

THE DECISION

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This book is dedicated to my husband Steve, my best friend and the love of my life. I also dedicate my creative journey to my three children, David, Eric, and Katelyn. I hope you're inspired to reach for your own dreams and pursue them with determination and perseverance.

THEME VERSE

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

Joshua 1:9 (ESV)

CHAPTER ONE



Uganda

Stepping down off the rickety truck, Ava Stewart pinched her eyes shut and swallowed back the acrid bubbles clinging to her throat. The oppressive humidity and the crater-filled roads did little to quell the storm brewing in her skull—and in her belly. Traveling to Uganda during the fall rainy season had been a bad idea. Ava sipped from her water bottle and sighed. The tepid liquid brought relief but not satisfaction. *I'd do anything for a glass of ice-cold mint tea.*

High-pitched cackles and a barrage of feathers shot through the air. Ava eyed the culprits and scowled. A rowdy group of scruffy chickens scratched and stomped at the muddy dirt, hoping to spy anything to peck. *What am I doing here? I'm a city girl.*

Two adolescent girls brushed past her, kicking a twine-wrapped ball, laughing and batting at each other for the next shot. Another girl, smaller than the others, struggled to keep

up. When her foot caught on a protruding rock, she tumbled to the ground.

Ava bolted forward. “Are you okay, sweetheart?”

The little girl glanced up. Her wide brown eyes were glossy with tears, and Ava’s heart ached. *Mommy misses you, Evelyn.* Taking a deep breath and releasing it, she pushed past the memory of her daughter. “Looks like you’ve got a scratch.” She motioned toward the little girl’s knee, now ruddy with blood, and frowned.

The girl sucked in a quick breath and Ava drew her attention back to the child’s face. Pointing to the gash, the girl sniffled as a handful of tears twisted down her dusty cheeks.

“I have something that might help.” She dug through her bag until she found the wad of bandages she’d packed for the trip. Finding one with an ombre of pink and purple flowers, she smiled back at the little girl. “Would you like one of my special stickers?” As if Ava were a magician pulling a rabbit out of her hat, the colorful bandage brightened the girl’s expression. Splashing a bit of water on the cut, Ava dabbed the wound with a tissue and threw her a wink. “Need to clean out the dirt.” She pulled the paper from the bandage and gently covered the girl’s knee. “All better.”

The girl stared wide-eyed at her leg and grinned. Then, bouncing to her feet, she wrapped her arms around Ava’s neck.

The child’s hug melted her heart as longing filtered through the creases of her soul. *I miss my little girl.*

Releasing her arms, the girl stepped back, darted through the group of chickens, and skipped across the open field.

Ava took in a couple of long, cleansing breaths as she stood. *You’re here to help, not wallow in your grief.* If she thought too much about the irrational decision she’d made to travel thousands of miles from her tidy, comfortable home in Dallas,

she'd be tempted to sprint back to Kampala and jump on the next plane to DFW.

Don't make any extreme decisions in your grief. Her therapist's words sprang into her mind like an out-of-control bouncy ball.

Ava pinched her brows together. "Too late."

"You have some time before our transportation arrives." A booming voice pulled her from her thoughts, and Ava glanced up. After picking up two more local doctors, they needed to transfer into a larger, roofless truck—hopefully one with better suspension.

Charles, the village pastor and leader for today's trek, pointed to the two grass-roofed huts and smiled. "Maybe take a minute. Stretch your legs."

Ava followed the group, grateful for the promised relief from the jarring roads.

"The sun's finally breaking through." Sharron, a pediatric nurse from her church, sidled up next to her and nodded toward the parting clouds.

"Yeah, but even with all this rain, it's still so hot." Ava squinted. Her designer sunglasses did little to darken the glare from the peeking sun.

Sharron chuckled and motioned ahead toward one of the shelters. "Smells like they're cooking up something delish in there."

Ava grimaced as Sharron trotted away and vanished inside the simple, four-walled building. When the sharp scent of aromatic spices assaulted her nose and throat, she darted for the nearest copse of trees. Placing a hand over the soft pouch of her belly, her stomach spasmed until that morning's breakfast splattered across the muddy ground and her new pink running shoes. *Please, God, don't let this be what I think it is.* Ava shoved her sunglasses on top of her head, then yanked a wet wipe out of her bag and swiped the cloth across her lips.

“You okay?” A hand landed on her shoulder and squeezed.

She stilled. Hearing the low timbre of her friend Colby’s voice, she pleaded for the dusty ground to open and swallow her whole. “Yeah—yeah, I’m good.” The words came out shaky, and she lifted a palm to steady herself against the trunk of a tree.

