergeant, who was noticeably out of shape himself, expected all of his deputies to be physically and mentally fit to perform their duties.

After icing his thumb, Seth exchanged his jeans and T-shirt for a pair of painter bib overalls, a long-sleeved cotton polo and paint-spattered running shoes, then covered his head with a tattered baseball cap. He felt as comfortable in what he deemed work clothes as he had in his military police and deputy sheriff uniform.

* * *

Natalia had emptied the bags and stored her groceries in the refrigerator-freezer, on shelves in the miniscule pantry, and had changed out of her blouse and jeans and into a pair of shorts she should've discarded last summer and an oversize white T-shirt. A pair of flip-flops had replaced the ballet flats. She debated whether to cover her short hair with a hat or a bandanna, and then decided on the latter.

Affecting a short, natural wash-and-go hairstyle had been advantageous when working double, and on occasion triple, shifts at the hospital. Then she would shower in the doctors' lounge, grab at least four hours of sleep, then go back on duty. She had been so sleep-deprived, Natalia knew she would never catch up on the hours she'd lost. She was looking forward to assisting Dr. Franklin, because not only would it be a different environment but she would be able to develop a relationship with her patients.

Natalia left the bedroom and walked into the kitchen, smiling when she saw Seth standing on the ladder and putting blue tape around the windows, cabinets and along the ceiling. He'd removed the stools at the breakfast island and covered the countertops and the round oaken table and four chairs in the eat-in kitchen with drop cloths. The radio positioned under a row of overhead cabinets was tuned to a station playing soft jazz.

"I didn't hear you come in," she said. Seth had entered the house so quietly that Natalia hadn't detected his presence.

Seth glanced at her over his shoulder. "That's a warning that you should keep at least one of the doors locked whenever you're home alone, because you don't want someone to walk in on you. Nowadays you have to take every precaution to protect yourself."

"Wickham Falls is so small that I thought there wouldn't be a lot of crime here."

He climbed down off of the ladder. "We don't have much when compared to larger towns or cities but there is crime here."

"What about opiates?" Natalia asked.

Turning slowly, he gave her a direct stare. "Did Dr. Franklin tell you about our drug problem?"

Natalia shook her head. "He didn't have to. It's become an epidemic that's affecting large and small cities and towns throughout the country. Even the so-called affluent neighborhoods aren't exempt."

"Amen," Seth confirmed under his breath. He opened a gallon of paint, attached the pour spout and slowly drizzled paint from the can into the pan with a liner, then repeated the action with the second one. "I brought over an extra pan for the paint, so we can both use rollers."

Natalia glanced around the kitchen. "How long do you think it's going to take us to finish painting this?"

"Probably about two to three hours."

"What I don't understand is the walls in the other rooms are spotless, while the kitchen is a mess."

The house's pristine condition and updated appliances, along with a washer and dryer in the unfinished basement, were the reasons Natalia had decided to rent it. When she'd questioned the realtor why the home had remained vacant for a year, the woman said interested tenants complained that the rent, which included a two-month security fee, was out of their price range, but for Natalia it was less than what she'd once paid for her mortgage and maintenance on her condo.

"I'm willing to bet that Chandler's nephews are the culprits," Seth said.

"Mrs. Riley at the realty company told me that my absentee landlord is a confirmed bachelor and lived alone."

"He is and does, but every once in a while, his sister would drop off her twin boys and that's when chaos erupted. Chandler and his sister were raised by a single mother. They were never allowed to have friends over because Mrs. Evans said she didn't want them tracking dirt inside. Chandler is also a neat freak, but he's also a very indulgent uncle when it comes to his nephews."

Although she was curious to know more about her landlord *and* her neighbor, Natalia decided not to question Seth further because she wanted them to finish their painting project. Picking up a disposable respirator, she put it on and then protected her hands with a pair of rubber gloves.

* * *

Natalia stood next to Seth admiring their handiwork. They'd completed painting the kitchen in less than two hours. The bluish-gray color was the perfect complement for the stainless-steel appliances. "You did a very nice job, Seth."

Attractive lines fanned out around his eyes when he smiled. "So did you," he countered. "And I'm willing to bet that this isn't your first painting project."

