

# Life Choices

By J.A. Stone

## Chapter 1

Each step that Jessie Graham took in her brand new Jimmy Choo heels was a minor miracle. The shoes weren't easy to walk in under the best of circumstances, and they certainly hadn't been designed for climbing a steep, gravel hill. On another night, Nick might have driven her to the top of the hill and deposited her by the steps leading up to Benton Hall, as other solicitous husbands were currently doing. But because she had insisted he come to this wedding, he was punishing her with the likely ruin of her new shoes, and the distinct possibility of a twisted ankle.

"It's your partner who is getting married, so you have to go." Jessie had argued earlier in the day when Nick started trying to back out.

"I'm on call tonight. Everyone will understand."

"But I'll hardly know anybody there."

"Give me a break, Jessie!" Nick had retorted furiously. "You don't even have to go to the ceremony. Just go to the reception, sign the damn book, congratulate the happy couple, and come home. Surely you can manage that."

"I'm not going by myself," she'd said firmly.

"Oh, hell," Nick had exclaimed. "Why did I have to marry a child instead of a woman?"

Now Jessie wished she had come alone. At least then she could have paused long enough at the bottom of the driveway to appreciate the lights hung beautifully in the trees lining the road. But without so much as a glance toward her, Nick had started striding up the hill, taking broad, determined steps that left Jessie scrambling to keep up with him.

When they finally reached the top, both breathing hard, they stood as silent as strangers in a line waiting to enter the front door. Jessie's silvery sheath dress, dangly diamond earrings, and almost waist length blonde hair shimmered in the window's reflection to the right of the door. Jessie examined her image critically. She had been satisfied at home in front of her bedroom mirror. She'd bought a seemingly perfect dress two weeks ago and spent almost two hours adding the finishing touches to her hair and makeup this afternoon. And her efforts would all have been worth it had there been any acknowledgement from her husband. However, when she'd walked into the den, his eyes had remained glued to the television as he'd muttered, "Damn the Dodgers! I should have known better than to bet on them." When he'd finally looked from the screen to her, his only comment had been, "I thought only the bride was supposed to wear white."

Jessie's confidence had plummeted. "It's not white. It's silver. But maybe I should change?"

"Like we have time for that now?" Nick rose from the sofa, looking perfectly handsome in his black tuxedo that complemented his dark good looks. "If I have to go to this wedding, I certainly don't want to be late. The sooner we get there, the sooner we can leave."

Standing in the receiving line, Jessie recognized Betty, the office manager of Nick's physician's group, and her husband, Ethan, ten people or so in front of them. To their left was a massive wedding cake topped with roses that looked more centerpiece than dessert and reminded Jessie of her own monstrosity of a wedding cake. She hoped the similarity in their cakes wasn't a bad omen for this new bride.

Finally it was their turn to greet the bride and groom. Nick heartily shook the hand of Jonathon, his newest partner, while offering jubilant well wishes to the glowing bride. No one observing Nick's enthusiasm would have guessed that he'd literally been forced to attend the event. But Jessie had long ago ceased to be amazed by how easily Nick could turn on and off the charm.

Pleasantries done, she and Nick flowed smoothly into the middle of the ballroom.

"You want something to drink?" Nick asked, scanning the ballroom with an experienced eye.

"Tonic and lime," Jessie replied and then watched Nick walk off. She looked around for any familiar faces. Seeing none, she moved from the middle of the room to one side where she wasn't so obviously standing alone and where she could watch Nick's slow progress in the bar line.

From across the dance floor, she noticed a woman in a tight, short, sapphire blue dress move determinedly toward the bar. She was the kind of woman who demanded attention. Even in the muted light, Jessie noticed how the woman's dress was a perfect contrast to her brilliantly red, short-cropped hair. Surprisingly, the woman didn't stop at the end of the bar line but walked directly to where Nick was standing. Jessie didn't know this woman, but she recognized the proprietary hand she placed on Nick's arm. They chatted for a few moments before Nick finally reached the front of the line. Then, after he handed the woman a glass of wine, she turned and was quickly swallowed up by a crowd of people.

