

ONE

Decision making's a bear.

Well, not all decisions, just ones that had the potential to ruin her life.

Jami Carlisle tilted her face upward and expelled a frustrated sigh. "Okay, Lord, I need some advice. Robert's getting tired of waiting, and frankly, I can't blame him."

She stepped onto an outcropping of rock that jutted over a small creek. Early morning sunlight filtered through the canopy overhead, painting the flora varying shades of green. Somewhere nearby, a cardinal whistled its cheery song. The McAllister woods were her refuge, her place to gather her thoughts and regroup. It didn't matter that they weren't hers. They adjoined her property, and she'd been coming there as long as she could remember.

She released a sigh. "Robert's expecting me to say yes." Actually, everyone was expecting her to say yes. The whole town had the two of them engaged and all but married the moment he'd taken her hand at the harvest party hayride in eighth grade. They'd each dated others through the years, but last summer it had turned more serious, and in the eyes of the people of Murphy, North Carolina, that was enough to cement it—she was marrying Robert.

With another sigh, Jami dropped to the cool surface of the rock and let her sneakered feet dangle over the edge. Just below, water trickled over a downed limb and around protruding rocks on its lazy path to lower ground. A breeze rustled the trees above, harmonizing with the soothing sound of the creek. But the peace she usually found there eluded her.

"This shouldn't be so difficult." She lifted her eyes skyward. "Robert's a good man. He's kind and responsible, and he's a Christian." There weren't many people she felt as close to as Robert.

So what was she waiting for? A sign? She snickered at the image that popped into her head, one of those black billboards with bold white letters:

JAMI. MARRY THE MAN.

-GOD

If only it were that easy. "Lord, help me know what to do."

She drew in a long, slow breath, heavy with the musty, organic scent of the woods. For the past eight years, Robert had been there for her, ready to lend support and a shoulder to cry on when another boyfriend bit the dust. There'd been several. Most of those relationships never made it to the serious stage. A couple had. And when their demise came, Robert was there.

She couldn't ask for a better friend. Based on everything she'd read, friendship was important for a happy marriage. But shouldn't she feel *something* when Robert kissed her? Was it too much to ask for a man who could make her stomach flip-flop and her pulse race by simply walking into the room? Someone whose kisses left her breathless?

She released a snort. She'd read one too many fairy tales as a child. Or too many romance novels as an adult. Prince Charming wasn't going to come in and sweep her off her feet, no matter how long she waited. She needed to quit stalling and take the plunge.

"Okay, Lord, this is it." She slapped both hands against the rock, palms down. "I'm going to do it. Tonight I'm going to tell Robert I'm ready and the answer is yes."

There. Mind made up. Life-altering course straight ahead. She would talk to Robert, then call her two best friends. She could hear Holly's response already—"Holy cow! Jami's finally decided to tie the knot. Someone take her temperature. She must be sick!" Holly always was a bit of a drama queen.

But she couldn't guess Sam's reaction. Sam liked Robert. All her friends did. But Sam insisted she wouldn't be having such a hard time committing if Robert were the one. But Robert *was* the one. He *had* to be. It was commitment in general that was so hard. And getting married was the most serious one she would ever make.

She dropped her gaze to the water, where a small branch had become trapped in the current. It clung to a rock for a brief moment, only to be recaptured and swept away. She picked up a stone and tossed it into the water. She'd finally done it. After almost a year of putting it off, she'd made her decision. And it left her feeling much like that small branch being carried helplessly downstream.

"Lord, please let me know I'm making the right choice."

After a final glance at the creek, she pushed herself to her feet and headed in the direction of home. Today was her last day of freedom before starting her job with the newspaper, and she had a lot to do. The first order of business would be breakfast. Then she had boxes to unload—four years of dorm life crammed into the interior space of a Pontiac Sunbird.

If she worked fast enough, maybe she would have time for a trip into town to catch up with friends before meeting Robert for dinner. She hadn't seen anyone yet since her return. It had been early enough when she'd gotten home. But she hadn't been able to muster up the gumption to go out.

She'd left Michigan State at four that morning, and six hours later, her AC gave up the ghost. After driving the next seven with both windows down, she'd made it to Murphy at six that evening, exhausted and looking like a redheaded stunt double for the Wicked Witch of the West. A sturdy hairbrush, a long shower and a good night's sleep had done wonders. Now she felt like a new person. Except for the two-ton elephant sitting on her chest.

She shook her head. There was no reason to feel that way. She'd made her decision, back there at the creek. She stepped from the trees into her own backyard.