Folding her arms under her breasts, Natalia nodded. "The year I turned thirteen, I asked my mother if I could paint my bedroom and she said okay as long as it wasn't black. One year it was fluorescent pink, and another year it was lavender. I was in the pink and purple phase for a while until I left for college. It was only after I graduated medical school that Mom told me since I was a doctor, I'd forfeited the room and she was going to paint it with a color of her choice. My mother liked oyster-white walls, which I've always found much too sterile. Although Mom tells everyone she's a very modern woman in reality, she's very conservative."

"There's something to be said for conservatism."

Natalia glanced up at Seth. "You're a conservative?"

He angled his head. "I'm more of a traditionalist middle-of-the-road guy."

"Is that another way of saying you're old-school?"

"Not as much old-school as I am a conventional person. Give me the rules and tell me the law and I will follow them without question."

"So, if you were to stop me for speeding, I'd never be able to talk you out of giving me a citation even if I told you I was going to a medical emergency."

"That would be the exception because if it's a 911 call, I'd escort you to see your patient."

Natalia knew without question that Seth was inflexible when it came to bending the rules, and she wondered if it was the reason why he wasn't married or had a girlfriend. That it was his way or the highway.

"Well, let's hope I don't have too many medical emergencies," she said in a quiet voice.

"Are you going to alternate hours with Dr. Franklin?" Seth asked.

"Not initially. We'll work together for a couple of months until we're able to establish a routine where we may be able to have at least two late nights to see patients. Speaking of patients, let me look at your thumb again."

"It's okay."

"It can't be okay if you're massaging it," Natalia said accusingly.

* * *

Seth let go of his left hand. He hadn't realized he was manipulating his thumb to ease some of the tightness in the digit. Some of the swelling had gone down, but now it appeared to have stiffened. "I hit it pretty hard so it's going to take a few days before I stop favoring it."

Natalia reached for his hand, cradling it in her much smaller one. "Do you want me to spray it again?"

He snatched his hand away. "No! I'll ice it again when I get home."

"You can apply a warm compress after you ice it again."

Seth smiled. "I'll do that. I'm going to clean up here—"

"Please don't," Natalia, said, cutting him off. "You've done enough. I'll clean up everything. And dinner tonight is my treat."

Seth shook his head. "No, it's not. I never allow a woman to pick up the check when we go out together."

"I'm not your date, Seth."

"Whether you are or are not my date is irrelevant. I still won't let you pay for my meal."

"What if we go dutch?"

Not wishing to engage in a verbal confrontation, something he'd done much too often with some women in his past, he forced a smile that did not reach his eyes. "It's almost three o'clock now, and I'd like to pick you up at six. Is that too early?"

"Oh... I mean no. It's not too early."

"If that's the case, then I'll see you later."

Turning on his heel, Seth walked out of the kitchen. It had been less than twelve hours since he met his new neighbor, and there was something about her that intrigued him. He was more than curious about the woman driving a top-of-the-line luxury SUV bearing Pennsylvania plates, and why she was renting a house in The Falls. Seth knew he could easily find out more about his new neighbor by entering her vehicle's license plate number into a national database accessible to law enforcement but that would be the same as snooping. After all, she wasn't a suspect or a person of interest in a case he was investigating. And he hoped, after sharing a meal with Natalia, she would answer some of the questions that had him wondering why she had come to The Falls.

* * *

Natalia dipped the sable brush into the compact with loose powder that was specially blended to match her complexion, and tapped it lightly against the lid to shake off the surplus before she drew it over her face. Peering into the mirror over the bathroom sink, she stared at her handiwork. Although it had been a while since she'd applied foundation, eye shadow, mascara and lipstick, it was apparent she hadn't lost her touch. A moisturizer and occasionally lip gloss were the only allowances she made for makeup when working at the hospital, and the last time she made up her face was New Year's Eve when she'd accompanied her ex to a party hosted by one of the partners at his law firm.

What had begun as a festive evening ended with them glaring at each other after Daryl accused her of flirting with one of his colleagues. The incident foreshadowed the end of what had become a fragile relationship when she vowed never to attend another social soiree with him unless he apologized for his rude behavior. She waited weeks, and then a month, for him to express regret, but when he didn't Natalia knew it was time to end their engagement. However, Daryl beat her to it when he moved out and took off with her ring and her dog.