Jessie watched Nick walk back to the center of the ballroom where she had been standing before. Clearly irritated, he looked from one side of the room to the other. Jessie walked out of the shadows to join him.

"Where were you hiding?" he asked.

"Who was that woman you were talking to?"

Nick seemed surprised at her question. "What woman? Do you mean Daisy? Our new office assistant?"

"The woman you handed the drink to."

"Yeah, yeah, that's Daisy," he said quickly.

"I don't know her," Jessie said in what she hoped was a neutral voice, taking a sip of her drink.

"She's only been working at the office for about six months."

Jessie took another sip and said nothing. Yet his words seemed to echo inside her head. Six months, six months, six months. Was it only a coincidence that Nick had been on call more than usual and working a lot of late hours for the past six months?

From then on, Jessie looked everywhere, trying to catch a glimpse of Daisy, hoping she'd be accompanied by an adoring husband or a long-time boyfriend. Perhaps then Jessie would realize that her suspicions were ridiculous. After all, the woman had

only placed her hand on Nick's arm. Maybe Jessie was becoming as paranoid as Nick often accused her of being.

A few minutes later when Nick's pager went off, she felt relieved. This night, which she had planned with such great expectations, had turned into an unmitigated disaster. Now, mercifully, it could come to an end.

"I'm going to the bathroom before we leave," Nick said, "Why don't you go ahead and get your wrap?"

Jessie nodded in agreement. There was no line at the cloakroom, and getting her wrap took only a moment or two. Instead of waiting at the front door as she normally would have done, Jessie decided to circle back to where the bathrooms were located just outside the ballroom and wait for Nick there. As she rounded the corner, she saw Nick and Daisy talking in the hallway. Without stopping to think, Jessie walked up to them and placed her hand on Nick's arm in much the same manner as Daisy had earlier. Their conversation stopped. And was it only Jessie's imagination, or did the conversation of the people standing near them in the hall also stop?

"I don't believe we've met," Jessie said brightly. "I'm Nick's wife, Jessie, and you are the new office assistant, Daisy, right?"

The woman's large blue eyes grew wider. "Yes, I'm Daisy Mitchell."

"Are you new to Atlanta?" Jessie imagined she saw a certain wariness in Daisy's demeanor.

"Yes. I moved here from Charlotte almost a year ago."

Nick interjected, "If we don't leave now, Jessie, I won't be able to drop you off on my way to the hospital." Was Nick anxious to end this conversation?

"Good-bye, Ms. or is it Mrs. Mitchell?" Jessie asked in a determined tone.

"Ms."

"Well, I must get by the office soon so I can get to know you better."

"I'll look forward to it," Daisy replied with what Jessie thought might be just a hint of a threat in her voice.

Outside, rain was falling lightly, and they hadn't brought an umbrella. In uncomfortable silence, Jessie walked excruciatingly slowly down the hill, trying to keep from slipping. Gusts of wind blew the tree branches wildly so that the lights mounted there created a psychedelic show as they went. In frustration, Nick finally reached out and took her elbow in an agitated manner, trying to speed her along. They were both drenched by the time they reached the car.

"Hasn't this been a lovely night?" Nick asked as he threw the red Mercedes E350 sports car he loved so much into reverse. Jessie looked out of her car window, unable to see anything through the suddenly heavy rain. The lights of Benton Hall appeared as a blur at the top of the hill.

"Perhaps we ought to sit here for a minute until the rain lets up," she suggested.

"Perhaps if you hadn't taken an eternity to get down that damn hill, we might be able to do so. But I've got to get to the hospital as soon as I can. Did you forget that someone's life depends on it?"

Jessie had grown to hate his profession as a surgeon because Nick used it as a trump card to get his way in any situation. "Well," she said, "what about going down

Roswell Road instead of Riverside Drive? A four lane would be better on a night like this.”

“Damn it, Jessie. Let me drive!”

A lightning bolt, the signature of an Atlanta spring storm, struck amazingly close and illuminated Nick’s profile. Jessie felt a sliver of relief when she saw how hard he was concentrating on the road. Nick was always at his best when there was a crisis underway. It had been a crisis of sorts, after all, that had brought them together. She put her head back against the leather headrest, closed her eyes, and remembered how much she had disliked Nick the first time she met him. Why hadn’t she paid better attention to those first impressions?

