

Chapter One

Marissa Thompson panned a critical glance across her dining room. She approached the cherrywood table, laden with china and crowned with a silk centerpiece, and tucked a loose blossom into place. Of course, the girls didn't care if they ate from paper plates or crystal. They weren't picky or prone to put on airs. Even less now than when they'd all been in college together a lifetime ago. Each of her three friends had been through too much in the last twenty-five years to worry about the little things.

Not that Marissa cared excessively about the little things or peoples' opinions, either. But she loved her historic Raleigh home with its carved banister, crown molding, and high ceilings. The long wrap-around porch so epitomized the south, the gardenia bushes along its length, releasing a gentle scent through open windows. The house represented her and spoke about what was important to her. And she was thrilled the reunion would take place that weekend in her home. She'd missed her friends. Julia. Sydney. Eden. She *needed* to see them. It had been a long year.

The phone pinged. Marissa dashed to the coffee table and checked the screen. A text message from Sydney. *Hey, Marissa. Just wanted to let you know I'll be there around five. Hit some construction traffic on 77 but nothing too bad. Can't wait to see you all!*

Marissa smiled at the tangible proof that they'd be together soon. Everyone was scheduled to arrive between five and six, coming to Raleigh from other cities and states. She'd prepared the food, the downstairs, their bedrooms. Everything was ready so she'd still have enough time to do some Facebook marketing. Bleh. Marketing wasn't her passion, but it was the least she could do for her fans and prospective readers of her historical fiction novels, in the place of giving them an actual book. Which she hadn't done in a while.

Her cell phone rang. She hoped it wasn't Eden or Julia saying they'd be late. Marissa had planned dinner at seven followed by a great weekend of lunching, shopping, laughter and catching up. She sank into the wing-back chair and reached for her phone on the side table. She saw the name "Randall" pop up and her heart sagged. Once again, she had nothing much to tell her agent.

"Hi, Randall. How was your vacation?" She kept her voice light and perky, hoping it was mostly a social call, knowing better.

"Fine, Marissa. Real good. Relaxing, which I needed. Did you get away?"

“Yes, to the beach for a few days last month before it gets too hot and crowded.” She rubbed the brass rivets on the arm of the chair, her skin moist against the metal. “This weekend three college friends are coming for a reunion, so I’m looking forward to that. We’ve known each other for twenty-five years.”

“That’s good you’ve kept in touch with them all these years.” His voice took on a strained thinness. Marissa tensed. Perspiration broke out on her neck.

“Marissa, this is hard to say, but I’m going to have to drop you as a client if you don’t have a new story idea soon. I know it’s been hard for you, losing Robert like you did, and I’ve tried to be patient.”

A cold ripple shuddered through her. She’d expected this sooner or later. “Randall—” Her words emerged like sandpaper. “You’ve been more than patient with me.” She cleared her throat, swallowed. “You’ve hung in there with me for over a year and I’m so grateful. But I—I hope you won’t give up on me.”

An audible sigh followed by two long seconds of silence on the line. Marissa heard a car rumble by outside, then another. A dog barked. Finally, Randall said, “Do you think you can come up with a story idea within a month? I can give you one month. Maybe a sequel to Joanna? It was such a popular novel and series and the books have done well.”

Marissa nodded. The Joanna books had done well enough to keep her out of the poorhouse over the last year and a half that she hadn’t written a thing. But her fans were losing patience, too. “I tried to create another adventure for Joanna, but really, I thought three books were enough for the series. Actually, I’d like to start a new series.”

Randall paused. “Okay . . .” His voice sounded tentative, hopeful. “A new series would be *very* good. Do you think you can come up with a new idea within a month? And a loose outline for the first two books of the series within two? If you have an idea, I’ll give you that time. But that’s all I can do, Marissa.”

She let out a breath. “Oh, thank you, Randall. Yes, yes, I’ll have an idea by then. I know I’ll have something. I needed time to grieve Robert, of course, but then I hit the doldrums. I couldn’t get myself going again. But I think I’m much better now.” Small exaggeration. Or wishful thinking.