Now she was preparing to go out with her neighbor. The major difference was that it wasn't what Natalia deemed a traditional date. However, she had admit to herself that she did find Seth Collier very, very attractive, but even that wasn't enough for her to think of him as anything other than someone who lived next door. She found it ironic that she'd lived in the condo for eight years and had never socialized with any of the other residents in her building. Although they would occasionally greet one another with a nod or perfunctory greeting, she didn't know any of their names. Picking up a wide-tooth comb, she ran it through the strands of her short hair and then using her fingers, fluffed

them to achieve greater height. Preparing to resign from her position at the hospital, closing on the sale of the condo to her sister and brother-in-law, and then packing the personal items she planned to ship to Wickham Falls hadn't left time for her to visit her favorite Philly salon for a trim. Fortunately, time was no longer an issue for Natalia with her working shorter hours and she had to decide whether to let her hair grow out or keep it short and virtually maintenance-free.

The ring of the doorbell startled her as she hurriedly washed her hands and left the bathroom to answer the door. The clock on the living room fireplace mantelpiece chimed the hour. It was exactly six o'clock. Seth said he would pick her up at six and arriving at the appointed time revealed he was a man of his word.

She unlocked the inner door to find Seth standing on the porch staring at her with an expression she interpreted as temporary shock. She unlatched the storm door and held it open. He'd changed into black slacks with a white untucked shirt open at the neck and spit-shined black boots. Much to her disappointment the stubble from his lean, strong jaw was missing. Natalia wasn't a big fan of facial hair, but somehow she liked it on Seth.

"Please, come in. I just have to get my jacket and purse."

"That's all right. I'll wait here for you."

* * *

Seth had told Natalia he would wait on the porch for her because it would give him time to recover from staring at her slender body in a pair of body-hugging black stretch slacks, high-heeled booties and a black-and-white striped silk blouse.

When Natalia opened the door, Seth felt as if someone had hit him in the chest, causing him to lose his breath, when he stared at her. He couldn't believe the transformation. She'd gone from a fresh-faced ingenue to a seductress with smoky eye shadow and a raspberry mouth that made him want to taste her lush lips to see if they were as sweet as they appeared. It had been a while since he'd slept with a woman, but that still did not explain his reaction to a woman who unknowingly had him wanting to spend time with her.

And there were a few questions he wanted her to answer for him: why had she chosen to practice medicine in Wickham Falls and not some other town? Who or what was the reason for her leaving a cosmopolitan city like Philadelphia to live in a town where more than half the populous were at or below the poverty line, and at the same time census numbers were steadily decreasing?

A smile parted his lips when she returned wearing a loose-fitting black peplum jacket. Her big-city sophistication was definitely on display, and he wondered how long it would take for her to conform to a more relaxed style of dress. Jeans, boots or running shoes were the norm for most residents. Even the local church had eased dress code restrictions where women attended services in slacks, and some of the teenage girls had attempted to push the envelope when they showed up in shorts and tank tops.

The scent of Natalia's perfume wafted to his nostrils when she closed and then locked the doors. "You look very nice," Seth complimented.

Natalia's demurely lowered her eyes. "Thank you."

Cradling her elbow, he led her down off the porch and over to his driveway where he'd parked the Dodge Charger. Seth opened the passenger-side door and waited until Natalia was seated and belted in before he rounded the car to sit behind the wheel. He didn't get to drive the powerful muscle car as often as he liked. He had driven it to Savannah and back, but most times he drove his late father's Ram Pickup to and from the station house to keep it from sitting too long. Even though the sixteen-year-old vehicle had more than a hundred thousand miles on the odometer it still handled like new. His father had claimed the great loves in his life were his wife and children, and then his pickup, which he worked on tirelessly to keep it in tip-top condition.

"How far is the Wolf Den from here?" Natalia asked when they stopped at the railroad crossing. The gates were down, bells were ringing and red lights were flashing indicating an oncoming train.

Seth shifted into Park, and then stared at Natalia's delicate profile as she looked out the windshield. "It's on the edge of town between The Falls and Mineral Springs."

