

“I loved this sweet romance wrapped around the life of sisters. Deborah Raney captures the love of family like no other. *Finding Wings* will delight readers from beginning to end.”

—RACHEL HAUCK, *New York Times* best-selling author

“A warm and wonderful love story written with a deft hand, *Finding Wings* tackles true-to-life family issues and shows how faith and strength of character can bring hope and healing.”

—ROBIN LEE HATCHER, best-selling author of
How Sweet It Is and *Cross My Heart*

“*Finding Wings* was the perfect read for me during quarantine. It’s a captivating romance that also explores the themes of sisterly love and what it means to sacrifice for family. The book sparkles with faith, hope, and love.”

—ELIZABETH MUSSER, author of
When I Close My Eyes and *The Promised Land*

“In *Finding Wings*, Britt Chandler’s journey toward love is a beautiful reminder to both reach for our dreams and recognize the joys in where we are planted.”

—KATHERINE REAY, best-selling author of
The Printed Letter Bookshop and *Of Literature and Lattes*

“With her customary small-town charm and oh-so-memorable characters, Deborah Raney delivers big in *Finding Wings*. Britt, the youngest Chandler sister, finally gets her story—and her man—in a swoon-worthy romance that wraps up this marvelous series.”

—TAMERA ALEXANDER, *USA Today* best-selling
author of *With This Pledge* and *Colors of Truth*

“*Finding Wings* features the lovable Britt Chandler, who’s still trying to find her place in the world. Raney pairs her with Rafe Stuart, a faithful, honorable man who’s filled with past regrets. The story takes the characters on a compelling journey of discovery and redemption. *Finding Wings* is a lovely tale of faith and family that’s sure to please fans of contemporary women’s fiction!”

—DENISE HUNTER, best-selling author of
the Bluebell Inn series

“*Finding Wings* is a wonderful conclusion to Deborah Raney’s Chandler Sisters series—not because everything ends perfectly, but because the sisters’ happiness is realistic. I love each sister’s story, but Britt’s is my favorite as she discovers that embracing the unexpected circumstances in her life reveals God’s best for her.”

—BETH K. VOGT, Christy and
Carol Award-winning author

Finding Wings

A Chandler Sisters Novel

Deborah Raney



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Finding Wings

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CHAPTER 1

November

BRITT CHANDLER COULDN'T HELP THE smile that came as she approached the freshly installed sign near the entrance to their long driveway. She tapped the brakes. The Cottages on Poplar Brook Road, the ornate wooden sign read. Billboard was more like it, the curlicue letters holding their own beneath painted silhouettes of poplar trees. The massive sign had cost a small fortune and even more to have it—and its smaller counterpart at the highway turnoff—installed. But Britt and her sisters agreed it was worth it, given the rather remote wooded acreage where they lived. More than one of their Airbnb customers had gotten lost trying to find the way on the curvy Missouri road.

Her phone chirped, and seeing her brother-in-law's name on the Caller ID, Britt pressed the button on the steering wheel to answer. "Hey, Quinn, what's up?"

"Not much. Are you home right now?"

"I will be in about two minutes. Why?"

“Would you mind looking in on Phee? At the new house.”

“Sure. Is everything okay?” She didn’t like the worry that had slipped into Quinn’s voice. “She’s working awfully late, isn’t she?”

“As usual. And it’s probably nothing, but she was feeling kind of puny when I took lunch by around one. I’m at the house here in town, but she’s not home yet and she’s not answering her phone. She’s probably just working outside, but I’m out the door to a meeting at church and I’d feel better if somebody checked in on her. Maybe persuade her to go home if you can.”

“Ha. You forget this is my stubborn big sister you’re talking about.”

“I remember. Believe me, I remember.”

Britt laughed. “Let me get my groceries put away and I’ll run over there. I have something to send home for you anyway.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a surprise, but you might want to save room for dessert when you get home from your meeting.”

“My mouth is already watering. Thanks, Britt.”

“No problem.” Britt ended the call and eased her Ford Escape up the lane. She frowned. Her oldest sister’s pregnancy had been pretty routine, but Phylicia’s morning sickness had dragged on for almost five months now—and not just in the mornings. Britt knew Phee was weary of it, especially when she had so many things she wanted to accomplish at the house she and Quinn were building on the property.

Britt peered up through the windshield and sighed to realize that the autumn colors were all but gone. The last smattering of leaves clung tenaciously to the poplars and dogwoods lining the lane. Before long, snow would blanket the countryside, leaching the landscape of the glorious golds and reds it had worn only a few weeks ago. Of course, winter had its own beauty here in southeast Missouri, but Britt wasn’t ready for that yet. Especially not for how short the days had grown. She glanced at the dashboard. Not even six o’clock and it was already dark!

Still, her spirits lifted, as they always did, when the cottages came into sight. Lights gleamed from the cottage windows and even from a distance, Britt could see Joanna moving around inside, no doubt obsessing over the plans for her spring wedding.

