



ROCHELLE ALERS

Twins for
the Soldier

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Rochelle Alers

Twins For The Soldier

«HarperCollins»

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He came home for a mission...Will he end up with a family?When Army Ranger Lee Remington returns home to help his sister, he's shocked by a powerful attraction to military widow Angela Mitchell...and floored by the mother of toddler twins who accepts his proposal.But as he preps for his ready-made family, there's one thing Lee forgot to tell her....

He came home for a mission...

Will he end up with a family?

Army ranger Lee Remington didn't think he'd ever go back to Wickham Falls, home of some of his worst memories. Now, returning home to help his sister, he's shocked by a powerful attraction to military widow Angela Mitchell...and floored by this mother of toddler twins, who accepts his proposal. But as he preps for his ready-made family, there's one thing Lee forgot to tell her...

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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[Chapter One](#)

Leland Wolfe Remington maneuvered off the county road and headed home to Wickham Falls, West Virginia. It had been a long time since he'd thought of The Falls as home. And it was the first time in twelve years that he had returned as a civilian.

Lee doubted whether he would've come back if his sister hadn't called him to reveal that she'd had to close down the family-owned boardinghouse after her live-in boyfriend had swindled her out of her inheritance. Not only was she facing the possibility of the house being seized by the county because of delinquent property taxes, but she was also being sued for large purchases she'd never authorized. The latest love of her life had stolen her identity, and she was facing bankruptcy. It had been on the tip of his tongue to tell her she was too trusting, that she loved with her heart and not her head, but he'd nearly lost his composure as he heard his sister sobbing while she begged him to come back to The Falls to help her reopen the boardinghouse. It was all she had left of their mother's family legacy.

Decelerating, he became a sightseer in a place of which he had good and bad memories. It was the bad ones that had sent him fleeing as soon as he graduated high school, vowing never to come back to live.

His foot hit the brake, and he came to a complete stop when he saw the tall, slender woman walking toward a minivan parked in front of the house where his best friend, Justin Mitchell, had grown up. Galvanized into action, Lee shut off the engine, exited his Jeep Grand Cherokee and waved to the woman shading her eyes with one hand as she held her son's with the other.

"Have I changed that much that you don't recognize me?" he teased as he closed the distance between them.

Angela Banks-Mitchell's jaw dropped. "Lee Remington?"

“In the flesh,” he said, smiling.

Lee met the curious eyes of the small boy who was a mirror image of his late father. He had inherited Justin’s taupe-brown complexion, light brown eyes and curly hair. Malcolm and his twin sister weren’t born when Justin had lost his life while on patrol in Afghanistan. Lee had just graduated US Army Ranger School when Angela sent him a text message about Justin. He had gone to his commanding officer and requested bereavement leave to attend a fallen soldier’s funeral, and returned to Wickham Falls to stand in as a pallbearer for his friend. Since that time, he hadn’t been back to his hometown—until now.

“There were rumors that you were coming back last year. Apparently, you changed your mind,” Angela said.

Angela’s mellifluous voice shattered his reverie. Wide-set eyes in a round face the color of whipped mousse held him spellbound. Her delicate features, long legs that seemed to go on forever and waif-thin figure had made her a much-sought-after model even before she graduated high school. Fashion designers were falling over themselves to get her to wear their haute couture, and her agent, who was known to be as unscrupulous as he was skilled in negotiating Angela’s meteoric rise as a supermodel, had proved profitable for both of them. She had earned the sobriquet of “America’s Naomi Campbell.” Lee always felt as if he had lost her twice: once to Justin, and the other time to the glamorous world of high fashion modeling.

The years had been more than kind to Angela. Her face had remained as beautiful as ever, while her body had filled out with womanly curves.

He rested a hand on her shoulder. If the child hadn’t been there, Lee would have kissed her cheek. He noted that although her mouth was smiling it wasn’t the same with her eyes. There was sadness in the depths of those slanting, dark brown orbs that was a reminder of the loss of her husband and the father of her children.

He wanted to tell Angela he hadn’t changed his mind, but that at the time he had been deployed for three months. She waved her left hand and his gaze was drawn to her fingers. Although widowed, she had taken off her rings.

“Believe it now, because I am back.” Lee felt a modicum of guilt that he hadn’t kept in touch with her following Justin’s funeral.

“How long are you staying?” she asked.

Lee dropped his hand. “I’m not sure.” His sister had asked him to come back last spring, but he’d had to decline her request. He wasn’t able to tell her he’d been assigned to raids in the Middle East and then subsequently to a war-torn African country.

“One month? Two months?”

Lee stared down at the toes of his military-issued boots before his head popped up. “It’s indefinite.” He didn’t tell her he had given himself a timeline of a year to get the boardinghouse up and running again before reenlisting.

“You left the army?”

He angled his head. Angela had asked him a question he knew would be repeated over and over by those living in The Falls. “I have, for now.”

“But—but—I thought you were going to be a lifer,” Angela stuttered.

A wry smile twisted Lee’s mouth. “Life has a way of changing the best-laid plans,” he drawled. The instant the words were out he regretted them. “I’m sorry about that.”

Angela shook her head. “There’s no need to apologize, Lee. The plans we made when we were teenagers no longer apply.”

He nodded. She was right. He, Angela and Justin had written down one wish for what they wanted for their futures the year they’d celebrated their sixteenth birthdays, put the lists in a sealed envelope with the proviso they would open it a day before their high school graduation. Lee had fulfilled his wish to join the military and Angela had had her wish to have a successful modeling

career. But it was Justin who had deviated from his goal of becoming a doctor by dropping out of medical school after a year to enlist in the Marines.

His gaze went to the little boy staring up at him. “Hello, buddy.”

A slight frown appeared between the child’s clear brown eyes. “I’m no buddy. My name is Malcolm.”

A wide grin parted Lee’s lips. “I guess he told me,” he said sotto voce.

Angela stared at her son. Her children were quite outspoken, a trait that annoyed her old-school mother-in-law who believed that children should be seen and not heard. “Malcolm, please say hello to Mr. Lee.”

Malcolm blinked slowly. “Hello, Mr. Lee.”

Lee hunkered down to Malcolm’s height and extended his hand. “It’s nice meeting you, Malcolm.” The child took his hand.

“Me, too,” the child said, as a hint of a smile played at the corners of his mouth.

Angela glanced at Lee. The last time she saw him was at her husband’s funeral, and the first thing she’d noticed was his gaunt appearance. When she’d asked him if he had been sick he’d admitted he’d just completed the requirements to become an army ranger, and had lost nearly forty pounds during the extremely intense sixty-one-day combat leadership course. It was apparent he had not only regained the weight but had also developed a lot of muscle, as evidenced by the bulging biceps in the rolled-up sleeves of his fatigues.

Lee was tall, standing six-three, and his striking good looks turned heads whenever he entered a room. The genes he had inherited from his mixed-race African American-and-Cherokee father and white mother had given him a light brown complexion, raven-black wavy hair and blue-gray eyes. The girls at their high school had labeled him tall, dark and dangerous—his good looks, combined with his father’s criminal reputation, made him seem particularly lethal in the eyes of their parents, who warned them to stay away from him. *Like father, like son*, she’d heard people say.