Colby’s hand dropped from her shoulder as a shudder of frustration rippled through her. *I should have never come here.* Another flutter of uneasiness stirred in her belly, and she kicked at the tree trunk like a spoiled child. *It’s nobody’s fault but your own.*

Colby sighed, yanking her out of her pity party. “Ava,” He paused. “I know you’re going through a tough time right now.” Another pause. Nobody—not even a good friend—had the right words to rub out the sting of grief.

Ava shook her head. “Don’t say it.” She couldn’t handle any more well-intentioned expressions of comfort. She’d fled Texas, angry at her husband, angry at God—well, angry at everyone—and if a few thousand miles couldn’t bring relief, then she didn’t know what could. *Get it together, Ava. Two weeks. You just have to get through two weeks.* “I’ll be fine. I think I just got a little car sick.”

Colby stood there for a breath of a second, and she didn’t doubt he was questioning her sanity. No sane person buries her husband, then a few weeks later jumps on a plane to Uganda.

Intense emotions are normal. Take some time to heal.

Ava wanted to scream—or laugh. She’d not even bothered to tell her therapist where she was going. Why? Because she didn’t want anyone to stop her.

“Just make sure you’re drinking plenty of water.” The gentle tone of Colby’s voice circled through the air as tears gathered in her lashes.

She nodded, afraid to speak. A moment passed before he patted her shoulder, then dropped his hand and shuffled away. Releasing a sigh, she reached into her bag, pulled out a ginger drop, jerked off the wrapper, and plunked it onto her tongue. *God, if You care anything about me—never mind.*

After a quick swipe of her brow with the back of her hand, she turned, slipped on her sunglasses, and focused on the bumpy, red dirt road they'd driven in on. It was lined with umbrella trees, sprigs of tall wispy grass, and a handful of other low-hanging vegetation she couldn't name. Everything about this country felt unfamiliar to her—the food, the people, and the insects. Ava shuddered, then dusted off her hands on her pants. *The insects.* Some creatures she'd come across, she'd only seen at the Dallas Zoo behind thick glass. *The zoo. Our first date.* The sentimental image darted across her mind. She jerked back as if someone had slapped her in the face. *Don't go there.*

Ava pinched her brows together. *What I wouldn't give for one more day.* She kicked at the ground again, this time the tip of her shoe hitting hard against a buried rock. She groaned and crinkled her toes in pain. However, the ache was nothing compared to the raw, gaping hole in the center of her heart.

A buzz of activity pulled Ava's attention back to the group she'd traveled with.

"Time to load up, everyone." Their translator for the day pushed through the crowd and clapped his hands. "Our replacement vehicle has arrived." The airy lilt of his voice sent a ripple of laughter across the diverse group of missionaries.

The battered vehicle rolled in front of them, and Ava cringed. So much for added luxury.

"It's not glamorous, but it does the trick." Sharron, who'd shimmied up next to her holding a skewer of unidentified meat, flashed her a grin.

Ava wrinkled her nose and studied their new ride. The

truck's green paint was faded and the large dent in the side gave the impression it had been through a fight scene in *Jurassic Park*. "If you say so." She forced a smile and watched Sharron hoist herself into the open bed of the truck. Each side had a plank of wood to sit on and raised backs to give it the illusion of safety and comfort. "No roof or seatbelts?"

Sharron motioned for her to get in. "Not today, city girl. Not today."

She looked down at her long skirt. She still hadn't grown used to wearing one, but etiquette called for it, and admittedly, the light fabric kept her cooler than jeans. Gripping the side of the truck, she considered the most lady-like way to get in.

"Are you ready for your first shot clinic, Mrs. Stewart?"

She glanced back at Colby and frowned. "Mrs. Stewart makes me sound ancient."

He chuckled as he wrapped his hands around her waist to give her a gentle lift.

Stepping up into the truck, Ava straightened her threadbare Texas Rangers baseball cap and settled onto the bench across from Sharron. She had no medical experience but she'd volunteered to keep track of supplies and help with the children's Bible camps.

Colby hopped up into the truck with the ease of an athlete and plopped down next to her. Ava rolled her eyes. Her muscles ached all over, and today she moved more like someone on injured reserve than a woman of thirty-two.

"Okay Ava Marie, are you ready to entertain kids and hand out lollipops?"

She forced a happy expression. "I think so." The truck lurched forward, and a myriad of ruts and bumps in the uneven road rippled through her body. Glancing over the side of the truck, she swallowed back the burning liquid coating her throat. *Why can't they have smoother roads?*

Twenty minutes into their trip, Colby nudged her shoulder. “You look a little pale. I’d like to give you a brief check-up when we get to our next stop.”