Farther up the lane, she spotted Phee's car in front of the two-story home under construction at the far end of the property. The house currently sported a roof and a pretty stone facade. If not for the field of mud where a front yard would be next spring, it almost looked like it might be occupied. Phylicia and Quinn were hoping to move in before the baby arrived in March. But since they were doing a lot of the work themselves, Britt had her doubts they'd make that deadline. Of course, she would never reveal those doubts to her oldest sister. Phee was nervous enough about being ready for the baby's arrival—a child she and Quinn jokingly declared had been conceived on their honeymoon in Hawaii. For now, they were living a few miles away in another house Quinn had built. Or at least that's where they slept. They spent nearly every waking hour at the construction site. Britt loved that they would soon all live here on the same property, but she sometimes worried that her sister overdid things. Half the time Phylicia forgot to eat lunch until Britt or Joanna reminded her. Or Quinn brought her a sandwich from town.

Remembering the cookies she'd baked this morning, Britt parked in front of her cabin and pulled her cell phone from her purse. She dialed Phee, but the phone went to voice mail. "This is Phee. You know what to do."

Britt waited impatiently for the tone. "Hey, you. I'm bringing over some cookies for you to take home. I made Quinn's favorite. Oatmeal scotchies."

The sisters all doted on Quinn Mitchell and for good reason. Britt wasn't sure how they would have managed getting their little Airbnb enterprise up and running without him. But things were going surprisingly well, despite some rather

major hitches at the beginning. She and her sisters made a good team. In fact, only yesterday Phee declared that they'd built their renovation fund back up to the eleven thousand dollars they'd started with after purchasing the cottages free and clear. If Joanna's idea for opening a wedding venue here at the cottages took off, they could probably breathe easy where money was concerned.

She turned off the ignition and, as she did every time she arrived home, she stopped to admire the tiny stone cabin she'd claimed for her own. Dim lamplight outlined Melvin's silhouette on the windowsill, tail twitching, anticipating his nightly treat, no doubt. Her mother's tuxedo cat they'd inherited after Mom's death had decidedly become Britt's. Her sisters might argue with that claim, but Britt's cabin was where Melvin was fed, where he slept, and less happily, where his litter box resided. Mom would have loved knowing that Melvin had taken to country life so quickly. In some ways it felt surreal that the first anniversary of Mom's death was approaching, yet in other ways, it seemed an eternity since they'd had Mom in their lives.

Britt unloaded groceries from the back of the Escape and glanced toward Quinn and Phee's house. The lights were on inside, and she didn't see Phee outside. It wasn't like her to not return a call. She might be on the phone with someone else. Maybe Daddy had called from Florida. He'd been keeping in touch with Phee more often now that he was going to be a grandpa.

She heard the thud of Melvin jumping down from the windowsill and a second later he appeared in the kitchen. "Hey, buddy. Sorry, but you're going to have to wait a few minutes for your treat."

Britt gave him a quick head-to-tail stroke, then shrugged out of her jacket and put the groceries away before dialing Phee again. Straight to voice mail. Hmm. Well, no matter. She'd walk the cookies over and make sure everything was okay. The

exercise would do her good after the three warm-from-the-oven cookies—and cookie dough worth three more—she'd snarfed while baking them this morning.

She slipped out of her boots, changed into tennis shoes, and donned her jacket again. The night air was cool and the ground soggy from recent rains, but she knew the lane by heart, rain or shine. Picking her way across the makeshift boardwalk Quinn had laid leading up to the house, she listened to the sounds of the Missouri night. A gentle breeze rustled the branches overhead, and a barn owl hooted above her somewhere in the canopy of the largest poplar.

Not that long ago, she would have been terrified to be alone in the night, but something about this beautiful spot of earth she and her sisters owned had cured her of that almost as soon as her name was on the title.

The porch light was on and Britt rang the bell. Muffled chimes sounded from inside. Good. Phee had been pestering Quinn to get the doorbell connected. Britt waited and rang again, knocking on the solid oak door for good measure. When that didn't rouse anyone, she tried the doorknob. Locked.

She knocked again. "Phee? Anybody home?"

Silence. She released a breath, set the paper plate of cookies on the edge of the half-finished porch, and stepped onto the boardwalk. Tiptoeing through the mud to the closest lit window, she was thankful she'd changed out of her favorite boots. She cupped her hands over her eyes and peered inside.

No sign of Phee, but a measuring tape and notepad lay atop a bolt of fabric on the kitchen counter. Britt remembered her sister saying she was going to try to sew all the curtains for this house. Not so much because she could save money that way, but because their mom had made the curtains for their childhood home, and Phee wanted to carry that tradition into the home her own children would grow up in.

Britt knocked on the window. "Phee?" she called again. It was too dark to see a clear path to the next lit window but

she trudged blindly, the soft earth giving way beneath her feet. The landscape sloped downward on this side of the house, and by the time she reached the window, it was too high for her to look in.

She turned to retrace her steps but stopped, hearing an unfamiliar sound. Like the high-pitched mewling of a kitten. Holding perfectly still, she listened again. Only this time, she clearly heard her name.