But she’d known firsthand that Lee would never dabble in drugs—he’d witnessed how it had nearly destroyed his family. Even when a lot of boys were smoking marijuana, drinking or popping pills, Lee was always an outsider, and she didn’t know if it had something to do with his father’s drug addiction.

He now stood straight, and her eyes met his as she recalled his question if he’d changed much. At first glance Angela would’ve said he hadn’t. But upon a closer look she saw things that hadn’t been apparent during their last encounter. There was a network of fine lines around his eyes, and the stubble on his lean face, with its high cheekbones and sharp features, enhanced his overt masculinity. His hair grazed his jawline, and at the age of thirty, there was no hint of boyishness left in her friend.

“Where’s your daughter?” Lee asked.

“Zoe is inside with Lee’s mother. Malcolm and I have a dental appointment.”

Lee inclined his head. “I’m not going to keep you. Whenever you’re free, give me a call so we can catch up.”

Angela nodded. There was so much she wanted to tell Lee about the things that had happened since they last saw each other. The year before she’d been hired as the receptionist at a local medical clinic and then promoted to office manager. “Once you’re settled in, I’d like you and your sister to come by for Sunday dinner one of these days. I don’t know if Vivi told you, but I sold my house and moved in with my mother-in-law a couple of months before the twins were born.”

He shook his head and smiled. “No, she didn’t. I’m not going anywhere for a while, so I’m really looking forward to getting together.”

Angela returned his smile with a bright one of her own. “I’d love to stay and chat, but I have to get going or I’ll be late for our appointment.” She paused. “I’m glad you’re home.”

A beat passed before Lee said, “Me, too.”

Lee watched as Angela settled Malcolm in a car seat in the second row of the late-model minivan. It may have been years since their last encounter, but time hadn't changed how he felt about his best friend's widow. He'd just celebrated his fifteenth birthday when he first entertained romantic feelings about the girl who told him she loved him like a brother. However, his thoughts about her were anything but brotherly, and he made certain never to cross the line to act on his fantasies. Now, fast-forward more than a decade, Lee realized his feelings for Angela hadn't changed. He still liked her for more than friendship. There were countless times when he cursed his reticence to let her know how he felt, once Justin confessed that he and Angela had slept together two weeks before their high school graduation. And this revelation told him she was lost to him forever. Although they'd promised to stay in touch with one another, he, Justin and Angela took different paths. Lee had immersed himself in all things military. Justin had concentrated on a pre-med curriculum at college, while Angela had taken the world of high fashion modeling by storm.

Their paths did not cross whenever he returned to The Falls for family business. The only contact was an occasional email or instant message with a cursory update as to what was going on in their lives. Lee was shocked when Justin told him he'd dropped out of med school to join the Corps. When he questioned his friend about not following his dream to become a doctor, Justin had said going into medicine had been his mother's wish.

Lee pulled his thoughts back to the present as he clamped his teeth together and watched the taillights of Angela's vehicle turn the corner and disappear. He silently berated himself for not staying more closely connected to the two people who hadn't judged him because he was Emory Remington's boy.

To the men in his unit he was known as Sergeant Remington or "Wolf," but to those in Wickham Falls he was a descendant of the infamous Wolfes who at one time owned most of the coal mines in Johnson County and were notorious for the exploitation of their workers. Although many of the mines had been closed for more than thirty years, Lee could not escape the stigma attached to his family's name. And despite having married a Remington, his mother had continued the family tradition that male descendants who did not carry Wolfe as their surname would have it as a middle name.

Lee exhaled an audible breath. Well, he was back in Wickham Falls, not for a few days or even a week, but close to a year. He would take the time allowed him before reenlisting to rejoin his fellow rangers.

Five minutes later, Lee turned into the driveway leading to The Falls House. For years it had been known as Wolfe Hall, but when it went from being a family residence to a boardinghouse his Aunt Babs changed the name. The century-old structure, designed in the architectural style of the antebellum South, bore noticeable signs of disrepair. Several shutters had come loose from their fastenings, and what had been touted as the finest residence in Johnson County appeared to be an eyesore to Lee. Although the ten-bedroom, twelve-bath mansion was constructed during the Victorian period, Hiram Wolfe's new bride had insisted it resemble her ancestral home in Beaufort, South Carolina.

Lee parked near two carriage houses turned guesthouses that also needed fresh coats of white paint. Repairs weren't at the top of his to-do list, though sitting down with his sister—to ascertain how much money she needed to hold on to the property—was.

Getting out of the car and walking around to the front of the three-story dwelling, Lee rang the doorbell. The keys to the house were in his backpack. He didn't have to wait long for the door to open. The smile parting his lips faded quickly when he saw firsthand the effects of the strain of his sister's current ordeal. There were dark circles under large toffee-colored eyes, and her tawny face was a lot slimmer, almost emaciated, surrounded by a cloud of black curls falling to narrow shoulders.

He extended his arms and wasn't disappointed when she came into his embrace. Lee rested his chin on the top of her head as she cried without making a sound; he massaged her back in a comforting gesture and waited for her to compose herself.

“You came.” Viviana sniffled against his chest.

Lee smiled. “I promised you I’d come.”

Leaning back, she stared up at him. Looking at his sister brought back memories of when they’d stood outside their mother’s bedroom comforting each other after the doctor informed them that Annette Remington had passed away in her sleep. Even though he had been told that his mother was terminally ill, Lee at nine had not understood or believed she wouldn’t be there for him and Viviana. The reality of losing one parent was compounded by the absence of his father. Emory Remington had been arrested, convicted and sentenced to five years in jail for the robbery of a convenience store to get the money he needed to pay his drug dealer. Lee would never forget the shame of his father being escorted to his mother’s funeral in handcuffs and shackles by US marshals. Although it was a private service, with only family and close friends in attendance, word had still got out that the deceased’s husband wasn’t permitted to sit with his children, but was sandwiched between two federal police officers at the back of the church.

“I’m so sorry I put you through this,” Viviana said, as a new wave of tears filled her eyes.

Reaching into the pocket of his fatigues, Lee took out a handkerchief and dabbed her face. He had promised his mother he would always take care of his younger sister, and he would. “Stop beating yourself up, Vivi. I’ll pay the back taxes, and once that’s done we’ll sit down together and figure out whatever else you have to pay off.”

Viviana took the handkerchief and blew her nose. “That scammer stole my identity and ran up thousands of dollars of debt, which has ruined my credit. I barely have enough money to keep the lights on.”

Lee stared over his sister’s head. Seeing a woman cry was his Achilles’ heel. There were times when he’d snuck into his mother’s bedroom to find her in tears. The sight had rendered him motionless when she cried without making a sound. He didn’t know if it was because she was in pain, or because she was rapidly facing mortality and knew she wouldn’t live long enough to see her children grow to adulthood.

Cradling Viviana’s face in his hands, he angled his head. “Haven’t I always promised to take care of you?” She nodded and smiled through her tears. “Then I want you to believe me when I say you’re not going to lose the house or walk around in the dark. Give me a few days to get acclimated and then we’re going to sit together to figure how to get you back on your feet. And even though the house is yours, I’m going to make a few suggestions about not reopening it as a boardinghouse again.”