“Okay.” He sounded genuinely relieved now. He believed her.

Marissa bit her lip. Her hand felt slick on the cell phone. *Oh, Lord, don’t let me be a liar. I want to do what I promised.*

If she couldn’t, she’d end up with a very short writing career.

After she hung up, a heavy cloud crept in and overshadowed her mood. She stood and paced the living room once, twice. She stopped in front of a silver-framed photo of herself with Robert, both of them smiling into the camera on a carefree day of sunshine

and possibilities. The dim and narrow world of her childhood and adolescence had burst into color when she met him. She could still picture him in freshman English class sitting two rows from her, his curly hair sticking out over his ears. And for over two decades he was the love of her life. When he died, everything returned to dim for a long time.

Not completely, though. There was her son, Sean, who lived in Atlanta and was getting established in his first job out of college. They talked or texted a few times a month. Occasionally, he'd visit. She had her house, which she and Robert had purchased when she received her first-ever sizable advance for the Joanna series. Then there was her writing career, which she loved. At that moment, it hung by a fine filament in danger of being severed. The muse had apparently escaped on a one-way flight without leaving a forwarding address.

She couldn't lose her writing career. Who would she be without it?

In the last ten years, she'd defied her mother's predictions of a small, dull life, one in which she worked shelving other peoples' books rather than writing her own. After she left for college, her world stretched out, pushing down the walls that had surrounded her all her life. She'd been a mousy adolescent at first, fearful of each day. But during the first year, she met Eden, Sydney, and Julia. And then Robert.

She couldn't go backward. She'd come too far. She had to come up with an idea for a new book. Had to.

Marissa prayed and pep-talked herself and by the time the doorbell rang at five fifteen, she'd managed to plaster a reasonable facsimile of a peaceful expression on her face. The prospect of the coming weekend nudged a portion of her discouragement to the back burner. Her *friends* were coming.

She hurried to the door and flung it open. Sydney stood there, a wide grin on her face, her willowy form casual in denim capris, a tank top, and flip-flops. She lived in Charlotte, so she knew how to dress for May in North Carolina. The two women squealed and wrapped each other into a hug.

"So good to see you!" Marissa ushered Sydney inside the house. She took the canvas tote from Sydney's hand and ducked into the kitchen to set it on the counter. "You can put your suitcase there in the foyer. I'll show everyone to their rooms later."

Sydney set a cloth-covered weekender bag down on the hardwood floor. "The bag there has some munchies for us, a couple bottles of wine, and a casserole for tomorrow." She stepped into the living room and her eyes panned the room. "Oh, your house is lovely! What year was it built?"

"1905."

“I love historic homes! And you have such a flair for decorating. Julia will love this.” Sydney strolled through the living room and ran two fingers across the carved wooden mantle of the brick fireplace. She turned, arms crossed, and gazed at the ornate details and comfortable but elegant furnishings.

“Thanks, I love it here.” Marissa felt a flush of pleasure at Sydney’s admiration. She anticipated Julia’s response, too, since she had a business in interior design. “There’s a lot of upkeep, but for me, it’s worth it. I’ll have to do a couple of repairs this fall. One good thing is, the house is big enough for all of us to party away all weekend!” She forced a tone of celebration into her voice then gestured Sydney to follow her into the kitchen. “Come, we can talk in here.”

Sydney followed Marissa to the kitchen and perched on a stool at the speckled gray granite island. “I so need this weekend away and being with you all. I’m just finishing my grades for the year after putting in a lot of extra hours. The kids have been antsy for almost a month. This time next week, I’ll be done for the whole summer.”

“I bet you can’t wait.” Marissa grinned and opened the fridge to place Sydney’s casserole inside. She pulled out a frosty pitcher of chilled water with lemon slices floating on the surface, poured it into two glasses, and set one of them in front of Sydney. “Last time we all met, you said you were thinking of leaving teaching to do something else. Any more thoughts on that?”