It came again.

“Phee!” she shouted, heart in her throat. “Where are you?” Something wasn’t right.

She slogged back through the damp sod and knocked again on the front door. Then pounded. She turned the handle and pushed with her shoulder, hoping maybe it was just stuck, but it didn’t give.

She stopped to listen again, but only heard the night sounds—water sloshing the riverbanks below the cabins, the breeze, a distant hoot owl. Maybe she’d only imagined hearing her name. Joanna had accused her more than once of having an overactive imagination.

She dialed Quinn, thinking he might have a key hidden somewhere. But his phone went to voice mail and she hung up without listening to the familiar message.

Feeling more frantic by the minute, she retraced her steps along the side of the house and went around to the back door. To her relief, it was open. The cloying scents of sawdust and new paint mingled with the musty smell of rain.

Once inside the mudroom, she heard the sound again. Her name. And this time she was sure it was Phee, calling out to her, her voice weak and trembling. But unmistakably Phee.

Adrenaline surged through Britt’s veins. She ran down the hallway, following the sound. When she reached the kitchen, she stopped short.

Phee was slumped on the floor, her back against the kitchen island. Britt ran to her and knelt beside her.

Her sister's complexion had a gray cast, and she trembled like the last leaves on the poplars outside. "Britt? Thank God you're here. Something's wrong. Something . . . the baby . . ." Her words slurred and she clutched at her belly. "Oh, Britt . . . My baby . . ." She struggled to push herself up from the floor, revealing a puddle of blood underneath her.

"No! Stay there." Britt put a hand on her sister's shoulder. She worked to keep her own voice steady. But there was too much blood. Had Phee already lost the baby? "I'm calling an ambulance, Phee."

She felt like she was going to be sick. With trembling fingers, she dialed 911.

The dispatcher answered on the first ring. "Nine-one-one. What is your emergency, please?"

"We need an ambulance. My sister is—" She started to say "miscarrying a baby," but she didn't know that for sure and didn't want to scare Phee. But surely . . . surely you couldn't lose that much blood and still carry the pregnancy to term. "My sister is pregnant but . . . she's bleeding. Pretty bad."

"Okay, I'm going to send an ambulance. I need you to clearly state your exact address for me."

Britt gave a little gasp. Quinn and Phee probably had a different address, even though their house was on the same property, but Britt didn't know what it was. "It's a new house . . . still being built. I'm not sure of the address, but tell them to come to 1585 Poplar Brook Road. There are four houses here. We're at the last house on the left at the end of the lane. You'll see a sign for The Cottages on Poplar Brook Road." The words tumbled out on top of each other.

The dispatcher repeated the address in a frustratingly slow singsong voice. "Is that correct? Could you repeat your phone number to me, please?"

Britt did so, growing more frustrated when the dispatcher repeated it back. "Yes. Yes, that's it. Please hurry!"

"I need you to stay calm and answer some questions for

me. Tell me exactly what's happening. Is your sister conscious and breathing?" Frustrating calm permeated the woman's voice.

"Yes. She's breathing, but—" She turned away, whispering into the phone. "There's a lot of blood. And she's so pale. And weak."

"But you're certain she's breathing and conscious."

"Yes, she's breathing. She's . . . sitting up."

"Okay. That's good. And how far along is her pregnancy?"

She scrambled to remember. "She's not due until March."

Phee gripped Britt's hand with a strength that surprised her. "March 28. Tell them I was having some contractions earlier. Not hard ones . . . I'm not even sure they were really contractions, but . . . Oh, Britt. It's too early! Way too early—" Her voice broke.

"Did you hear that?" Britt asked the dispatcher. "Her due date is March 28. And she had some contractions."

"Can you please state your name and your sister's name clearly?"

Britt did so, her panic escalating. "Please! She's really pale. Is someone coming? Did you send an ambulance yet? She's just . . . so pale."

"Yes. The ambulance has been dispatched. Your sister may be going into shock."

"Then what do I do?" Panic rose inside her. She thought shock could be life-threatening.

"I'm going to put an EMT—an emergency medical technician—on the line. He will stay with you and talk you through everything until the ambulance gets there. Please stay on the line and I'll transfer you."

"No. Wait . . ." It felt as though her lifeline was being cut.

Almost immediately, a man's voice came on the line. "This is Rafe. I'm with the Langhorne Emergency Services. The dispatcher said you might be in labor? With some bleeding. Is that right?"

“No, not me. It’s my sister. She’s not due until March but she’s bleeding and—”

“Your name is Britt? Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, Britt. First, I need for you to stay calm. Your sister needs your help. I’m going to stay on the phone with you until the ambulance gets there. I’m going to talk you through what I need you to do while we wait. Do you understand?”

“Yes. Okay . . .”

“Britt, what is your sister’s name?”

“Phylicia. Phylicia Mitchell. We call her Phee for short.” She pronounced it again, then spelled it, feeling like every syllable she spoke wasted a moment that might mean the difference between life and death—if not for Phee, for her baby.