Viviana smiled through her tears. “What are you talking about?”

Lee pressed a kiss to her forehead. “No hints. We’ll discuss it after we straighten out our financial dilemma.”

She blinked slowly. “*Our dilemma*, Lee?” she questioned. “It’s not about your or ours, but *my* dilemma. It was me who let some slimeball sweet-talk me to where I trusted him so much that I believed everything that came out of his corrupted mouth until it was too late. I—”

“Enough!” Lee said gently. The single word, although spoken quietly, had the same impact as if he’d shouted. “We’re not going to talk about your so-called friend ever again. He’s your past and will remain that. I’m back to help you look ahead and rebuild what you feel you’ve lost. The house is still standing and with a few repairs it will be back in business, good as new.”

“That’s what I told her.”

Lee went completely still when he heard a voice he’d almost forgotten. Turning slowly, he stared at the person he hadn’t thought he would ever see again. It had been at least twenty years since he and Emory Remington had come face-to-face, and those encounters were branded in his mind like a tattoo.

Even before and after serving his sentence for armed robbery and finishing his parole, Emory would show up without warning and stay for a week or two. Whenever he came, Viviana was like a kid in a toy shop, laughing with delight that her father was back, but for Lee it was different. They

barely exchanged more than a dozen words, and it always was as if he was waiting for the other shoe to drop and he'd wake up to find his father gone. And only when his father left had he allowed himself to relax. It was if Emory had a restless spirit that wouldn't permit him to stay in one place too long. There were so many things he wanted to say to Emory and most of them weren't good, but his upbringing wouldn't permit him to openly verbalize those thoughts.

Emory was only fifty-one, but appeared much older. It wasn't just the snow-white ponytail or the lines around his brown eyes, but the obvious weariness in his nut-brown face that was probably the result of years of drug use coupled with incarceration. What hadn't changed was his slender physique and the ramrod-straight posture of a former marine.

A muscle twitched in Lee's jaw. "What are you doing here?"

Viviana reached for Lee's hand, her fingernails biting into his palm. "Please, Lee, don't start with him. If you want I'll have Daddy move into one of the guesthouses."

Lee glared at his sister. If she had told him Emory was staying with her he would've been more than prepared to see the man again. "Don't. It looks as if I'm the intruder here. I'll check in to the Heritage House extended-stay motel off the interstate."

"Lee, please stay," Viviana pleaded.

He forced a smile he didn't feel. "It's okay, Vivi. I need some time alone to get used to civilian life again. Call me when you get all of your paperwork together. Check every place in the house where your ex-boyfriend could've hidden receipts from you."

That said, he turned on his heel and walked out. He returned to his jeep and backed out of the driveway. It took every ounce of self-control not to say all of the things he'd wanted to say to the man who was his father. For years he'd rehearsed the words he would tell Emory Remington to let him know just how he felt about him. However, time and maturity had changed him to a point where he now rarely thought of the man or how his absence had emotionally scarred him. He had lost his mother, while his father had abandoned his wife, son and daughter.

Lee had discussed his fears and apprehensions with the army psychiatrist, and those sessions had helped him see things in a whole new light. The doctor had pointed out that if his father had been killed in combat the result would've been the same: Emory would not have been there for his wife or his children. It took a number of sessions for him to realize there were different forms of loss and abandonment.

As much as he wanted to come home to help his sister, something had him dreading his decision. There were things about his hometown that wouldn't permit him to feel completely comfortable living there again. It had been people with long memories dredging up stories about how immoral the Wolfes had been to their employees, how they'd preferred shutting down the mines and putting people out of work rather than improving safety conditions. Then there was the gossip about his mother breaking her engagement to a boy from a good family to elope with Emory, an aspiring artist, who got a job as a sign maker while he painted in his spare time.

Lee drove onto the county road leading to the interstate. He had wanted to yell at Viviana for not warning him that Emory was back and living with her, but that wouldn't have solved anything. His sister was already emotionally drained, having allowed a man to take advantage of her kindness and generosity, and arguing with her would only acerbate her more about her predicament.

A wry smile twisted Lee's mouth when he thought of how his sister's life had paralleled their mother's. Both had fallen in love with men who had not only disappointed them, but had also broken their hearts.

[Chapter Two](#)

Lee parked the jeep in the lot adjacent to the Heritage House. He sat motionless and stared out the windshield as a gamut of emotions washed over him like storm-swept waves. Encountering his father again after nearly twenty years had shocked him to the core, because for a long time the

lingering images of shackled prisoner Emory Remington would occasionally surface and prevent him from getting a restful night's sleep.

And seeing him that way had prompted Lee to ask his deceased mother's older sister about his absentee father. Aunt Babs had explained as simply as she could to a nine-year-old about Emory's descent into drug addiction, and told him how his father had been arrested in Tennessee and charged with the robbery of a convenience store to get money to buy drugs.

Even before Emory was incarcerated Lee had become accustomed to not having his father around. The man would come and go every few months, and whenever he asked Emory about his absence, his explanation was always the same: "*I have a job painting a sign and I'll be back as soon as I'm finished.*" Lee knew parents had jobs, but he didn't understand why his father's work took him away from home so often.

Lee closed his eyes and shook his head. He was back in The Falls and so was Emory. He didn't know how long Emory planned to stay, but Lee knew he wouldn't be able to live under the same roof as the man because he could not let go of the memories of seeing his mother crying for her husband as she lay dying.

He opened his eyes and exhaled an audible breath. The extended-stay residence, once a motel, had been expanded and renovated. A neon light on an overhead sign indicated there were vacancies. He removed his duffel and backpack from the trunk and pushed open the door to the lobby. The man dozing on a chair behind the front desk sat up when the buzzer rang, indicating someone had come in.

"Welcome, soldier. What can I do for you?"

Lee smiled and noted the name *Leroy* on the badge pinned to the pocket of his chambray shirt. "Good evening. I'd like to check in to one of your one-bedroom suites."

The portly man pulled up a pair of suspenders attached to the waistband of his slacks. "How long do you plan to stay? I'm only asking because we have special rates for folks who stay for at least three months. And because you're military we also offer a fifteen percent discount."

Lee digested this information. *June. July. August.* He would take the three months to settle back into civilian life until he planned his next move. "I'll take it," he told the man with a shaved pate and friendly brown eyes.

"I need a credit card and some government ID." Lee handed him a credit card and his military driver's license. "I have one available with a kitchen that includes a full-size refrigerator, dishwasher, compact washer-dryer, stovetop and microwave. Your suite will also have Wi-Fi, televisions in the living and bedrooms, and housekeeping services. If you need clean sheets and towels, just hang the placard on the door and someone will replenish your supply. I'm only going to charge you for half of June, with the fifteen percent discount of course, and if you're still here in July I'll charge you for that month. We have a policy that you can check out at any time and management will prorate your bill." He paused as he took a copy of Lee's driver's license. "We can't have folks accusing us of cheating them. That would be bad for business."

"You've got that right," Lee said in agreement.