She turned to meet his eyes. "Why isn't it located downtown like the other businesses?"

"During Prohibition, the Gibson brothers decided they'd had enough of being miners and pooled their meager savings to buy some land off the beaten track to set up a still to sell moonshine. And to stay one step ahead of the revenuers they built the restaurant as a front for their illegal activities."

"Were they ever caught and prosecuted?"

Seth smiled. "No. There was no way folks were going to snitch on them because it would cut off their supply of some of the best hooch in the county. Once Prohibition was repealed, the Gibsons wanted to move the restaurant into town, but several town council members retaliated and passed a law prohibiting the sale of alcohol within the business district. They'd assumed it was their way of punishing them for breaking the law, but it backfired. The Den became even more popular among those folks because they had a place where they could drink openly and eat some of the best barbecue food in Johnson County."

"What about Ruthie's?"

"Ruthie's is a family style, all-you-can-eat buffet restaurant. Their busiest times are weekends when kids are out of school and also when families gather there following church services."

A slight frown furrowed Natalia's smooth forehead. "Are you saying Sunday dinners are passé?"

"It is with some families."

"When I grew up we had a tradition that the first Sunday in each month the extended family would get together. We'd rotate homes. One Sunday it would be our house, and then it would be one of my aunts. My grandmothers would compete with each other as to who could come up with the best desserts. Most times it was a draw because whatever they made was spectacular."

Seth chuckled. "Everyone brags about their grandmother's cooking. You'll discover that during our Fourth of July bake-off competition. Around here, holidays are cause for the entire town to turn out and celebrate. We have the upcoming Memorial Day parade and picnic."

"Mr. Grand at the hardware store was bending my ear about the parade," Natalia said, smiling.

"It's a big deal in The Falls because of so many active military and former veterans."

"Like you?"

Seth nodded. "Yes, like me. I suppose you noticed the American and US Marine Corps flags attached to the porch."

"That and the Semper Fidelis decal on the bumper of this car," she said, laughing softly. "Is it true once a marine, always a marine?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What other holidays do you celebrate big-time?"

"The Fourth of July. We combine that with three nights of carnival rides, games and food contests. Labor Day is a little low-key with family cookouts. Then the whole town also turns out to celebrate Halloween. There are games and a photo gallery where parents can pose in costume with their children. After sunset, there are tailgate parties, hayrides and bonfires with folks taking turns reading ghost stories. It's the perfect segue to our Fall Frolic, Thanksgiving and then Christmas. Once most of the mines closed and kids were leaving to join the military or find employment elsewhere, those who couldn't or didn't want to leave The Falls look forward to the town-wide get-togethers."

"It must have been fun growing up here with all of the holiday celebrations."

"It was and still is," Seth confirmed. "The adults have as much fun as their children."

* * *

Natalia stared at the passing cars of the freight train, some of them carrying hazardous materials, and remembered the excitement in Johnnie Lee Grand's voice when he talked nonstop about the upcoming parade and wondered if Seth would become a participant.

“How many people leave and come back?” she asked.

She realized she was asking way too many questions, but it served as a foil not to think about the man sitting inches from her. There was something about Seth that made it impossible for her to ignore him. She found his overall virility, soothing drawling voice and smiling light brown eyes fascinating.

Resting an arm over the back of her seat, Seth exhaled an audible sigh. “Not too many. There was a time when my father was drafted to serve in Vietnam that most of the boys who survived came back to work in the mines like their fathers, grandfathers and generations of men before them. Then after the mines closed, most of those who went into the military didn’t bother to come back because there were no jobs for them. The members of the town council have repeatedly voted down allowing chains to set up here because although it would provide employment opportunities, the downside is it would also put local shopkeepers out of business.”

Natalia turned slightly to give Seth a long, penetrating stare. “What made your dad come back?”

“A pretty girl who was in college studying to become a schoolteacher caught his eye. My father had just begun dating my mother when his number came up. He wanted to marry her before being shipped out, but she refused, saying she didn’t want to be a young war widow. She told him if and when he came back she would marry him. He made it through the war physically unscathed except for occasional flashbacks which plagued him for years. He married my mother and because he was good at fixing things, he started up a home repair business. Dad could glance at a diagram of something and put it together without looking at it again.”