“Okay. That’s good. An ambulance is on its way for Phee right now, but I need you to answer a few more questions for me. Can you do that?”

The man’s voice was calm and soothing and Britt nodded, determination rising in her. Nothing was going to happen to her sister or this precious baby. Not on her watch. She made her voice strong. “Yes, I’m here.”

“Good.” She thought she heard a smile in the man’s voice, and it brought surprising encouragement. “Okay, is your sister having contractions?”

“Yes. She said she was earlier. She said they weren’t too hard . . . But it’s way too early.”

“I understand. Now, I need to determine how much blood your sister has lost.”

He asked a series of questions and Britt answered them as best she could, all the while keeping one eye on Phee, who’d relaxed and closed her eyes—a fact that didn’t encourage Britt. She cradled her cell phone between her ear and her shoulder and spoke her sister’s name softly.

No response. “Phee?” She shook her sister’s shoulder.

“Is she losing consciousness?” The calming voice came again.

“I’m not sure. She’s still breathing.”

“That’s good.”

“But I can’t get her to open her eyes.”

“Try to rouse her. Have her stay awake.” The EMT waited a few seconds. “Is she awake?”

“Phee! Come on, Phee. They want you to stay awake.”

Phee stirred and her eyes fluttered open, then closed again. “I’m awake.”

“Then open your eyes. Please.”

“I’m trying.”

“She’s talking to me, but she isn’t opening her eyes. Is that okay?” She willed her voice to stay steady.

“The ambulance is almost there. I’ll stay with you until I’m sure they’ve arrived. Be sure they can get inside.”

The wail of a siren in the distance was the sweetest music Britt had ever heard. “Oh, I hear them now. Thank you!”

“Stay on the line, Britt. Until we’re sure they’ve found the house.” She didn’t want him to ever hang up. His voice had been a lifeline, and she wasn’t sure how she would have gotten through without his calming words to guide her.

“Yes, I’m here,” she told him. She patted Phee’s arm. “The ambulance is almost here. Stay awake, okay, sis?”

“I am.” But Phylicia’s words were frighteningly slurred, and the blood stains on her clothes seemed to tell the worst.

CHAPTER 2

BRITT WAS TERRIFIED TO LEAVE her sister's side even for a few moments, but she knew the front door was locked. What she couldn't remember was whether she'd told the ambulance crew to come around back. "I'm going to go unlock the door for them, Phee. I'll be right back."

Phee seemed to have fallen asleep, the slight rise and fall of her chest the only indication she was still breathing.

Britt clutched the phone to her ear, the EMT on the other end her lifeline.

"Yes, go open the door." That smooth, low voice again. *Rafe*, he'd said his name was. Rhymed with *safe*. "But stay with me on the phone, Britt, okay?"

"Yes. I'm here." Britt raced through the house and unlocked the door. She looked out to see red and blue lights strobing through the trees down at the road. "I see them."

"Good." She flipped on the porch light and, leaving the door wide open, went back through the house flipping on light switches as she went. "Do they know which house to come to? It's the last one all the way down the lane."

“I’ll let them know. You’re doing great, Britt. When you get back to your sister, let me know how she’s doing.”

“I’m here. Her eyes are closed.” She knelt beside Phee and patted her cheek.

Phee didn’t so much as flinch.

Britt’s grip tightened around her phone. “She’s still breathing, but I can’t wake her up.”

“The team is there now. Just outside the house. Go show them where Phee is and let them do their job. You did great. You did everything you could.”

Reluctantly, she left Phee’s side and started back toward the front door. “Will they let me ride with her in the ambulance?”

“Probably not,” he said. “It would be best if you follow them to the hospital in your own vehicle. Do you feel okay to drive?”

“I . . . I think so.”

“Don’t drive if you’re feeling too shaky or upset. It’d be better to stay behind and be safe than—”

“No . . . I’ll be okay. But I need to try to get hold of Phee’s husband. And Joanna.”

“That’s fine. Just let me know once the team is with your sister and then you can hang up and make those calls.”

But she didn’t want to hang up. She wished he could stay on the line with her until this nightmare was over and Phee was back home safe with the baby safe inside her. But was that even possible with as much blood as she’d lost? She opened her mouth to ask the EMT—Rafe—but closed it just as quickly. He couldn’t possibly know how this would turn out, and it wasn’t fair to make him answer her desperate questions.

Two EMTs—a middle-aged woman and a younger man—were hustling out of the emergency vehicle by the time she opened the door. They rushed up the steps, medical kits in hand, and Britt led them to the kitchen where Phee was still crumpled on the floor.

She should have thought to at least get a pillow under her sister's head to make her more comfortable. What else had she failed to do that might have made a difference for Phylcia and her baby?

She stood back watching as the man and woman worked over her sister, communicating almost silently, and when they did speak, their unfamiliar words resembled a foreign language to her. She couldn't sense from their tones how serious things were, but within a few minutes, they had Phee on a stretcher.