Leroy returned Lee's license and credit card and then gave him two keycards. "Your room is 322. You will find the elevators down the hall on the left. There's an outdoor pool on the other side of the building, and also an exercise room. I don't know if you're familiar with this area, but there are a few chain restaurants and local sports bars less than a quarter of a mile from here. Further up the interstate is a shopping mall. You will find a binder in your room with a listing of stores and shops in the area. There's also a supermarket close by where you can shop for groceries, or you can go online and order what you want and they'll deliver them to you. And by the way—thank you for your service."

Lee wanted to tell the loquacious man that he was more than familiar with the area, but decided to humor him. "It was an honor to serve," he said truthfully. He was anxious to check in to his suite, shower and change out of the fatigues into civvies. Earlier that morning he'd just returned from

overseas when he was summoned by his commanding officer and informed that effective immediately he was honorably discharged. Lee had packed up his on-base apartment and then gotten into his vehicle to leave the 75th Ranger Regiment headquartered at Fort Benning, Georgia, for West Virginia.

After changing he planned to go online to order enough groceries to stock the kitchen. His aunt Barbara, whom everyone called Babs, had taught him to cook, and it was something he enjoyed. Even when he returned to base and settled back into his apartment he preferred cooking for himself to eating in the mess hall.

Lee called his aunt whenever he had the chance. He'd grown to love his guardian as much as he had his mother, and when she'd complained about wanting to move to a warmer climate he'd made all the arrangements for her and her husband to relocate to an Arizona golf community where both had become avid golfers.

He opened the door to his suite and walked into the living/dining area. Lee was pleasantly surprised to find that it wasn't filled with the ubiquitous hotel furnishings, but was more in keeping with a personal apartment. Varying shades of green and yellow gave it a tropical look. He dropped his bags and made his way to the bedroom. The vibrant colors were repeated in the wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling drapes and the bed dressing. The bedroom was furnished with a king-size bed, a double dresser and bedside tables. There was a spacious sitting area with a love seat and chaise. A desk and chair with outlets nearby doubled as a mini-office. He knew he would enjoy coming here to relax, cook or sleep, while readjusting to life as a civilian for the first time in a dozen years. Lee made his way to the bathroom and peered inside. He had the option of soaking in the garden tub with a Jacuzzi or utilizing the shower stall with an oversize showerhead.

Bending, he untied the laces on his boots and then kicked them off. Within minutes he had undressed and left the clothes in a large wicker basket doubling as a hamper and replaced the lid. Lee returned to where he had left his bags and removed a toiletry kit from the duffel. He lathered his face with shaving cream as he studied his reflection in the mirror over a double sink. His hand stilled when he realized he was looking into the face of a younger Emory. There were times when he couldn't remember what his father looked like because his aunt had removed all photographs of Emory once he was sentenced to prison. It was as if she'd sought to eradicate the memory of the man who'd caused her sister so much emotional pain. Now Lee thought about the times when Aunt Babs stared at him with a perplexed look on her face whenever he stopped by to visit her in Tucson. And he wondered if his startling physical resemblance to her brother-in-law conjured up memories she had buried years before.

Lee knew his aunt loved him and Viviana as if they were her own children, and wondered if she would ever forgive the man who'd deserted her sister, niece and nephew when they'd needed him most. Turning on the hot water, Lee wet the razor and began the task of removing the stubble he'd grown during his last deployment. And like a prisoner counting down the days for his impending release, Lee counted today as his first as a civilian. And he had another three hundred sixty-four before his time would expire for him to reenlist.

Angela sat on a love seat in the enclosed back porch of her mother-in-law's home, watching her son and daughter put together a large-piece puzzle. They'd gone to church earlier that morning, and services were followed by Sunday dinner. Afterwards it was time to relax and wind down before preparing for a two-week vacation for her and a six-week one for her children.

She'd recently celebrated her first year as a working mother. She was employed at a local medical center, and having accrued vacation, she'd decided it was the perfect time to take it. She had never been away from her children since giving birth to them, so it would be a period of adjustment for all of them when visiting her parents and her children's grandparents.

She glanced over at her mother-in-law as Joyce Mitchell concentrated piecing squares for a quilt for her granddaughter's bed. Joyce, a very attractive woman in her midfifties, had been widowed for more than ten years, and had summarily rejected the advances of a number of men who expressed

an interest in her. She claimed she was still mourning the loss of her husband and son. Angela hadn't been widowed as long as Joyce, yet she was realistic enough to know Justin was gone and he was never coming back. Every time Justin left on a mission, his parting words to her had always been that if he didn't come back alive, then he didn't want her to spend the rest of her life mourning him. And if she did decide to marry again, to just make certain that the man could love and protect not only her but their children, too.

Joyce had been badgering her to join the military widows' chapter of a local service club, but Angela saw no use in talking to other women about what was, and she didn't want to relive the image of her husband's flag-draped casket before the flag was folded and handed to her. Her sole focus was her son and daughter and their emotional well-being. She hadn't dated and wasn't looking forward to dating until her children were older. After all, she was only thirty and had plenty of years ahead of her to think about having a relationship.

"Lee Remington's back in The Falls."

Joyce's head popped up as she stared over her half-glasses at Angela. Her clear brown eyes grew wider, eyes that were the almost the exact color of her café au lait complexion. "When did he get back?"

"It was a couple of days ago."

"Did you talk to him?" Joyce asked.

Angela nodded. "We chatted for a few minutes before I took Malcolm to the dentist."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

A shiver of annoyance snaked its way up Angela's back. Joyce Mitchell was her mother-in-law and her children's grandmother, but Joyce failed to realize she wasn't her keeper. "I didn't think it was important enough to tell you."

Joyce narrowed her eyes. "How long is he staying?"

Angela lifted her shoulders. "I don't know. But he claims he's left the army."

Joyce slowly shook her head. "First we've had to deal with the father and now the son. What's the world coming to?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Angela asked.

"Everyone knows that Emory is a convict and a drug addict, and it stands to reason that he could have some influence over that boy, who's had his own brush with the law."

Angela smothered a gasp. "You know that's not true! It was Will Carson who stole Lee's jacket and left it behind when he and his friends broke into the Newman house to put the blame on Lee. And it's a good thing Lee had reported his jacket missing days before or he wouldn't have been able to prove his innocence."

Joyce pressed her lips together until they resembled a slash in her face. "You say that because there was always something going on between you and that boy."

"There was nothing going on between me and Lee except friendship." Angela's voice was barely a whisper. She didn't like arguing or disagreeing with her mother-in-law while her children were present. But apparently it wasn't the same with Joyce. Whatever she thought came out of her mouth without being censored first.

Joyce snorted under her breath. "He didn't think I noticed, but there were times when he couldn't take his eyes off you."

Angela bit her lip to keep from screaming at the older woman. "Lee was and is my friend and that's all he'll ever be to me. And you're wrong about Lee liking me beyond friendship."

Joyce placed her quilting in the basket next to her chair. "Are you saying you'll be seeing him again?"

"Yes, and for as long as he's here. I've never judged Lee for what his father did years ago. The man paid his debt to society and it's only narrow-minded people who are not willing to forgive and forget."

Joyce sat straight. “Are you saying I’m narrow-minded?”