Yeah, the decision was made. But somehow, she didn't feel any more settled coming out of the woods than she had going in.

Grant McAllister pulled into the only available parking space in a two-block stretch and backtracked down the sidewalk toward the Daily Grind. The hotel clerk had promised he'd find a good cup of coffee there. Actually, he'd seen the place yesterday, tucked into the row of shops

lining that side of Valley River Avenue. He'd been in the area for an appointment with a lawyer, a meeting that had left him reeling.

Although he'd never met Elizabeth McAllister, he knew a lot about her. At least the things that mattered. His mother had seen to that, filled him in on all the sordid details. His whole life, his grandmother had wanted nothing to do with him. Learning he was sole heir to her estate was the last thing he'd expected.

It wasn't a pleasant surprise, either. Twenty years ago, when his mother was working two jobs to keep food on the table, his grandmother's money would have been welcome. Now he didn't need it, and this trip south was more of an inconvenience than anything.

He swung open one of the glass doors and stepped inside. The Curiosity Shop Bookstore stood in front of him, with the Daily Grind ahead and to his left, a wide hallway separating them. Apparently, the Daily Grind was the place to be at eight thirty on a Thursday morning.

He ambled toward an empty stool, the latest issue of the *Cherokee Scout* rolled up in his hand. A cheese-and-egg biscuit and cup of coffee should hit the spot. And his usual quick skimming of the paper would keep him up to date on happenings in the world. Then again, maybe not. A fraction of the thickness of the *New York Times*, what lay on the bar in front of him probably wouldn't offer a whole lot in the way of international news.

A perky female voice cut across his thoughts. "Haven't seen you around. Are you vacationing?"

His eyes followed the voice, heavy with a mountain twang. An older woman sat perched atop the stool next to him, crowned with a halo of fiery orange hair that could only have come from a bottle.

"No vacation." That was coming soon enough. "I'm here on business."

She wiped her fingers on the paper napkin in her lap and extended her hand. "Bernie Hopkins."

"Grant McAllister."

"Well, I'll be. You're the McAllister boy. How long have you been here?"

"I flew in from New York yesterday."

"The city or the state?"

"Both."

Her gaze swept him from the collar of his Gucci polo to the toes of his Ferragamo loafers. When she again met his eyes, she nodded. What she'd been looking for, he wasn't sure. Apparently she'd found it.

"I hope you can squeeze in some R and R while you're visiting. We've got some of the prettiest country on God's green earth."

A young woman approached from behind the counter and took his order. But Bernie wasn't finished yet. As soon as the attendant stepped away to make his café mocha, she picked up where she'd left off.

"Y'all staying out at the McAllister place?"

"No y'all. It's just me. And no, I'm staying at the Holiday Inn." There were no five-star hotels in Murphy, but the Holiday Inn was clean and comfortable, and he didn't have any complaints.

"I don't blame you. That house has sat empty since Elizabeth McAllister was moved to the nursing home five years ago. I bet there's all kinds of critters taking up residence in there."

Grant smiled. "No critters, unless you count some hyperactive spiders and an overabundance of dust bunnies."

She threw back her head and laughed, a loud, boisterous sound that wasn't nearly as annoying as it should have been. Anything less wouldn't have seemed natural. Everything about her was

bold and loud—from her bright red hair to the brilliant pink-and-purple fabric of her pantsuit to her way of engaging perfect strangers in conversation. She picked up her coffee cup and washed the Danish down with a loud slurp. “So you’re single? No wife? No girlfriend?”

He cocked a brow at the intrusion into his privacy. But something told him this fiery-haired Bernie wasn’t much for convention.

“I’m not married.” He’d made that mistake once. Two years and a quarter of a million dollars later, he was once again single.

“Don’t worry, you’re still young.” She gave his hand a couple of pats. “You’ve got plenty of time.”

He stifled a snort. Thirty wasn’t exactly young. And if single was an ailment, he wasn’t looking for a cure.

She downed the rest of her coffee and set the cup on the wooden bar. “I’d better get to the paper. It won’t run without me. Actually, it would, but that’s beside the point.” She slid off the stool. “While you’re here, though, you have to check out our sights.”

The young woman returned with his egg-and-cheese biscuit and steaming cup of coffee, then removed the napkin and mug left by the flamboyant Bernie.

Bernie raised a hand in farewell. “I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

“For a few days, anyway.” That estimate was overly optimistic. It would probably take weeks to figure out what to do with his surprise inheritance.