Something about seeing Phee carried from the house on a gurney sent a chill up Britt's spine. It was too familiar from the times they'd had to call the ambulance for Mom during those final days before cancer finally took her life. Those awful days . . . But Phee wasn't fighting cancer. She was fighting for the life of her baby. And maybe her own life too.

Desperate for someone to tell her that everything would be okay, Britt ran out behind the EMTs, hoping they'd offer to let her ride with Phee.

With the stretcher loaded into the back of the ambulance, the female EMT climbed in behind. She spoke in a clipped voice. "We're taking her to Southeast. You know where that is?"

"Yes. I . . . I'll follow you."

"Sorry, we can't wait for you. We need to get there as fast as we can. Just come on your own. Park in the ER lot when you get there and tell the front desk who you're there for. And drive safely!" Without another glance, the woman slammed the door, and the ambulance roared down the lane.

Fighting back tears, Britt ran back into the house, located her phone, and tried Quinn again. No answer. She dialed Joanna and almost cried when her sister answered.

"Jo! Where are you? An ambulance just took Phee to the ER. You need to get to Southeast Hospital right away."

"What? Why? What happened?"

Racing back to the house, Britt gave Jo the short version as she quickly closed up Phee and Quinn's house. The blood on the kitchen floor stopped her cold. So much blood. She prayed Quinn wouldn't find that before someone could come back and clean it up. But she couldn't take time now.

She ran back up the lane to get her Escape. "I'm on my way to the ER right now. And pray! Oh, Jo, she lost so much blood!"

"But did she lose . . ."

"I don't know. I don't think so, but it can't be good. Just hurry. They said we can park in the ER lot."

"I'm on my way. I'll probably beat you there."

"Okay. Don't wait for me. Go on in and tell them you're there for Phee. I still can't get hold of Quinn."

Fifteen minutes later Britt pulled in beside Jo's car in the small parking lot outside the ER. Closing her car door, she realized there were smudges of blood on the door handle of her white car. She looked at her hands and realized where it had come from. Phee's blood. As she ran toward the building, she searched her purse for a tissue. But it did no good. The blood was already dried. *The life is in the blood.* "Oh, Lord," she whispered. "Please, please sustain that life for Phee and her baby."

She pushed through the doors and found Jo talking to a woman behind the window—a nurse, if her blue scrubs were any indication.

Britt pressed close to Jo and whispered, "Did she . . . lose the baby?"

Jo shrugged, her eyes dull with worry. "I don't know. I just got here."

"You're both her sisters?" the woman at the counter asked.

"Yes." They answered in unison.

"You can go on back. I'll buzz you in." She pointed to their left. "Through those doors, and take the first right. Your sister is in Three."

Thanking her, they hurried through doors that parted like the Red Sea before them.

Phee was sitting up in the bed, alert and talking to a nurse. They'd already changed her into a hospital gown and her hair was matted to her scalp. But already, her color was worlds better.

Relief washed over Britt, only to recede like a tide when she realized they didn't know yet about the baby.

Phee gave them a wan smile over the nurse's shoulder. "Sorry, guys."

"What on earth are you sorry for?" Jo went to the foot of the bed and tentatively touched Phee's toes beneath the blankets. "How are you doing?"

"Better. Now that I know the baby's okay."

Britt willed herself to swallow back the huge sigh that came. "Thank the Lord!"

"Oh yes," the nurse said. "Baby's still in there with a good, strong heartbeat. We're not completely out of the woods yet but baby is fine."

Phee frowned. "Is Quinn on his way?"

"We haven't been able to get hold of him," Britt said. "I talked to him about an hour ago. He said he had a meeting at church."

"Yes," Phee supplied. "He's at the church."

The nurse uncoiled some wires on a machine Britt didn't recognize. "One of you might want to go get him. There may be some decisions he'll want to be in on."

"I'll get him." Jo grabbed Britt's arm and tugged her toward the door they'd come in. "I'll be right back."

"You may as well both go. We're taking this young lady back for some tests. It'll be"—she looked at her watch—"twenty minutes or so."

"Are you sure, Phee?"

Phee gave a weak laugh and held up an arm that already sported an IV line. "I'm not going anywhere."



“Well, hey there.” Quinn smiled up at Britt from the table where he was seated with half a dozen other board members in the church basement.

His gaze went to Jo behind her, and he seemed surprised they’d interrupted his meeting, but quickly registered that something must be very wrong for them to do so. Quinn excused himself and met them at the doorway. “What’s going on?”

“Everything’s okay,” Britt said quickly. She lowered her voice. “But Phee is in the emergency room.”

“What?” He stepped into the hallway and pulled the door closed behind them. He glanced instinctively in the direction of the hospital, looking like he might run out the door to the ER. “What happened?”

Britt gave him the same quick update she’d given Jo earlier, leaving out the details about the blood. She was grateful she’d been able to clean her hands with some hand sanitizer in the car on the way here.

“The baby is fine,” Jo reassured with a hand on Quinn’s forearm.