Angela wanted to tell her she was, but knew it would start something that would escalate into a full-blown spat resulting in hurt feelings. “All I’m saying is that if Lee reaches out to me, then I’m not going to reject him. I was going to invite him and his sister over for Sunday dinner but judging how you feel about him that’s not going to happen.”

“I just don’t want him around my grandson because you know Malcolm’s been asking about finding a daddy.”

Counting slowly to ten so she wouldn’t say something that would completely fracture her relationship with Malcolm and Zoe’s grandmother, Angela took deep breaths. “You seem to forget that your grandson and daughter are *my* children and as such I decide where they live and who they see. You raised your son, and now please let me raise mine.”

Much to Angela’s surprise, Joyce’s eyes filled with tears, and suddenly she felt remorse for speaking so harshly. But they had reached a point in their relationship when Joyce sought to control her life and those of her children as she’d done with Justin, who’d sometimes joked that his father died just to get away from his mother’s constant nagging. That no one could make Joyce happy even if they gave her everything she’d ever wanted. And it wasn’t for the first time that Angela blamed herself for selling the house her parents had given her and Justin as a wedding gift, after they moved to Florida to teach at a historically black university.

Two months before she was scheduled to give birth she’d put the house where she’d grown up with her brother on the market to move in with Joyce. Now, in hindsight, she realized it was an action based on impulse and not common sense. It wasn’t that she hadn’t been more than aware of Justin’s mother’s controlling personality, but at that time she’d been vulnerable and had allowed the woman to make all her decisions for her.

Grieving the loss of her husband and giving birth to twins had proved overwhelming for a first-time mother. Her mother had taken family leave to come up and stay with her for a month, and after witnessing Joyce’s domineering behavior she’d invited Angela to move to Florida. Even her brother had urged her to relocate to the West Coast to be close to his family, but Angela did not want to leave Wickham Falls because her husband was buried there.

Reaching for a tissue in a box near a side table, Joyce dabbed her eyes. “I know I can get a little pushy, but my grandkids are all I have left to remind me of my son.”

Angela felt a pang of guilt that she had to be reminded of Joyce’s loss. Not only had Joyce lost her husband but also her only child. “I know that. But you should realize Malcolm isn’t Justin, and no matter how much you try to mold him into his father’s image he is his own little person.”

Joyce sniffled softly. “I’m sorry, Angela, if you think I’m trying to raise your children. No one knows better than me that you’re a very good mother, and I’m honored to call you daughter. I suppose I’m overreacting, anticipating not seeing the kids for the summer when they go to Florida to stay with your folks.”

Rising from the love seat, Angela leaned over and kissed Joyce’s short salt-and-pepper curls. “I’m going upstairs to finish packing. After that I’ll be down to give the kids their bath.”

A smile parted the older woman’s lips. “Okay.”

Angela walked off the porch and made her way up the staircase to the second story. She entered her bedroom and closed the door behind her. Flopping down on a cushioned rocker, she pulled her lip between her teeth. It was getting more and more difficult to live under the same roof as her children’s paternal grandmother, whom they adored. There were occasions when she contemplated contacting the local real estate agent to look for a house in The Falls.

Angela picked up her cell phone and scrolled through her directory until she found Lee’s name. She needed to talk to him if only to stop thinking about what was becoming an escalating situation with her mother-in-law. And he had always been the one she had gone to whenever she and Justin occasionally broke up for weeks, before reconciling as if nothing had happened.

He picked up after two rings. “What’s up, Angie?” She smiled when she heard his warm greeting.

“I hope you’ve settled in The Falls House okay.”

There was a pause before he said, “I’m not staying at The Falls House. I’ve checked in to the Heritage House extended stay off exit 15.”

A slight frown appeared between her eyes. “Why?”

There came another pause. “I’ll explain it when I see you in person.”

“You won’t see me for the next two weeks.”

“Why?”

“I’m taking the twins down to Daytona Beach to stay with my folks for the summer. I’ve decided to spend two weeks with them. I should be back by July 2.”

“How are your parents?”

“They’re well. This is the first summer they’re going to spend time with their youngest grandchildren.”

“What about your brother’s kids?”

Angela kicked off her sandals and rested her feet on a cushioned footstool. “They’re enrolled in a tennis camp for the summer.”

“How old are they now?”

“Kendra’s ten and Mariah’s eight.”

Lee’s chuckle came through the earpiece. “Talk about the second coming of Venus and Serena Williams.”

It was Angela’s turn to laugh. “Now you sound like my brother.”

“Are they good, Angie?”

She nodded. “Yes. In fact, they’re very good.”

“Well, it looks as if everyone’s doing well.”

Angela closed her eyes. “Not everyone.”

“What’s the matter?”

She heard the concern in Lee’s voice, and decided to be truthful. “I’m not getting along with Justin’s mother.”

“What’s going on?” Lee asked.

Angela opened her eyes and stared at a photograph of her and Justin, taken right before he was deployed. She’d just discovered she was pregnant, but was unaware that she was carrying two babies. “She can’t stop meddling in my life. Now that I look back I realize selling my house and moving in with her was one of the worst decisions I’ve ever made.”

“Is it meddling or concern?”

“Why are you taking her side?”

“I’m not taking sides, Angela. After all, you’re a widow with two young children, and maybe she’s just being overprotective.”

“Please don’t get me wrong, Lee. I appreciate all she’s done for me, but I’d like to be able to raise my children without her telling me what I should or shouldn’t do with them.”

“Have you thought of getting your own place?”

She smiled. “Lately I have. Even though my parents have been nagging me to move to Florida and buy a house in their gated community, I don’t want to leave The Falls because Justin’s buried here.”

“If you don’t want to leave The Falls, you should be able to find a house to fit your needs or lifestyle.”

Angela’s smile grew wider. Lee had just echoed her notion about buying a house in her hometown. “You’re probably right. Once I come back I’m going to contact a real estate agent and see if she has any listings within my price range.” She wasn’t a pauper, and neither was she wealthy.

She'd saved most of her earnings from modeling, given half the proceeds from the sale of her parents' house to them for their future retirement, and invested Justin's military combat death benefit in a college fund for her children.

"When are you leaving for Florida?" Lee asked.

"Tomorrow morning."

"Are you flying or driving?"

"I'm driving. Barring delays it should take about ten hours."

"Drive carefully."

"I will. And thanks, Lee."

"What are you thanking me for?"

A hint of a smile touched the corners of her mouth. "For letting me bare my soul."

"Don't even go there, Angela. How many times have you listened to me go on about what was going on my life and what I wanted for my future? And it was the same with Justin. Remember when we put our wish lists in that sealed envelope with a promise we would open it the day before graduation?"

"How can I forget?"

"It was also the day we promised each other that we were friends for life, and that we would always be there for one another. And that means in the good and bad times, Angela. So, you don't ever have to thank me for anything."

"I want to thank you one last time for reminding me of that. I'm going to hang up now because I have to finish packing. I'll be in touch once I get back."

"I'll be here."

Angela couldn't help smiling. She placed the phone on the bedside table and thought about what Joyce had said about Leland liking her beyond friendship. He'd always treated her with respect and told her if she ever needed him for anything he would be there for her. And if he did love her, then it was not as a boyfriend, but like a sister.