Sydney waved the air dismissively. “Oh, I go through that about every three months or so. I’m sure one day I’ll really do it. I’ll resign from teaching and do something completely unrelated.”

“You’ll know when that time comes.” Marissa sat across from Sydney. “I admire you. You’re so committed to your students, even the tough ones. On top of that, you’re so smart with numbers. I don’t have a mathematical bone in my body. I’m only good at words, that’s it. Though, not too much lately.” She leaned on the other side of the island and glanced over Sydney’s head through the kitchen window, feeling the weight of her own words.

Sydney leaned forward on folded hands. “I love your words, Marissa. I, along with everyone in America and maybe England too, loved the Joanna series. I hated for that last book to end. You are so gifted.” She paused and caught Marissa’s gaze. Her voice softened. “Though I know lately it hasn’t been easy.” She reached out and grasped Marissa’s hand.

The simple gesture brought a sting to Marissa’s eyes. She squeezed back and blinked, following with an awkward smile. “You’re right. It’s been hard to get myself re-motivated after—after Robert. I can always find things to distract me. I’ve enjoyed working in the garden. I took a painting class. It was as though I wanted to avoid writing,

even though I love it. I'm not sure what was going on inside." She'd better figure it out fast. She wouldn't mention the call with Randall, which was still too raw.

"You were healing, Marissa."

Yes, that and a good dose of inertia.

Sydney pulled her thick ash-brown hair behind her shoulders and took a gulp of cold water. She could have easily been a model instead of a high-school math teacher. Her passionate stories of her low-income students gave ample evidence of her dedication to them. That explained her persistence in her sometimes-difficult profession.

"What time is everyone getting here?"

"I expect them before six. Eden flew into Dulles last night from Indianapolis and she's driving here with Julia."

"Then we'll be complete."

Marissa took a deep breath. "Yes, complete."

Two hours later Marissa, Sydney, Julia, and Eden sat around the dining room table, ready to dive into the feast Marissa had prepared. Flickering candles cast a golden hue across the table. China dinner plates brimmed with chicken cordon bleu, fingerling potatoes sautéed in butter and herbs, and steamed asparagus in hollandaise sauce. Enticing aromas of sautéed potatoes and chicken circled around the table.

"This looks fabulous, Marissa. We told you not to go to any trouble." Julia leaned forward, but despite her gentle admonition, her face showed delight and anticipation as she took a sniff of the steaming homemade biscuits.

Marissa looked around the table at her friends. Julia, with her Mediterranean complexion and dark hair, Sydney, the tall and athletic, and Eden, a petite blonde with a bubbly, outgoing personality. They were all so attractive while Marissa considered herself rather plain. At least she wasn't the jealous kind. She knew Robert had considered her beautiful and talented. She tried to draw comfort from that. Occasionally, she attempted to see herself the way Robert saw her. She was still working on that skill. It was much harder without him there to remind her.

She turned back to Julia and smiled. "I wanted to do something special for our first evening back together."

"I'm so happy that we've managed to keep our reunions, though with our schedules, I know it's not easy." Eden glanced around the table for signs of agreement. "We need to do our best to keep our dates with each other."

"I vote for a cruise next time." Sydney lifted her water glass. "Any takers?"

"Either that or a long weekend in San Francisco," Marissa said.

“I’m sure we’ll have lots of ideas. But the main thing before we leave here is to get out our calendars and schedule our next one, okay?” Eden’s round, blue eyes invited a response.

A chorus of agreement resounded from around the table. “I know we sort of kept in touch in a sketchy way after college with Christmas cards, Facebook, the occasional Skype visit—” began Julia.

“Better than nothing.” This from Eden.

“Thank goodness for technology!” Sydney said.

“Amen to that.” Eden looked back at Julia. “Finish your statement, Julia. We’re sorry to be rude friends who interrupt.”