“And Phee too,” Britt hastened to add. She and Jo had decided not to tell him about the nurse’s warning that they weren’t out of the woods yet. “But they want you to be there while they’re doing tests and trying to decide what’s going on.”

“Of course.” Quinn fished in his pocket and produced his keys. “I’ll meet you there. You said Southeast, right?” He didn’t even go back to explain to the group in the meeting room.

“Yes, Southeast. Please drive carefully, Quinn.” They were Jo’s parting words to anyone getting in a vehicle ever since she’d been in a serious car accident last summer. She still walked with an almost imperceptible limp after getting the cast off her leg a couple of months ago.

Britt and Jo followed Quinn to the parking lot and

climbed into Britt's Escape, but despite Jo's warning, they soon lost sight of Quinn's pickup as he sped for the hospital.

After a few minutes of silence, Jo spoke what they were both thinking. "Do you think she'll lose the baby?" Worry creased her brow.

Britt bit her bottom lip. "I don't know . . . Oh, Jo, I don't know how she could lose that much blood and still survive, let alone keep the baby." She took in a sharp breath, remembering. "We need to get things cleaned up before Quinn gets back home. It looks like a crime scene in their kitchen."

Jo pointed in the direction of home. "Let's go now then. That'll give them a little time alone together."

"Maybe you should text Quinn and let him know we're . . . running an errand and will be there soon. We don't want Phee to worry about us."

Jo spoke the message into her phone and pressed Send. But as they headed out to the cottages, Britt dreaded what they'd find at the new house and wished she'd taken the time to mop the floors—for *Jo's* sake.

CHAPTER 3

IT WAS ALMOST EIGHT THIRTY by the time Britt and Jo got back to the hospital. Phylicia had been admitted, and they had to park in the visitor parking lot before going up to see her.

Quinn sat in an uncomfortable-looking vinyl chair scooted as close to the hospital bed as it would go. The TV overhead was on but with the sound turned down. Quinn's eyes flitted between a sleeping Phee and the monitors over her bed, as if he could will her vitals to remain at appropriate levels by keeping his eyes glued to the ever-changing numbers on the screen.

"How is she?" Britt mouthed when Quinn acknowledged them.

"She's stable. They got the bleeding under control and the baby is still doing great, but Phee has a condition—I forget what they called it—where she'll have to be on bed rest."

"For how long?"

He blew out a breath. "The rest of the pregnancy. Unless it resolves itself. Apparently that *can* happen, but it's not guaranteed. They just hope she can go a few more weeks."

“Oh wow.” Jo shook her head.

“Tell me about it. How on earth are we supposed to keep this woman down?”

“She’ll do it,” Britt declared. “For the baby’s sake. And yours, Quinn.”

“I know.” He shifted in his chair. “But she’s not going to like it.”

“She doesn’t know yet?” Jo lowered her voice to a whisper.

“She was awake when the doctor told us . . . It has something to do with the placenta not being where it’s supposed to be. Previous placenta? Something like that.”

“Placenta previa?” Britt remembered a friend from her book club having the condition. She forgot exactly what it meant, but Mindy had been on bed rest for more than six weeks. They’d even held their book club meeting one month gathered around Mindy’s bed. But Britt took great comfort in the fact that Mindy now had healthy twin girls. They had to be three or four years old by now. Of course, they’d been premature and in the hospital for several weeks before coming home. But you’d never know it now.

“Yeah, that sounds right. Placenta previa.” Quinn rolled his tongue around the words, then shrugged. “I don’t know anything about this stuff. I just know what Dr. Hinsen said about her being on bed rest for the duration.”

Britt gave him a wry smile. “I don’t envy you trying to keep Phee in bed.”

“Oh, she’ll do whatever she has to to keep the baby safe, but she’s definitely going to be chomping at the bit.” Quinn shook his head. “I just don’t know how we’re going to work out meals and laundry and all that. I mean, I can do most of that stuff but not if I have to keep up with work and the construc—”

“Don’t even worry about that,” Jo said.

“That’s right,” Britt echoed. “We’ll take care of everything.”

“Well, I’m aware that you both have lives too.”

“No, we really don’t.” Britt laughed.

“Hey, speak for yourself.” Jo affected a pout.

“Just kidding. But seriously, what are sisters for if not for times like this?”

Quinn swallowed hard and for a minute, Britt thought he might cry. But he straightened in the chair and turned to look between her and Jo. “Listen, you guys go on home. I’ll text you later tonight and let you know how it’s going.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. Go home. I’ll tell her you were here, and you can see her tomorrow—hopefully at home.” Quinn shooed them away with a smile Britt knew was intended to prove to them that he was fine.

She wasn’t so sure. But she and Jo navigated the hallways trying to find a shortcut to the parking lot.

When they passed a restroom, Jo held up a hand. “Wait for me. I’ll be right back.”

She disappeared into the restroom, and Britt looked for an out-of-the-way place to wait. A couple of employees were joking and laughing quietly behind the nurses station, and Britt’s ears perked up when she recognized a familiar voice. It took her a minute to realize it sounded like *the* voice. The one that had calmed her so on the phone while she’d waited for the ambulance.