Angela walked over to the closet to select what she needed to pack for her vacation. It was the first time in more than a year that she would take a break from the medical office where she had initially been hired as a receptionist.

She hadn't planned to reenter the workforce until her children were enrolled in school, but when she heard that Dr. Henry Franklin was looking for someone to work the front desk after his longtime employee relocated to Delaware to care for her elderly father, Angela had submitted her application and had been hired despite not having any prior office experience. She'd taken to her position like a duck to water, and had been promoted to office manager soon after because of her organizational skills. Dr. Franklin had also taken on a partner, Dr. Natalia Hawkins, and the result was that the wait time to treat patients was cut in half.

Working outside the home offered Angela the opportunity to vary her daily routine. The first week she'd experienced guilt at leaving her son and daughter and made it a point to come home during her lunch break to be with them. At first they were glad to see her, chatting excitedly about what they had done with Grammie, but Joyce had changed their schedule and Angela had found them napping whenever she arrived.

It had taken a while, and Angela didn't want to believe she was suspicious or even paranoid, but she couldn't shake the notion that her mother-in-law was using subtle methods to drive a wedge between her and Malcolm and Zoe. And it was Malcolm in particular. Not only did he look like Justin, he was also bright for his age—articulate, curious and outgoing—while Zoe was shy and more reserved.

She thought about the terse back-and-forth with Joyce about Lee. Joyce's views about her friend and his father were echoed and believed by so many in The Falls that it was difficult to find someone who thought otherwise. However, Angela was different. She'd liked Lee from the moment she and

Justin befriended him in the high school cafeteria. She'd seen him around town, and was as surprised as a lot of kids when he had transferred from a private Catholic institution to the local high school. Angela found him more mature than most boys their age, and despite living in what most called a mansion he was modest and unpretentious.

Did she like him? Yes. Was she in love with him? No. Justin Mitchell was the love of her life, the only man she'd slept with, and she doubted if she would ever fall in love again.

Angela piled slacks, blouses and several sundresses on a chair before taking out a Pullman, and then made quick work of packing her clothes.

[Chapter Three](#)

Lee opened the door to his sister's knock. The first thing he noticed was that she didn't look as tired as she had the week before. Pulling her into the suite, he dropped a kiss on her hair. She had blown out the curls and in its place was a cascade of raven strands sweeping down her back.

"Welcome to my humble abode."

Viviana smiled and the gesture lit up her brown eyes. "It doesn't look that humble to me. I've passed this place a number of times and never knew it looked like this inside."

"I was also quite surprised," Lee admitted. He had spent the past few days catching up on sleep, swimming laps in the outdoor pool, working out in the exercise room and binge-watching a favorite TV series of which he'd missed a few episodes. The suite had everything he'd want if he was looking to rent a furnished apartment. "How are you?"

"Much better now that you're here." She sniffed the air. "Something smells good."

Reaching for her hand, Lee eased the canvas tote from her fingers and placed it on a side table. He led her into the dining area and pulled out a chair to seat her at the table set for two. "I decided we'd eat before wading through what I expect is tons of paper."

Viviana's expression sobered. "And it's more paper and receipts than I'd expected to find. I still can't believe that rat hid bills that the mail carrier delivered to the house. And it wasn't until the bank manager called and told me that I'd overdrawn my line of credit that I realized something was wrong."

"We'll talk about your rat later, but right now I need you to tell me how much you need to cover the delinquent property taxes." Lee schooled his expression not to reveal his shock when Viviana quoted a figure that was a lot more than he'd anticipated. "That can't be for one year."

"It's for two years."

"I'll make arrangements to get a bank check and then drive over to the county offices and take care of it."

Viviana lowered her eyes. "I'm sorry you have to dip into your savings to bail me out. As soon as the boardinghouse is up and running again I promise to pay you back."

Lee smiled. "Did I say anything about you paying me back? Remember, I own half the property, so I do have a personal stake in keeping it in the family."

Their mother's will bequeathed them the house and the twelve acres on which it sat. He and Viviana were also equal recipients of their mother's life insurance. The terms of the policy had designated her older sister Barbara Wolfe-McCarthy as executor and legal guardian for her children until they were eighteen. Lee had taken control of his trust months before enlisting in the army, purchasing ten-year tax-free municipal bonds. Once they matured he'd reinvested half in a retirement fund and purchased certificates of deposits with the remaining half, while Vivi had used her inheritance to pay for college and set up a partnership with their aunt and uncle to convert The Falls House from a private residence to a boardinghouse.

"I can't believe I trusted someone so much that I wasn't able to see what was right in front of me. His online profile was almost picture-perfect. I'm definitely through with online dating sites."

"I didn't invite you here for a pity party, Vivi. What's done is done, and hopefully it will never happen again."

Viviana met her brother's large eyes, eyes that reminded her of their mother's. When he'd walked into The Falls House, she was seeing him for the first time in nearly four years, and she was shocked at how much he resembled their father. He could have been Emory Remington's younger clone, except for the eye color. She was only two years younger than Lee, but there were times when she felt he was more of a father figure to her than an older brother. She was also aware that if he did come back to Wickham Falls it would be to visit, but never to live again.

Days before he was scheduled to leave for basic training he'd told Viviana there were too many bad memories to make him feel at home in his place of birth. However, he did come back to attend her high school and college graduations, and to sign the legal documents transferring half their share of the boardinghouse to Aunt Babs before she relocated to Arizona. He had also come back for the funeral of Justin Mitchell. Not only had he looked different, but something inwardly had changed. There was a vacant look in his eyes that frightened her, and he didn't speak unless spoken to. He'd stayed long enough to pay his respects, and then he was gone.

"What are you making?" she asked, changing the topic of conversation.

"Your favorite: rack of lamb with mint sauce, roasted asparagus and rosemary potato wedges." Viviana smiled. "You remembered."

Lee opened the oven to check on the meat. "There aren't too many things I forget."

"Like Dad being gone more than he was here?"

He went completely still. "I really don't want to talk about him now."

"Sorry about that."

"There's no need to apologize, Vivi. I'm just not ready to relive the past."

She nodded. He didn't want to talk about the past and she did. Times had changed and so had their father, so she decided to bide her time before broaching the subject again. Pushing back the chair, Viviana rose to her feet and walked over and stood next to Lee as he blended fresh mint leaves, confectioners' sugar and cider vinegar in a mini food processor.

"Have you thought about getting married?"

"No. Why would you ask me that?"

"I just thought you would've been married and made me an aunt by the time you were thirty."

He gave her a sidelong smile. "I could say the same about you making me an uncle."

Viviana affected a frown. "Not with my track record for attracting lowlife vermin masquerading as the opposite sex."

"Maybe men see you as an easy mark because you smile and talk to everyone."

"Well, I do have a background in advertising, marketing and hotel hospitality."

"You have to separate the business hospitality from the personal one. What works when greeting guests and working the front desk shouldn't carry over to becoming personally involved with a man."

She paused. "I don't know what it is, but I go on a hiatus where I won't date anyone for months or even a year, and then when I do he's usually not worth wasting my time with."