“So, your father was never a coal miner?”

“No. But my grandfather and his father before him were. Grandpa used to say all of us were different colors when we went down in the mines, but at the end of the day when we came out, we were all the same color from the coal dust.”

“And it was the same when they were diagnosed with black lung,” Natalia whispered.

“You’re right about that. Mining was both a blessing and a curse. It provided men with money to take care of their wives and children, but it also destroyed entire families when fathers, grandfathers, sons, brothers and uncles were killed or injured because of unsafe conditions. If you travel throughout the state you’ll see memorials erected to honor those who lost their lives in mine disasters.”

Natalia remembered television coverage of a mining disaster in West Virginia when she was in her last year of medical school. Experts reported it was preventable because the owners had neglected to install safety systems. The mines may have closed in and around Wickham Falls, but mining for coal, copper, silver, iron, lead, diamonds, gemstones and other minerals was still in operation in the States and all over the world.

“Why did you come back?”

“Initially I’d planned to make the military my career, but after eighteen years, I came back to be with my mother after my father passed away. My father had retired and my sisters who were living in Georgia were begging them to move closer to their grandchildren. Mom would’ve gone years ago, but Dad didn’t want to leave his buddies who got together every week to play cards and trade war stories. Four months after I became a civilian, the sheriff approached me to join the department as a deputy because he knew I’d been military police. Once I was sworn in, Mom told me she was moving to Savannah, so I utilized my GI bill and bought the house from her. She moved into a townhome several blocks from my younger sister.”

Natalia smiled. “So, you’re one of the rare ones who left and came back to stay.”

The last car of the freight train clattered past as Seth put the car in gear and drove over the tracks. “It wasn’t something I’d planned until I was much older, but even the best made plans can go awry.”

“I hear you,” she said under her breath.

When she’d accepted Daryl’s marriage proposal, Natalia felt as if all of the pieces of her life were falling into place. She’d realized her dream to become a doctor, and had met and fallen in

love with a brilliant litigator who'd landed a position with one of Philadelphia's most prestigious law firms. He had pursued her relentlessly for two years until she'd agreed to become his wife, but then he changed much like a snake shedding his skin when he went from easygoing to someone she didn't recognize. She'd made allowances for the shift in his behavior to the added responsibility of becoming partner, but once his controlling and ongoing criticisms about her appearance impacted her emotional well-being, Natalia decided she'd had enough and began pushing back. Disagreements escalated into shouting matches after which they wouldn't speak to each other for days. Physical intimacy declined and then stopped altogether when Daryl spent more time in his condo than he did in hers. They continued to attend social events as a couple unbeknownst to others that their relationship was as fragile as eggshells.

"How long do you intend to work here before you return to Pennsylvania?"

Seth's query shattered Natalia's reverie. "I won't know until the end of next April."

He gave her a sidelong glance. "What's happening then?"

"That's when I'll let Dr. Franklin know if I intend to join his practice as a partner."

"And if you don't?"

"Then I'll have to decide where I want to go. It'll probably be in another small town because I've had enough of municipal hospitals with staff shortages, shrinking budgets and endless bureaucratic red tape. I've always wanted to be a small-town doctor and living and working here will give me the experience I'll need to establish my own practice."

"Let's hope you'll find a permanent home here because we need you."

Chapter Three

Seth escorted Natalia into the Wolf Den, his hand resting at the small of her back. He felt her go stiff against his palm before she went pliant. When he'd told her that *we* need you, he had included himself in that equation. He didn't want her as a girlfriend but as a friend. It had been a few years since he could count a woman among his friends.

The conversations among those seated at the bar stopped when customers spotted him with Natalia. The locals were used to seeing him come in wearing his uniform, but rarely in street clothes or with a woman. He nodded and exchanged greetings with those with whom he had reconnected since returning to The Falls. Transitioning to life as a civilian had gone smoothly for Seth, which he attributed to frequent trips home. He didn't know what it was, but there was something about his hometown that drew him back again and again. Even when his mother announced that she was moving to Savannah, Seth had the option of reenlisting or becoming a federal agent with the Marine Corps Criminal Investigation Division. He had taken advantage of his GI education benefit to obtain a bachelor's in criminal justice and had six remaining credits to complete to obtain a graduate degree in the same field.