But she was certain it was his voice when the curly-haired girl he was bantering with called him by name: Rafe.

Feeling guilty for eavesdropping, she took a few steps back and leaned one shoulder against the wall, craning her neck for a glimpse of the owner of the silken voice. Unfortunately, he was partially hidden by a pillar, and the part she could see had his back to her. But even with her limited view, she could tell he was tall and athletically built with a shock of blond hair. He wore street clothes—jeans and a sweatshirt.

Britt glanced toward the bathroom door, hoping Jo wouldn’t emerge just yet. She was overwhelmed with curiosity

about the man who'd been so calm and comforting on the phone.

"Would you have known what to do?" the curly haired girl asked.

"Oh, I could have talked them through it. I had the book open to the childbirth section, just in case."

She laughed. It sounded flirtatious to Britt's ears.

"I'm just glad it was only a phone consult. Let me deal with blood and guts any day. Just don't make me deliver a baby."

"Rafe, that's terrible! Besides, I hate to break it to you, but delivering a baby *is* blood and guts."

"Whatever." He shrugged the shoulder Britt could see from her vantage point.

"So did she have the baby?"

"Not on my watch." His voice turned serious and took on the well-modulated tone she remembered from the call earlier this evening. "But it would have been a miscarriage. She was only about eighteen weeks along. Do you know if they admitted her?"

The curls bounced as she shook her head. "Not that I know of, but I just got here. I haven't made rounds yet."

The girl glanced Britt's way and gave Rafe a pointed look, lowering her voice. He glanced over his shoulder, but Britt looked away before their eyes could meet, quickly pulling out her phone and trying to look oblivious to the conversation she'd been eavesdropping on.

She could hear the low murmuring of their continuing conversation, but she couldn't understand anything they were saying. She had half a notion to approach the desk and inform Rafe that her sister had, indeed, been admitted and that the baby was safe. But the girl—an aide, judging by her uniform—intimidated Britt for some reason. Probably because she was clearly flirting with Rafe—who seemed oblivious to that fact.

The door to the women's restroom swung open and Jo came through. "Ready?"

Making a split-second decision, Britt held up a hand to her sister. “Hang on. I need to go talk to someone.”

“What? Who?”

“I see somebody I know. I’ll meet you at the car in just a few minutes.” She fished in her purse for the keys and handed them to Jo.

Jo hitched her purse up on her shoulder. “Okay, but please hurry. I have stuff to do tonight and if we have to clean Quinn and Phee’s house first, then I—”

“I won’t be long, I promise.”

Jo hurried down the corridor and Britt considered following her out, her earlier resolve having dissipated. But she would regret it later if she didn’t say something. She gathered her courage and approached the nurses station.

The two turned in unison to look at her. The girl—her name tag read Stefani—looked slightly annoyed at the interruption. But she said politely, “May I help you?”

Keeping her eyes on the girl, Britt pointed in Rafe’s direction. “I wanted to talk to him.”

“Me?” He pointed at himself, eyebrows lifted in surprise.

Britt met his gaze. “Yes. You’re . . . Rafe?” Her breath caught. She knew this guy. She couldn’t remember from where, but she’d definitely seen him before. Met him maybe.

“Yes, I’m Rafe.” He took a step back. His furrowed eyebrows said he wondered how she knew his name.

And indeed, he wore no name tag.

“This might sound strange, but I recognized your voice. You were the EMT I talked to on the phone this evening, right?”

He gave her a strange look and for an awkward second, she worried she had the wrong guy. But it had to be him. That mellow voice was too distinctive. And Rafe wasn’t exactly a common name.

“My voice?” He cocked his head and eyed her suspiciously.

She nodded. "I heard you talking out here and knew it had to be you." She quickly decided not to mention that she'd overheard the girl call him Rafe. And that she felt sure they'd met before.

"Wow." He shuffled his feet. "Yes. That was me. How is your sister doing?"

"They're keeping her overnight, but she's going to be okay."

"And . . ." He hesitated. "The baby?"

"Hanging in there."

"Oh. That's good." He shuffled again. "You said that you wanted to talk to me?"

"Oh . . . Sorry. I just wanted to thank you. You really helped me to stay calm during the whole ordeal. That's why I remembered your voice, I think."

"Well, I'm glad." He looked embarrassed at her compliment. "Just doing my job."

"So, you work here at the hospital?"

The curly haired girl—Stefani—had taken a perch on a rolling stool at the counter a few feet away and was working at the computer, but Britt had the distinct impression she was eavesdropping on every word of their conversation. Not that *she* had any room to judge.

"No, I actually work for the Langhorne police department. As an EMT. Just . . . visiting here." He gave Stefani a sideways glance.

Ohhh . . . Britt looked between them, feeling like an idiot for not having figured that out by the way they were talking.

Rafe gestured. "Actually, if you'll excuse me, I need to be going."