Lee wiped his hands on a terry cloth towel after blending the ingredients in the food processor and spooned it into a small glass bowl. "Don't beat yourself up, Vivi. Men go through the same thing. I've met women who I feel may be that special one, and then without warning she'll change into someone I don't recognize."

"Do you think it's difficult for you to form a lasting relationship with a woman because you don't know when you're going to be deployed?"

"That and a few other things."

Resting her hip against the countertop, Viviana stared at her brother. "Do the few other things include you thinking you'll not be a good husband or father?" She froze when Lee impaled her with a lethal stare that sent chills up and down her body despite the heat coming from the oven.

"I saw firsthand how *not* to take care of my wife and children."

Viviana's eyelids fluttered. She didn't know what all had gone on between her parents, because most times Aunt Babs had made excuses about her father's frequent absences and had attempted to shield her from the disease that changed her mother from a happy young woman into one who spent more time sleeping than awake. Even when Lee elected to attend the local high school, she'd continued her classes at the parochial boarding school because she didn't want to leave her friends. And that meant coming home during school recess and holidays and occasionally some weekends.

"Is there anything I can help you with? I feel so helpless standing around watching you cook." Aunt Babs had taught her and Lee to cook. Her aunt had graduated culinary school but her career was short-circuited when Babs returned to The Falls House to care for her sister, niece and nephew.

"I didn't know if you want wine with your meal, but just in case I bought a couple of bottles of white, rosé and red."

Lee's voice broke into her thoughts. "I'll have rosé but only if you'll join me." Viviana knew Lee rarely drank, and if he did it was either a glass of wine or beer, but never hard liquor.

"The wine is in the fridge, and the corkscrew is in the drawer on your right."

Twenty minutes later Viviana sat down with Lee to enjoy the most delicious meal she had had in months. Once she'd discovered her ex's duplicity she was unable to eat more than a few morsels before feeling full. She exhaled an audible sigh after swallowing a tender slice of lamb. Her world had righted itself. Her brother was back and so was her father, the latter informing her he was only going to spend a few weeks in The Falls before returning to Philadelphia—a city that was now his permanent home.

Over dinner they discussed Lee's proposal to turn The Falls House into a bed-and-breakfast, while both agreed that she should file for chapter 7, which would wipe out her debt, allow her to keep her assets, rebuild her credit, incorporate another business, make repairs and start anew. His next suggestion rendered her mute for a full minute.

"You want to sell off more land?" she asked, once she recovered her voice.

Lee laced his fingers together. "Not all of it. Every generation since the turn of the twentieth century sold large parcels of the original two hundred thirty acres. The house and outbuildings sit on twelve acres. If we sell eight, then you'll have more than enough money to make repairs and put some away for your retirement."

She blinked slowly. "But the land is a part of our legacy."

"What legacy, Vivi? We are the last of the Wolfes and the exterior of the house is falling apart. I've told you that I'm going to stay long enough and help you get your business up and running and then I'm out of here. So if you want to hold on to the property, then you cannot continue to go down the same path."

Viviana knew Lee was right. What once had been the grandest house in Johnson County was now becoming a shabby replica of what it had been. "I'll think about it," she said, not willing to give in that easily to her brother's proposal to sell off the land that had been in their family for more than a century.

"Don't think too long," Lee said softly.

She ran her fingers through her hair and closed her eyes. So much had happened over the past year to turn her life into a nightmare. Creditors were calling incessantly, asking for money she didn't have, and three months ago, she had given employees and lodgers of the boardinghouse notice that she was going out of business. Viviana opened her eyes and gave Lee a long, penetrating stare.

"It is a lot to think about."

A hint of a smile played at the corners of his mouth. "I know it is, but gone are the days when the Wolfes had an active social calendar when they entertained friends and elected officials. And even if you do decide to marry and start a family I doubt if you'll have enough children to fill ten bedroom suites like our relatives did in the past."

"I doubt if I'll ever marry and have children."

Lee winked at her. “Don’t say *ever*, little sister.”

“Enough talk about marriage and babies. Do you want me to call Preston McAvoy’s office and set up a meeting to discuss filing for bankruptcy and setting up a new corporation?” she asked.

“Yes, and try and come up with several names for the new business. Meanwhile, I’ll cover the past-due taxes and utilities.”

Viviana pulled her lip between her teeth for several seconds. “Dad paid the electric bill.”

Lee sat straight. “I don’t want you to accept any more money from him.”

Viviana knew Lee didn’t want to talk about their father, but she did. When Emory offered to pay the delinquent electric bill she’d wanted to tell him that he was twenty years too late in his attempt to play the supportive father, but had held her tongue. Even if he hadn’t been able to provide for his family financially, she’d realized once she was older that he could have been there emotionally for them.

“I didn’t ask him. He volunteered.” She didn’t want to argue with Lee about their father. And she didn’t want Emory involved in something that had nothing to do with him. His name did not appear on any of the documents in connection with the main house, the guesthouses or the land. “I’ll make certain not to involve him again.”

Lee gave her a barely perceptible nod. “Thanks. You have a lot on your plate before the B and B is up and running, and that means prioritizing.”

“You’re right. I think we should take care of legal matters first.” Reaching for a pencil and pad she began jotting down possible names for the new corporation. Her hand stilled. “I did something I never thought I would do.”

“What’s that?” Lee asked, as he stood up and began clearing the table.

“I posted a photo of Marcus on a number of social media sites with a warning that he’s an identity thief. Hopefully someone will recognize him and call the authorities.”

Lee’s eyebrows lifted slightly. “Scamming you probably wasn’t his first rodeo, and if he’s done this before then someone is sure to recognize him.”

Viviana pushed back her chair, stacked plates and flatware, and joined Lee in the kitchen. “That’s what I’m hoping.” She pressed her lips together when she recalled meeting Marcus for the first time. He was everything she wanted in a man, and then some, but that was before she realized he’d hustled her. “You’re probably right about that. Everything about him was so calculating and I...” Her words trailed off when Lee’s cell phone rang.

Wiping his hands on a towel, Lee picked up the phone and glanced at the display. “I have to take this.” Angela was calling him again. He tapped a button. “How’s it going?”

“Great. I just called to say I’m back in The Falls.”

Lee turned his back when he noticed Viviana staring at him. “I thought you were going to be away for two weeks,” he said under his breath.

“That was before my parents decided to fly to LA and take Malcolm and Zoe with them. My kids were beside themselves once they discovered they were going on a plane for the first time.”

“Can I call you back later, because I’m having dinner with my sister?”

“No problem. Call me whenever you get the chance.”

He smiled. “I will.”

“Who was she?” Viviana asked once he ended the call.

He set the phone on the countertop. “What are you talking about?”

“I know you were talking to a woman because your voice changed. Have you been holding out on me?”

“No. And for your information, Miss Busybody, the woman is Angela.”

“Angela Banks?”

“Remember she’s now Angela Mitchell.”

Viviana snorted under her breath. “It appears as if you haven’t wasted any time hooking up with your best friend’s widow.”

A frown appeared between his eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I always thought Angela married the wrong friend.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, so get your mind out of the gutter because I have no intention of *hooking up* with her.”