Julia laughed. “That’s okay. I wanted to say that even though we’ve kept only loosely in touch over the years, I find it so rare and wonderful that we’ve made a commitment at this point in our lives to see each other regularly and get together twice a year.”

The other women murmured their agreement.

“Through the years and the trials and the careers and kids—” Julia shook her head, hands splayed.

“And husbands—” added Eden with a chuckle.

“Oh, yes, the husbands. Well, we won’t talk too much about them. That’s rather a sore subject for all of us.” Sydney smirked and reached for the potatoes.

“— here we are, twenty-five years later. We have a lot of history among us and I feel so blessed to be here with you all.” Julia’s voice softened as she finished her thought and looked around the table. “And now so much has changed for every one of us. Now, we’re—” she hesitated, one hand gesturing in the air.

“Post-married.” Sydney’s statement brought laughter followed by a few seconds of solemn silence.

“Yeah,” said Eden. “We’re single. Who would have thought, ten or even fifteen years ago, that all four of us would be sitting here post-married?”

“Better than dead, I guess,” Sydney said. The laughter was more muted.

“Just goes to show you how surprising life can be,” Marissa said quietly as a trace of sadness swelled inside her. “Some of you went through awful divorces and others of us have lost our husbands. We never expected these things.”

“But we’re strong,” said Eden emphatically. “God gets us through it, whether death or divorce. And we survive. We get stronger. And here we are together, supporting each other. This is only our second reunion, but we’ll have many more. I’m sure of it.” Eden’s face shone with certainty and contentment. She’d been widowed for nearly ten years. Now

she had the ability to talk about her husband without tearing up or feeling the wave of desolation mount up inside. At one time, she'd walked in Marissa's shoes. She, too, had gone through the daily struggle to get out of bed and keep living.

Eager to change the subject, Marissa turned to Eden. "Eden, how is your restaurant going?"

The candlelight glinted off of Eden's sleek shoulder length haircut, making it shine like polished brass. "It's going well, thanks to my brilliant chef. Wish I'd hired him years ago. Actually, I'm considering selling. I'm tired of the restaurant business and a couple people have shown interest in buying it."

"Oh, keep us posted," Julia said. "What will you do next?"

"No idea." Eden gave them a hesitant grin followed by a shrug. "Maybe I'll travel or write a cookbook. Or both. Or maybe I'll move, leave Indiana. It wasn't my choice to live there in the first place, but there I am, fifteen years later." Eden sighed. For a moment all mirth dropped from her face and a shadow crossed her brow. "I'll let you know what I end up doing once I know that myself." Her smile returned as she glanced around the table.

"I think you should move to North Carolina," said Julia. "Or northern Virginia or Maryland, near me. D. C. is nearby and *quite* exciting."

Marissa took the platter of chicken and passed it for a second round.

"At least move to a place where we can get together more easily and often." Marissa was relieved that the conversation had moved on. "Raleigh, for example." They all laughed.

"Here, here." Sydney lifted her wineglass. "Charlotte would work, too."

Eden leaned forward and placed her elbows on the table. "I'll keep you all posted. Sounds like I have plenty of potential destinations. I'll definitely need your advice when the time comes, so you might be sorry you asked."

"No problem, you can count on us to tell you everything we think you should do with your life," Sydney said. A new round of laughter followed.

"And what about you, Julia? You haven't filled us in on your life yet or your business." Eden reached for the water carafe and served herself. "Anyone for a water refill?" She glanced around the table and refilled Sydney's glass.

Marissa couldn't read the expression on Julia's face but predicted bad news.

Julia leaned back in her chair. "I have some interesting clients. There's one guy who owns a small airline. He is having me redesign his whole first floor. That's kept me busy. He'd also like me to marry him."

This drew laughter and oohs. "Any potential?" Eden lifted her eyebrows.

Julia grinned and shook her head. “Along with that, I have some hotel clients, which I enjoy. The design store is doing pretty well. But I’ve had to cut back my time there because my mother has been getting worse. I’m the only child, so I need to be more available to visit her and take care of her needs.”