As soon as he’d arrived yesterday, he’d checked out the house—a huge stone monstrosity that looked as if it hadn’t hosted occupants since the Civil War. Cockeyed shutters framed several cracked windows, and the wooden deck that spanned the back leaned precariously. Inside were two floors of rooms crammed full of furniture, art, books and other belongings. He smiled wryly. He could plan and prepare a seven-course meal and memorize an entire horn concerto, but sorting through his grandmother’s stuff felt like cutting the White House lawn one blade at a time.

Once finished with his biscuit, he brushed the crumbs from his fingers and sipped his coffee. This afternoon, he had an appointment with a Realtor. And he needed to call the investor whose name the attorney had given him.

But first he had to go face the mess of a house that waited for him several miles southwest of town. If it were just his grandparents’ belongings, it would be a no-brainer. Because frankly, he didn’t care what happened to their things.

But he would give anything to hold a piece of the past if it included his father.

Jami stepped under the green awning in front of Downtown Pizza Company. The mouthwatering smells almost woke up her appetite, which had been on strike for the past hour. Robert would have finished work and should be pulling up at any moment. She probably had all of two minutes to calm her nerves and convince her protesting stomach that it was time to eat.

She drew in a deep breath. She hadn’t finished her chores, but she’d gotten far enough along to squeeze in some visiting before dinner. Since they were both in town, she’d called Robert to tell him to meet her at the restaurant. It saved him the seventeen-mile round-trip to her house and back. And gave her an out if their reunion didn’t go so well.

No, that was ridiculous. Everything was going to be fine, despite the butterflies taking flight in her stomach. Actually, these weren’t butterflies. They were something much less dainty. Maybe moths. Big, hairy ones.

She cast a glance over her shoulder in time to see a familiar silver Scion ease into a parking space three down from hers. The door swung open, and Robert stepped out in black dress pants, a pale blue long-sleeved shirt and a coordinating striped tie. Granted, he was coming from his accounting office, but no matter where he went, he dressed well. His clothing choices reflected his personality—rigid, particular, precise.

He moved down the sidewalk toward her, then swept her into his arms and spun her around. “Welcome back.” When he again put her on her feet, a wide smile split his face. There wouldn’t be any welcome-home kiss until later. Robert wasn’t much for public displays of affection.

After he paid for their meals, she started through the buffet line. Boasting a salad bar and several choices of pizza, both main course and dessert, Downtown Pizza Company was the CiCi’s of Murphy. She’d been coming most of her life and had yet to be disappointed.

She filled one plate with a moderate serving of salad and plopped two slices of pizza on the other one. At shortly after five, the place was pretty empty. They’d beaten the dinner crowd. Over the next hour, it would fill up.

She took a chair against the wall, and Robert sat opposite her. Once she got started, her appetite would kick in. At least she hoped so.

“Are you all unpacked and settled in?”

“I got a good jump on it. Got the cleaning finished, anyway.” She’d paid the neighbor kid to mow a few times over the past nine months, but inside, everything had been pretty dust covered. Other than her two brief trips home for Christmas and spring break, the house had sat vacant, and it showed. Pain stabbed through her.

That first step inside had been the hardest, the moment she’d felt her mother’s absence the most. There had been no breeze blowing through open windows, fluttering the sheers and spreading around the tantalizing aromas of freshly baked bread and that night’s casserole. Instead, everything had been musty and still. Even aired out, the house had a deserted, forlorn feel, as if it had sat empty so long all its energy had seeped out.

“I know you miss her.” Robert’s voice was low.

She gave him a weak smile. His sympathetic nature was one of the things that made him such a great friend.

“Yeah, I do.” The summer after her junior year of college was when the cancer had come back, so she’d put her education on hold and stayed in Murphy. Near the end, her mother had made her promise she’d finish her final year. The last part of July, the cancer won. The middle of August, Jami headed to Michigan.

She shook off the melancholy thoughts and smiled at Robert. “Fill me in. What’s the latest gossip?” Their recent contact had consisted of a few hurried phone calls between research papers and finals. Not conducive to acquiring all the juicy details of life in Murphy.

“No interesting gossip, I’m afraid.”

“Did Missy have her baby?”

“Babies. Twins.” He picked up his pizza to take a bite, then wiped his hands on his napkin. “Elizabeth McAllister died last week. A stroke, I think.”

She frowned. Depending on what the heirs did with the property, she might have to curtail her walks. “Any other news?”

“Samantha ran away with a traveling salesman.”

“Holly, maybe, but not Samantha.” Sam was the grounded one, the voice of practicality that kept her and Holly out of trouble.

He reached across the table to take her hand. "I've missed you. I can't believe I've got to fly out tomorrow for my cousin's wedding. I'm tempted to skip it and stay here."