"Of course." Britt gave an awkward wave. "I didn't mean to interrupt. I just wanted to say thank you."

"I appreciate it." He dismissed her with a nod, then took a step toward Stefani. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

“Sure.” For being so flirtatious with him a moment ago, the girl had suddenly gone glacier.

Britt turned and hurried down the corridor toward the parking lot, feeling more than a little foolish. But she hadn’t gone far when she heard the voice behind her.

“Excuse me . . . Wait up a minute, will you?”

She turned to see Rafe practically jogging to catch up. She stopped in the hallway and waited.

He eyed her with that suspicious gaze again. “Have we met?”

She gave a tentative smile. “I don’t know, but . . . you look familiar to me too.” She stuck out a hand. “I’m Britt Chandler. But I don’t know where we would have met.”

“Chandler? Do you have sisters?” Recognition dawned in his eyes. Pale blue eyes framed with lashes that matched his tawny hair. “Two sisters?”

“I do. Do you know them?” She and Joanna were often mistaken for twins. Maybe that was why she looked familiar to him, but that didn’t explain where she knew him from.

“I don’t know them by name, but I think I know where we met.” A twinkle came to his eyes.

“You do? I’m drawing a complete blank.”

“I don’t want to embarrass you but . . .”

“Excuse me?”

“What if I told you I was a police officer with the Langhorne police department before I started working as an EMT there? You, um . . .” His smile wasn’t quite a smirk, but close. “You had a black-and-white cat, right?”

And suddenly, she knew *exactly* where she’d met Rafe Whatever-His-Name-Was. And she wished she could crawl under the gurney down the hall. “That was you?” She shaded her eyes and dropped her head, feeling her cheeks grow warm. “Of course, it was you. Oh boy . . .”

“Nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Oh, easy for you to say!”

“No, it just means you’re human. As Mark Twain liked to say, ‘Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.’”

That made her blush twice as hard. She dared to sneak a look at him and couldn’t help but laugh at the impish grin he wore.

A few weeks before they’d bought the cottages, she’d been staying alone in Dad’s house with only Melvin to keep her company. The crazy cat had knocked over a vase in the middle of the night, scaring her half to death. She panicked and called 911. And Rafe was one of the policemen who showed up that night—along with two squad cars and another officer. The whole neighborhood had been awakened, and she’d been mortified for her false alarm. “So you know my brother-in-law?”

“Your brother-in-law?”

“Quinn Mitchell.” Quinn had heard about the story—probably from Rafe himself—and further embarrassed Britt when he informed her that the story was all over town. By the time it made its way down the pike, the story involved a mischievous cat and “two hot chicks in pajamas”—no doubt the most exciting thing that had happened in the sleepy town of Langhorne in a while. She wondered if Rafe remembered the pajamas part and blushed at the thought.

Seeming not to notice, Rafe frowned. “Quinn? I know him. Sort of. He’s a friend of a friend. But I’m not sure what that has to do with . . .” A light came on in his eyes, then quickly turned to worry. “Wait . . . Was it Quinn’s wife you called the ambulance for? That’s your sister?”

“Yes.”

He rubbed his face. “Oh, man. I hadn’t made all the connections yet. I’m so sorry.”

“Oh no, it’s okay. Everyone’s going to be fine—Phee and the baby—thanks, in part, to you.”

Again, he brushed off her praise. “I don’t know about that. But . . . wow. I’m putting it all together now. So that was

you and your sisters that night, huh? No wonder you looked familiar. That's funny."

She cleared her throat pointedly.

"Wait. Not funny ha-ha," he said quickly. "Funny strange— Oh . . . that didn't come out right either. What I meant was—"

She gave him a look. "Yeah, you just go ahead and dig that hole deeper."

He laughed again and suddenly seemed like an old friend.

"You wouldn't want to go get something to eat, would you?" Apparently he was feeling it too.

She hesitated. Was he asking her on a date? "Like, right now?"

He nodded, looking like an eager little boy.

"Thanks, but my sister's waiting in the car for me."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to keep you."

"No problem." She moved toward the door. "Thanks again for your help on the phone tonight."

Following her, he gave a little salute. "Just doing my job."

"Well . . . Good night." She hurried ahead of him, not looking back.

She couldn't deny that their conversation excited her in a way she hadn't felt in a long time. She was only twenty-four, but she'd started to wonder how she was ever going to meet anyone given that her social life consisted of a book club with a bunch of women.

But she also couldn't deny that Rafe apparently had something going with the curly haired Stefani—including a date of some sort, if his "see you tomorrow" was any indication.

No thank you. She wasn't interested in breaking up a couple or being "the other woman." Besides, with Phee in the hospital and needing full-time help after she got home, they were all going to be busy making sure this precious baby came safely into the world a few months from now.

And somewhere in the midst of all that, Joanna and her

fiancé, Luke, were going to be married up in the clearing, which needed a ton of work before it would be ready for another wedding.

The circumstances couldn't have been worse for her to finally meet someone. No matter how cute he was or how much his mellow voice stuck in her memory.