Viviana held up her hands. “Don’t get me wrong, Lee. I happen to like Angela and wouldn’t mind having her as a sister-in-law and becoming an auntie to her adorable twins.”

Lee smiled when he should’ve told Viviana to stop meddling in his life. “I never figured you for a matchmaker.”

“That’s because I’m a true romantic at heart.”

He tugged on the end of her unbound hair. “Let me know when you’re ready to meet a nice guy and I’ll introduce you to one of my buddies.”

Viviana scrunched up her pert nose. “Nice, or even close to perfect, but no thanks. I need to concentrate on reviving the business before I even consider looking at another man.”

Lee dropped a kiss on his sister’s hair. “It’s going to happen, and when you reopen it will be better than before.”

Wrapping her arms around Lee’s waist, Viviana rested her head against his shoulder. “That’s what I always like about you. You’re always so optimistic.”

He wanted to tell her that optimism was what allowed him to survive dangerous missions. And whenever Lee went out with his team his sole focus was completing what he’d been ordered to accomplish and return alive. “Why don’t you go home before it gets too dark.”

She lowered her arms. “Don’t you want me to help you clean up?”

“No. Everything can go into the dishwasher.”

Viviana kissed Lee’s cheek and then gathered her tote as he walked her to the door. She smiled up at him. “You’re the best brother a sister could ever have.”

He winked at her. “That goes double for me when it comes to choosing a sister. Text and let me know when you get an appointment with the lawyer.”

“I will.”

Lee closed and locked the door behind her, and then returned to the kitchen to finish loading the dishwasher. On average, he and Viviana communicated several times a month, either Skyping or through text messages. He’d felt obligated to let her know that he was all right, because aside from their Aunt Babs he was her only other surviving relative. And they’d agreed to give each other power of attorney for all legal matters if he wasn’t available to sign in person. There were few things they hid from each other—the exception was his missions—and what he found odd was her not mentioning that her relationship with her latest boyfriend had ended nearly four months earlier. It was only when she received a notification that the property would be added to an auction listing that she was forthcoming, finally admitting she’d been too embarrassed to tell him that she had been scammed and faced losing the house.

Viviana claimed she was a romantic, but she was also a grown woman who didn’t need him lecturing her about the men she chose to become involved with; he’d hoped the imminent fear of finding herself homeless would finally allow her to think with her head and not her heart. A wry smile twisted his mouth when he recalled his mother claiming she was a romantic, hopelessly in love with her husband, and would stand by her wedding vows until death parted them. And it had.

Lee programmed the dishwasher and punched the start button. He then picked up his cell phone and tapped Angela’s number. She answered after the third ring.

“Leland, come and get me!”

“What’s wrong?” he asked, hearing panic in her voice.

“Please come.”

His heart rate sped up. “Where are you?”

“I’m at Miss Joyce’s.”

“I’m on my way.”

Lee hung up and dashed to the bedroom to retrieve his keys. He had never known Angela to be a drama queen, not even when she and Justin split up temporarily. She’d come to him and say, “*Justin and I are not speaking*,” and whenever they continued to share the lunch table she was the epitome of poise, not allowing anyone to suspect she and Justin were no longer a couple. But hearing her strident tone now had momentarily unnerved him. He wondered if something drastic had happened between her and her mother-in-law.

He wasn’t overly fond of Joyce Mitchell and had never felt welcome in her home, but he respected her as Justin’s mother. Most times he’d suggested Justin and Angela come to The Falls House for their study sessions whenever it was Justin’s turn to host the meetings. Miss Joyce, as people usually referred to her, used to glare at him and then turn her back without saying a word. It was apparent she sided with those in The Falls who believed he would end up like his father—a drug-addicted felon.

Lee tried not to overthink why Angela wanted him to come and get her as he managed to stay under the speed limit on his way to The Falls. Night had fallen over the landscape when he maneuvered up in front of the Mitchell house and spotted Angela waiting at the curb, clutching the handles of a Pullman. He got out of the jeep and came around to help her in at the same time the front door to the house opened and Joyce came down off the porch, gesturing wildly. He lifted the Pullman, storing it in the SUV’s cargo area.

He closed the passenger-side door once Angela was belted in.

Angela’s chest rose and fell heavily as she stared out the windshield. “You just got back and this is the second time I’ve burdened you with my problems. But I didn’t know who else to call.” She didn’t have any close friends from high school, and had made it a practice not to discuss her personal business with coworkers.

Lee gave her a quick glance. “It’s okay, Angie.”

“Nothing is going to be okay until I finally move out and take control of my own life. When I told her that I was going to look for a house she went off on me, and I knew I couldn’t spend another night under her roof without losing it completely. The woman knows exactly what buttons to push to make me lose it.”

Decelerating, Lee rested his right hand on her denim-covered knee and gave it a gentle squeeze while steering with his left. “That’s because she knows what to say to set you off.”

Angela slowly shook her head. “She messes with me so much that I’ve learned to ignore her, especially when the kids are around, because I don’t want them to see their mother go ballistic on their grandmother. She said something so twisted tonight that I knew I couldn’t spend another minute there.”

“Where do you want to go?”

She stared at Lee’s distinctive profile. She had always thought him incredibly handsome, but his attractiveness didn’t end there. He exuded a masculinity that was almost palpable. “I’d like to spend the night with you.”

Lee’s foot hit the brake, causing the vehicle to come to an abrupt stop. “No!”

Angela gave him an incredulous look. “Why not?”

“Because where I’m staying only has one bedroom.”

“Do you have a sofa?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll sleep on your sofa. It’ll be just for tonight.” Angela wanted to tell Lee that she could check in to a hotel or motel, but she didn’t want to be alone. Not tonight. And not when she needed

to bare her soul about pretending to be strong when it was something she struggled with every day for the benefit of others *and* her children.

Lee exhaled an audible, ragged sigh. “Okay, Angela. Just for tonight. If you need someplace to stay, then I’ll call Vivi and have her put you up.”

Angela clutched the hand on her knee. “I really appreciate it.”

Lee pulled his hand away and activated the Bluetooth feature on the dash, connecting it to Viviana’s number. “Hey, Vivi,” he said when her greeting came on the speaker. “I have Angela with me and I’m asking if you can do her a favor.”

“Of course. What does she need?”

“Can you prepare one of the bedroom suites for her? She’ll be there tomorrow and she will let you know how long she’s staying.”

“That’s not a problem. I’ll put her in the suite across from mine. What about her twins?”

“They’re away for the summer, so it’ll just be her.”

“No problem. Give her my number and have her call me before she comes over just in case I may have to step out.”

“I will.” He disconnected the call and met Angela’s eyes. “You’re all set.”

Slumping against the leather seat, she nodded. “Thank you so much.”

Chapter Four

Angela felt as if she could finally exhale after so many years of holding herself in check. Her appearance on the ramp had been touted as the next coming of supermodel Naomi Campbell, when in reality Angela had been just a frightened teenage girl who had to psych herself up before taking that first step onto the runway. And no one knew of her insecurities about her height and waif-thin body, which had become the brunt of jokes from her peers who called her Olive Oyl, the skinny cartoon character from *Popeye*

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