He had been truthful with Natalia when he told her he'd wanted to return to live in Wickham Falls, but only after he retired from the military and law enforcement. If he'd served in the corps for twenty years and another twenty as a federal agent he would be fifty-eight, still young enough to enjoy fishing, traveling and tinkering around his house. Not once had the notion of having his own family figured into his future plans once his divorce was finalized.

Seth had known when he married Melissa, life would be challenging for his young wife. She had complained that she felt like a nomad packing up their apartment and moving whenever he received orders to transfer to a different base. The final straw came when he was deployed to Afghanistan. When he returned to the States, it was to discover his wife was carrying another man's child. Her excuse that she was lonely and he wasn't there for her fell on deaf ears. Seth filed for divorce, ending their three-year marriage, and then signed up for his second deployment.

"Hey, Seth, where have you been hiding yourself?" the bartender shouted.

One of the regulars, a retired postal worker sitting at the bar, raised his mug of beer. "Fletcher's right. Me and the boys were talking about not seeing you around. We thought you had re-upped."

Smiling, Seth patted the older man's back. "It's called a vacation, Jesse."

"Good for you and good for us. Sheriff Jensen would be up the creek if he lost you." The others sitting at the bar echoed his sentiment. "By the way, who's your pretty girlfriend?"

Seth stared at Natalia when she glanced up at him. He was suddenly aware that being seen with her would generate some gossip. He lowered his head. "Do you want to introduce yourself?" he said in her ear.

* * *

Natalia knew it was only a matter of time before all of Wickham Falls would know who she was, not as Seth's girlfriend but as Dr. Franklin's assistant. "I'm Natalia Hawkins, and Seth and I are just friends," she added, smiling.

"If that's the case, I'm available if you're looking for a boyfriend," called out a man with a shaved pate, a full strawberry blonde beard and both arms covered with colorful tattoos.

Natalia laughed along with the others. "I just got rid of a boyfriend so I'm really not looking for another one right about now," she said truthfully.

Seth's arm curved around her waist. "Let's find a booth before someone puts a ring on your finger."

Natalia wanted to tell him someone had put a ring on her finger, and if she could turn back the clock she never would've accepted it. "Do women who come here always get propositioned?" she asked Seth.

He waited for her to slip into the booth before sitting opposite her. "I've never witnessed it before. I'm glad you took it all in stride because they're really harmless."

She smiled, and then lowered her eyes. "I wasn't insulted." Natalia wanted to tell Seth that she'd found it flattering that men would flirt with her because it had been much too long since she'd thought of herself as pretty. Wearing scrubs and no makeup had become the norm for her rather than the exception. Even when she'd dressed up for Daryl's firm's New Year's Eve party, what she'd felt inside was reflected in her demeanor when she refused to smile and join in the festivities. It was then she realized no amount of makeup or haute couture could mask the instability of a doomed relationship that was evident by her expression, and now knew moving to Wickham Falls was one of the best decisions she had made in her life, thus far.

The people she'd met were friendly, unpretentious and weren't afraid to speak their minds. She'd experienced countless catcalls from men who felt it was their right to say whatever came to their mind, but something communicated to Natalia that the men in the Wolf Den were different. She was certain if she had revealed she was Seth's girlfriend, then the flirting would've ended immediately.

"Now that they know you're not my girlfriend, news is going to spread like a wildfire that you're available," Seth said in a quiet voice.

Her eyes met his. "Whether I'm dating anyone or not is not a problem for me because I'm not looking to get into a relationship."

"Is it true you just got rid of a boyfriend?"

She paused for several seconds, and then said, "He wasn't a boyfriend but a fiancé."

"What happened to..." Seth's words trailed off when a middle-aged waitress with fire-engine red hair came over and placed two menus on the table.

"Hey, handsome," she crooned, winking at Seth. "I missed seeing you last week."

* * *

Seth smiled at the woman who'd recently switched with her daughter from the lunch to dinner shift. "I took some time off to visit my mother and sisters."

"By the way how is your mom?" the waitress asked as she set napkins and place settings on the table.

"She's well, Sharleen. Thanks for asking."