"You can't. You're a groomsman."

"A minor detail." He squeezed her hand, and a little of the lightheartedness fell away. "And if that isn't bad enough, I have that trip with my two other cousins. So I'll be gone three weeks. What was I thinking?"

"You planned this almost a year ago. Two weeks touring Europe is the trip of a lifetime. Relax and enjoy it."

He heaved a sigh. "When I get back, we'll work on our wedding plans."

The moths that had settled down while they chatted went into a frenzy, and her insides drew into a knot. What was wrong with her? She'd made her decision. So why did she feel like a prisoner listening to the cell door clang shut?

She forced a casual smile. "Why rush things?"

"Rushing? We've dated off and on now for, what, eight years?"

Nine, if she counted the hayride. But most of that had felt more like friendship.

He continued. "I'm twenty-five, and you're twenty-three. I've got my accounting practice, and you're finished with school. We've been talking about marriage for months. There's no reason to wait."

No, *he* had been talking about it. She'd been pulled along for the ride. Now her foot was itching for the brake pedal. "You're talking wedding plans, and I haven't said *yes* yet." She released a wry laugh, born more of uneasiness and frustration than humor. "Actually, you haven't asked."

"Yes, I have."

"Not exactly." Every time he broached the subject, it was to tell her that once she finished school, they'd move ahead.

"Maybe not, because I thought it was a given. But I'm asking now. Jami, will you marry me?"

She twisted her napkin in her lap as she listened to the dings and rings and buzzes coming from the arcade area. Her gaze traveled to the vines trailing along the ceiling, the wall painted a faux concrete-block design. It was a fun, casual atmosphere, a great place to get together with friends.

But a wedding proposal? Where was the candlelight, the romantic music and the white linen tablecloth? The getting down on one knee and taking her hand, the hinged satin box? Robert was too practical for all that. Those sappy, romantic gestures were nonsense. Part of those wedding plans he mentioned would be taking her ring shopping to pick out something she liked.

Robert snapped his fingers near her face. "Earth to Jami."

She swallowed an annoyed sigh. He'd said it like he was joking, the same as he always did. But she recognized the quip for what it was—one more admonition to get her head out of the clouds.

Another moment passed in silence. For the first time, doubt flickered in his eyes. "You're going to marry me, aren't you? Come on, we're perfect together."

She opened her mouth, but nothing would come out. He was right. They *were* perfect. They'd grown up together and knew each other's secrets. Spending time with Robert was like wrapping up in a down comforter in front of a roaring fire at Christmas, a hot cup of cocoa in her hands. She was comfortable with him, just like she was comfortable with Holly and Sam.

And that was the problem. There was no spark because Robert was just another close friend.

She shook her head. "I can't."

"You can't right now . . . or ever?"

She picked up the paper napkin in her lap and started tearing small pieces from its edge. The moths were gone. The few bites of salad and single slice of pizza she'd managed to eat had congealed into a doughy lump. "I'm sorry." She forced the words through her constricted throat. "All I feel for you is friendship."

His brows drew together, and his gaze dipped to the table. For several moments, he sat in silence, straightening the napkin holder, making each side perfectly parallel to the edges of the table, then doing the same with the salt and pepper shakers. His jaw was tight, and a vein throbbed in his right temple. Robert didn't do outbursts of emotion. But the pain swimming in his dark eyes was unmistakable. Her heart twisted, knowing she was the one who'd put it there.

He again met her gaze. "Have you met someone else?"

"No." Her tone was emphatic. "There's no one else."

He gave a small nod, then stood. "You know, Jami, you can't live your whole life afraid you'll repeat your mother's mistakes."

Her jaw dropped, but he'd already turned and was walking toward the door, his pace brisk. Missy and her husband, John, walked in just then, each holding a baby carrier. Several others had entered over the past thirty minutes. The dinner crowd was arriving.

Jami crumpled in her chair, doubt chasing regret through the corridors of her mind. Was that what was wrong with her, why none of her relationships worked out? Was she really letting fear keep her from a happy, satisfying future?

No, Robert was wrong. Fear had nothing to do with it. She just had high standards and wasn't willing to settle. Besides, she wasn't always the first one to bail. She'd been the *dumpee* as many times as she'd been the *dumper*. Neither was much fun.

She wadded up her napkin and retrieved her purse from the chair beside her. What if she'd just made a huge mistake with Robert? What if she realized, years down the road, that her standards were out of reach, that what she was holding out for didn't exist? By then, Robert would be married to someone else.

Whatever happened, one thing was sure.

Tonight she'd lost one of her closest friends.