“Anything new with her condition?” asked Marissa. “Or is it the same, just worse?”

Julia nodded, frowning. “Yes, it’s the same, emphysema and Alzheimer’s. Bad combination. It’s hard to run a business and also be involved in her care to the degree I need to. But I have some great employees and assistants. That’s made it easier to go see her. I just take it day by day.” She let out a heavy sigh.

“Let us know if you need to talk or get away or anything, okay? We’re here for you.” Eden gave Julia a light squeeze on her arm. Julia returned a small smile that didn’t reach her eyes and said no more. The women fell silent.

After a moment, Eden turned to Marissa. “Marissa, aside from being a divine hostess, you’ve been quiet this evening. Is everything okay in your world?”

Marissa looked around at her friends and knew she was in a safe place to tell them about her current pressure. She sighed.

“Uh-oh, I knew it. You can tell us, Rissi.” Eden’s brow furrowed as she awaited Marissa’s response.

Eden had walked with Marissa through becoming a widow. She was Marissa’s closest friend among them, although Marissa loved them all like sisters and considered them all her best friends. If there was one place she could be transparent, it was there. “This is very recent news, like, this afternoon recent, so don’t be mad because I didn’t tell you all sooner. My agent, Randall, said he’d have to drop me if I didn’t give him an idea within a month.”

A collective gasp echoed around the table.

“That’s cruel!”

“How could he?”

“Doesn’t he know what you’ve been through?”

Marissa held up one hand. “Actually, he’s stood by me for the last year and a half. He’s given me time, but I haven’t given him anything. At all. Not in a year and a half since Robert’s death.” She frowned and her shoulders sagged. “A man’s got to earn a living. He’s been compassionate, but there are limits. He’s in demand as an agent, so I get it.” She finished with a shrug.

“Yeah, I can see that.” Julia’s voice lost its indignation.

“What will you do?” asked Sydney.

“I told him I’d have an idea within a month and an outline for two books of a series within two.”

Julia’s eyes widened with her smile. “That’s great. What’s the idea?”

“I loved the Joanna books.” At Sydney’s statement, the other women echoed their agreement.

“That’s just it, I don’t have an idea. I’m finished with the Joanna series and I’m clean out of ideas. I’m trusting God to give me one within a month.”

“You can do it, Marissa,” Julia said. “You have a proven track record.”

Marissa returned a forced smile, appreciative of their confidence. They didn’t know she’d tried for months to come up with a new story that she could be interested in or better, excited about. She’d come up empty for months at a time.

“The Joanna series took place in Victorian England,” Eden said. “Could you go back to England and let some history and culture seep in to give you more ideas?”

Marissa sighed. “I’d love to, but I don’t have the money to go back. I went there with Robert before writing the Joanna series and everything just fell into place, the story, the sequels. I guess he was my muse.”

“You could do U. S. history, then. The Gold Rush, the Civil War, the Revolution, the Colonies.” Sydney rattled off her ideas and a chorus of agreement sounded from around the table.

That might work if only she could just develop an interest in some period of U. S. history for her historical novels. There were many monumental events in United States history. But her niche had always been Victorian England and it was hard to change continents and cultures to something entirely different. She may just have to. She’d been riding on Joanna’s popularity for far too long.

Marissa and her friends finally went to bed at one-thirty. She climbed into her soft four-poster bed and let the day’s exhaustion roll over her. Felt good to dissolve into the soft mattress. Though her body was comfortable, and she was content with the evening, in the backdrop her thoughts were unsettled. She murmured another prayer about her dilemma. Her faith was weak on that subject.

She turned her head to gaze through the filmy curtains where she could see an almost full moon. It lit up the room with a soft, milky light. The sight was a comfort to her. She’d take her mind off of Randall’s ultimatum for now, but eventually, she’d have to commit everything she had to finding a solution.