“Please send her my regards.” She paused. “Where are your manners, Seth? Aren’t you going to introduce me to your lady friend? Or should I’ve said your girlfriend?”

Seth wondered how many more times he and Natalia would have to deny they were romantically linked; since he’d returned to live in Wickham Falls no one had seen him with a woman. “Natalia, this is Sharleen Weaver. Sharleen, Natalia Hawkins,” he said introducing the women and deliberately ignoring the waitress’s reference to Natalia being his girlfriend.

Sharleen rested her hands at her waist. “It’s nice meeting you, Natalia. Will we get to see you again?”

“I’m sure you will,” Natalia replied.

“Is there anything I can bring you good folks to drink before you order?” Sharleen asked.

Seth angled his head and stared at Natalia. “Do you want anything from the bar?”

“No, thank you. I’ll just have water.”

Sharleen nodded. “Seth, should I bring you your usual?”

“Please, Sharleen.” Leaning against the back of the booth, Seth waited until Sharleen left before focusing his attention on Natalia. She’d mentioned a fiancé and he wondered who’d initiated the breakup. “I’m sorry folks think we’re a couple.”

A slight smile played at the corners of her mouth. “It’s not about me as much as it is about you, Seth,” she countered.

“Why would you say that?”

“You claim you don’t have a girlfriend or a wife, so it’s apparent when people see you with a woman they assume she must be special enough for you to be seen in public with her. And it doesn’t bother me what they say or think because we’re neighbors and nothing more.”

Seth knew Natalia was right about them being neighbors. “That’s something we both can agree on.” A beat passed before he asked, “How did you get the name Natalia?”

“My mother taught college-level romance languages and literature, and had decided if she had children they would all have Latin names. I’m Natalia, which means ‘nativity’ because her due date with me was December 25. My sister is Serena, but everyone calls her Rena, and my brother is Justin.”

“Should I assume Justin implies justice?”

“Not so much justice as just or upright.”

Seth rested his forearms on the table. “Were you born on Christmas Day?”

“No,” Natalia said, smiling. “I came two days earlier but still close enough to Christmas for Mom to keep the name.”

“Where are you in the birth order?”

“I’m the middle child. And before you ask, I never went through the middle child syndrome. My parents treated all of us the same. But if you listen to my pompous brother, he’d tell that he’s their favorite because he’s the firstborn *and* male.”

Nodding slowly, Seth flashed a Cheshire cat grin and winked at Natalia. “I think I like your brother.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re older than your sisters.”

His grin became a wide smile. “Bingo. I was responsible for protecting my sisters and carrying on the Collier name.”

“Do you have a son or sons?”

“No, but—”

“But nothing,” Natalia said, cutting him off. “If you don’t have a son, then you can’t say you’re carrying on the Collier name.”

“That’s not to say it won’t happen one of these days.”

“When you’re fifty?” she teased.

Seth narrowed his eyes. “So the doctor has jokes.”

Natalia's expression mirrored innocence. "No. Either you're forty or close to it, and you profess not to be married or have a girlfriend all which translates into either you're commitment-shy or you plan to become a baby daddy."

"You're wrong on both counts. I'm not afraid of committing because I was married once. And I have no intention of ever becoming a baby daddy." He saw Natalia's face crumble like an accordion and wondered if she was comparing her failed engagement with his unsuccessful marriage.

"I'm sorry if I prejudged you," she whispered.

Seth flashed a smile. "There's no need to apologize. Some things just don't work out the way we'd like."

"How true," Natalia remarked.

"Is he the reason you moved here?" The query was out before Seth could censor himself. He'd just met Natalia and he didn't want to turn her off by prying into her love life.

She averted her eyes. "He wasn't the only reason, but I'd rather not talk about that now. I haven't eaten since this morning, and I'm ready to order everything on the menu."

Seth laughed under his breath. "So, you're not one of those women who eat like a bird because they're monitoring everything that goes into their mouth?"

Natalia rolled her eyes upward. "That's sexist, Seth. There are men who also are just as finicky when it comes to their diets. And do I look anorexic to you?"

Seth knew he'd put his proverbial foot in his mouth and had to be careful taking it out. "Um...no. I'm sorry I mentioned it."