He had been flirting with her sorority sister, Wendy, all night. Jessie had thought him too smooth, too perfect, and too old for a college band party. Over Jessie’s strenuous objections, Wendy had drunk lots of red wine and danced for hours with this mysterious older man, leaving Jessie with nothing to do but watch protectively.

Jessie recalled how Nick had been twirling Wendy as REM’s latest hit came to a close. Suddenly Wendy began spewing the remains of a burrito and a lot of red wine onto the dance floor. The people surrounding them had moved backwards en masse, with looks of disgust. To Nick’s credit, he hadn’t backed away from Wendy, but had reached out to hold her so that she didn’t crumple over onto the nasty dance floor.

“Will you help me get Wendy to my car?” Jessie had asked Nick after making her way to where they were.

“Sure.” He’d scooped Wendy up as though she were a bride that he was carrying across the threshold. “Which way?”

Jessie pointed to the right and started clearing a path toward that side of the room. When they’d finally reached her car, Nick had carefully placed Wendy in the backseat and then had taken off his t-shirt to gently wipe her face clean. His thoughtfulness had softened Jessie’s feelings toward him.

“Why don’t I go with you and help you get her settled?” he offered. “I’m Nick Graham, and I’m a doctor, or almost. Right now, I’m a surgical resident at the Medical College in Augusta.”

Jessie had almost said no thanks and sent Mr. Nick Graham on his way. But the fact that he was a doctor had been comforting, and the logistics of getting Wendy out of the car and into her apartment, if Wendy were unable to walk seemed daunting. “That would be great,” she’d finally said. Just four small words. Now Jessie couldn’t help wondering, if she had instead said, “No, thanks,” would she now be on this rain-slick road feeling afraid and miserably lonely?

Five minutes or so more, and the rain seemed much lighter. Jessie felt her fear lessening. She let out the breath she hadn’t realized she was holding.

Nick must have felt the danger was over as well because he turned to look at her for the first time since they left the wedding, “So what the hell was that bit of drama all about?”

“What do you mean?” Jessie asked hesitantly.

“Don’t act all innocent now. When have you ever wanted to come by the office and get to know the office staff?”

Jessie felt anger begin to simmer, “Maybe when an office assistant places her hand intimately on her boss’s arm in the bar line?”

“So what is it now?” Nick began angrily. “Am I not even allowed to speak to other women at public events? To have them touch my arm?”

Doubt flickered in Jessie’s mind. Had she imagined there was more to his exchange with Daisy than there had been? Surely even he would draw the line at having an affair with someone who worked in his office.

“I do have my reasons for being suspicious, you know,” she offered.

“Damn it, Jessie. Aren’t you ever going to forgive me for my past mistakes? Isn’t that what our very expensive marital therapist told you to do? Forgive me?”

“Yes, but he also said we should continue our therapy.”

“I know how that stuff works,” Nick said scornfully. “He was just trying to keep the income rolling in, and he wasn’t that good anyway.”

Jessie’s anger flared again. “How would you know? You only went along with it long enough to pacify me. You never really participated in the process.”

Nick looked at her coldly. “The process? Princess, here’s the only process we need to follow. You need to concentrate on learning how to take care of your husband, and the house, and getting pregnant. You do those things, and we’ll be just fine.”

“Well, guess what?” Jessie said, finally letting her anger explode white and hot. “I am pregnant, and we don’t seem fine to me!”

Nick looked at her with surprise. For just a moment, they locked eyes—two defiant eyes staring into two shocked ones. Then the darkness surrounding them exploded with bright lights that came from around the two-lane road’s sharp corner. Nick’s attention went back to the road, and Jessie watched him jerk the steering wheel suddenly. Then time seemed to stop as the car began to slide crazily. There was a rough jolt. Jessie felt as if she were on a stomach-lurching carnival ride as bright lights flowed over her and around her, and then she felt an excruciating pain in her head, followed by a delicious nothingness.