Her stomach tensed beneath her T-shirt. “No need. I’m fine.” She plastered on a smile and looked up at the sky. It had rained all day yesterday, but today it felt like a sauna. “You’d think the sun wouldn’t be so scorching after all the rain we’ve had.” She’d only been in Uganda for seventy-two hours and had already used nearly half of her bottle of sunblock and her can of bug spray.

Colby slid off his medical jacket. “Here, put this on.” Underneath, he wore a light blue T-shirt that said *Got Meds?*

“Don’t you need it?” She slipped her arms into the sleeves and sighed. It took just a few seconds to feel the relief of having her bare skin covered by the airy fabric.

“Nah, not right now.” He smiled big and pointed to his shirt. “I promised Arabella I’d send her a selfie of me wearing this. This will help me follow through.”

Ava grinned, recalling his niece, a spunky teen she’d once taught in Sunday School. “Teenagers and social media, you’ve got to love them.”

He laughed. “Right.”

As she rubbed the sweat off her forehead, she studied the open terrain. The sporadic trees dotted the landscape with their bushy arms reaching up and out toward the sun. The pose emulated a dispersed crowd in silent praise. She envied them.

“The scenery is beautiful.” Ava waved her arm past the road but didn’t hear Colby respond. After a few seconds, she turned away from the moving topography and glanced at him. Something about the way the muscle in his jaw rippled made her heart stall. “Colby?” As she said his name, he reached out and grasped her arm. “Is something the matter?”

Her words barely passed her lips before the truck lurched to a stop. She tried to shift her body to get a better view of the road. Before she could, the truck spun its tires into reverse and almost catapulted her off her seat.

“Ava, this doesn’t look good.” He lowered his gaze and the fear in his eyes shot a cold bead of sweat across her forehead. The truck lunged to another stop. Ava’s body slid hard into Colby’s, and he released her hand and wrapped his arms tight around her. “We need to get off this truck.”

The revving of several engines in the distance drew closer, and Colby looked past her to the road again. To calm her racing heart, she tried to concentrate on the tiny droplets of sweat traveling down his temple and sliding into the dark stubble of his beard.

“God, help us.” Ava’s whispered plea was snuffed out by the shouting between the driver and the passengers. Her ears strained to pick up on the one-sided English clashing with the native tongue as the voices rose in an anxious crescendo. “Colby, what’s going on?”

Colby didn’t answer. A tremor rolled down her spine while the engine beneath them throttled and roared, permeating the air with a thick fog of throat-burning fumes. Bracing her back against the splintered wood, Ava’s mind fought to distinguish between her body trembling and the vibration of the truck’s clunky metal shell. “Colby?”

The driver slammed through the gears, and Sharron prayed aloud. The cacophony of sounds made her heart pound as nausea swirled in her belly.

“Dear God, please help us.” Sharron’s petition deepened into a husky whisper.

Colby jerked his head to the right, and Ava followed his gaze. Beside them hung dense brush and low-hanging trees. Off to their left stood an open field. He glanced back in

Sharron's direction, and seemed to weigh an unseen dilemma.

"They're armed." Colby's voice lowered to a guttural hiss. "If something happens to me, tell Arabella I love her."

Before Ava comprehended Colby's words, he moved her to the back of the truck. The truck turned to the right and idled.

"Get low and stay out of sight." He leaned in closer. "When the trucks are gone, head south to the village."

"Wait! What?" Ava's chest tightened. "What about you and Sharron?"

"I'll get Sharron. If we all get off at once, we'll cause a scene." Colby nodded toward the copse of trees. "We're close enough to the trees now no one will notice us jumping off."

Ava didn't have time to argue before Colby nudged her off the tailgate. Her body propelled forward, and the truck spun out from under her jamming its engine into high gear.

"Colby!" She stumbled through a thick curtain of brush and landed on her knees with a thud. Trying to pull herself up, Ava grabbed onto the thick vines curling along the hill like gnarled, dirt-covered fingers. "Help! Colby!" Beyond her line of sight, the truck engine roared to life and sped away.

"No!" In a panic, she took a stumbling step up the slope. As she slipped into the mud, she lost her balance and clawed her fingers into the bushy leaves. "Don't leave me." Ava's plea dissolved into the humid air. Seconds later a loud blast rocked the ground, and she lost her footing. Dropping to a crouch, she crawled behind a low-hanging tree with branches bent over and hugging the ground. When a second explosion sent a tremble beneath her, Ava dug her shaky fingers deeper into the wet earth. "Dear God, help me."

Peeking around the tree, Ava squinted past the natural barrier of foliage, hoping to see the truck or any of her friends. For several seconds, she saw and heard nothing. Then, like a

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smudge from an artist's graphite pencil, grey smoke fanned out across the sky.

“Oh, no.” As tears rolled down her cheeks, she begged God for His protection. She didn't want to die like this—in a foreign land, alone.