"How much weight I gain or lose has never been a concern of mine. There were occasions when I worked eighteen hours in the ER that I'd take time out to drink a smoothie or grab a salad because it saved time. But whenever I had several days off I'd make all of my favorite dishes and sit down like a normal person to enjoy my meals."

"I suppose all of that will change now that you'll be working with Dr. Franklin."

* * *

Natalia nodded. Her entire life had changed since leaving Philadelphia. "Yes, it will." She opened the menu binder and perused the selections. "What do you recommend?"

Seth pointed to the chalkboard on the opposite wall. "Everything's good, but I usually order the day's special."

She glanced at the board. "I'm going to order the smothered chicken with steamed cabbage and rice." Natalia paused. "How's the white bean soup with ham?"

He smiled. "It's excellent. You must have been reading my mind because I was going to start out with a cup."

Natalia closed the binder. "I'm also going to have one."

Sharleen returned with her water and Seth's club soda, and took their dining selections. Minutes later, she came back with their soup. The mouthwatering aroma wafting from the cup was a blatant reminder of how long it had been since Natalia had eaten breakfast.

She took a spoonful and closed her eyes. When she opened them she found Seth smiling at her. "You're right. It is delicious."

"Everything they make here is incredible and that's why the Den has managed to survive after so many years when restaurants in other towns have gone out of business."

"Good food and the fact that there are no fast-food restaurants around here," Natalia said once she swallowed another mouthful of the soup made with navy beans and pieces of smoked ham.

"Fast food notwithstanding, if the Den didn't offer palatable dishes it wouldn't have survived."

"What about Ruthie's?" Natalia asked.

Seth picked up his spoon. "Ruthie's is good if you're looking for variety. And because what they offer is not processed and prepared daily, it is much healthier than fast food. Another good thing is the owners of Ruthie's and the Den donate all leftovers to our soup kitchen."

“There’s a soup kitchen here in Wickham Falls?”

“Yes. It’s a part of the church’s outreach.”

Seth gave Natalia a steady stare. “Poor farming techniques and the loss of jobs to mechanization in the mining industry have led to out-migration, and coupled with that, Appalachia has always had a problem with tax revenue and absentee land ownership has left many counties with hard-core pockets of poverty.”

She lowered her eyes. “I suppose I’m going to have to study up on the history of my new state.”

“You may not have to study too hard because I’m willing to bet your patients will give you an earful. Everyone has a tale to tell about their grandmother or grandpappy.”

Natalia finished her soup and laced her fingers together on the Formica tabletop. “How was it for you growing up here?”

Seth closed his eyes as a dreamy expression flitted over his features. “It was great. I didn’t realize we were poor because there was always food on the table and a roof over our heads.”

Sharleen set their orders on the table and over dinner, Natalia listened to Seth talk about three generations of Collier men working in the mines until his father was forced to choose another vocation once the mines began closing down. She pretended interest in the food on her plate because each time she glanced up, she found Seth staring at her.

“Dad’s number came up in the draft several months after he graduated high school. Once he returned to The Falls, he hired himself out as a handyman, extending credit to those unable to pay in full. Folks called on him to repair a leaky roof, busted pipes and rewire their home. Even though we had a little more than many other families my mother drummed it into our heads that we were no better than those who bought their food with government-issued stamps, or kids that wore hand-me-downs.

“I started going with Dad to his jobs once I entered high school. He wanted me to work with him after I graduated, while my mother insisted I go to college. It was the only time I witnessed my parents arguing with each other. I decided to enlist and have the military pay for my college education. I managed to give both my parents what they wanted when I earned a degree in criminal justice and whenever I came home on leave I’d spend that time helping Dad.”

Natalia took a sip of water. “That sounds like a win-win for everyone.”

Seth nodded. “Yes, it was. Enough talk about me and my family. Have your brother or sister made you an auntie?”

“My brother has. He and his wife became parents for the second time last year. My sister just celebrated her second wedding anniversary a couple of months ago, and she and her husband have decided to wait a few years before they start a family.”

“Are you one of those aunties that spoil their nieces or nephews?”

“I will when they’re old enough. My nieces are still too young for them to help me bake cookies or have sleepovers.”

“Speaking of cooking, what do you plan to make tomorrow?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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