



Shards of Ashley

Excerpt

Book 5 of the Family Heirlooms Series

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Part I: Counterattack

Prologue

"I can't stay long," Ashley Savage announced as soon as she entered her therapist's office. "I'm picking Jay up at the airport."

She strode across the room without bothering to remove her elegant black trench coat. Dr. Tyler was waiting for her in his usual chair, notepad and pen in hand. Wordlessly, he watched her take a seat across from him, set her briefcase with a drapery sample book down beside her purse, then cross her legs and arrange herself precisely before she faced him.

She'd been coming to Dr. Tyler sporadically for many years. He'd been ancient and grandfatherly then and gratefully had continued along that course in the time since. Pride filled her at how very little he'd gotten to know her in the duration. She gave almost nothing away in the short time she was here each appointment. Though she had a very deeply entrenched distrust of men in general, something about him was less intimidating than the others—possibly because of his age combined with a Santa Claus

appearance. He reminded her of the innocuous counselor she'd grown up meeting with in church. Jay's father, Pastor Samuels, had tried to befriend her after she was brought home against her will when she was fourteen. When he'd realized she wouldn't speak in anything but minimal word responses, the old man had seemingly lost all power to "help" her. She prided herself in how easily she'd rendered him harmless.

And that was precisely what she needed, then and now. Visits with Dr. Tyler allowed her to construct her armor. Combined with the many hours she'd spent this morning getting ready to see Jay, with flawless make-up application, donning the utterly sophisticated yet feminine soft pink skirt-suit, and the untouchable chignon she wore her hair up in, this visit would aid her in keeping Jay Samuels out of all the places he didn't belong. She'd spent her entire adult life avoiding the advances of anyone in the male species whom she had reluctant contact with.

"How long will Jay be home this time?" Dr. Tyler asked.

"He has leave for a week and will be staying with his youngest sister while he's here. On Monday morning, he'll be leaving. I'm sure he called me because he needed a ride from the airport."

"I'm curious, Ashley. Is there some reason he always asks *you* to pick him up? After all, you've made it clear that the two of you are...or rather, *were*...only friends in high school."

Ashley shrugged, downplaying the significance. "I'm closest. I live in La Crosse. Everyone in his family lives in Peaceful. Everyone except an older brother who's a medical missionary in some other country. But you know that."

"Yes, I know that. Is it possible that Jay sees you as more than a former friend from school?"

Ashley ignored the warmth filling her face. She struggled to remain passive when she said, "He might. But Jay is confusing at best. How should I know how he sees me?"

"How do you feel about him? You've never said."

Ashley's jaw tightened. Ironically, she didn't come here to talk. She'd learned that it was easier to face Jay's tenacity after she'd been through an intensive round of fielding questions with only the most generic answers.

"I've never said because there's nothing to tell," she said coolly. They'd graduated high school, and she'd promptly moved to La Crosse. He'd attended Bible college before joining the Marines, following his father's example almost to the letter by going into the military to get his pastoral training. In this time, Jay's behavior had been nothing if not bewildering. Her feelings for him were, as she'd said, nothing to tell.

"I find that difficult to believe."

"I don't see why."

"Because, Ashley, we've had an appointment once a week every week for the past three years, yet the only time you actually keep your appointment

is when you have to pick up Jay from the airport. You come just before you have to pick him up. There is a connection, and I've spent this time trying to come up with your rationale in this situation. I believe I finally have an answer."

Ashley's spine straightened even more. "I don't know what you mean, doctor."

"He upsets you. Maybe he throws off your rigidly maintained equilibrium. I think we can safely say that's true. And there must be a reason he asks *you* to pick him up every time. Surely anyone in his family who lives in the area would gladly do it for him if he asked them. But he doesn't ask them. He never has since he joined the military. He wants to see you, first and foremost, whenever he comes home on leave. And he spends the majority of his time while home with you. Isn't that right?"

She shrugged. "For all I know, he has a girl in every port. I'm not one of them. There's no reason to believe it's more than that for him."

For a long, stretched moment that made Ashley grit her teeth, silence reigned in the office and she felt positively thrust under a microscope.

"Tell me about your relationship with Jay while the two of you were in high school."

Ashley frowned. This wasn't the first time Dr. Tyler had posed the question. Why did he keep asking the same things? "We were...friends." *For lack of a better description.*

"Friends? How did you become so? Were you always friends? You said your family attended his father's church."

She fought the urge to close her eyes and block out the images that sprang into her mind with his words. "He started talking to me in math class. Jay is good at math. I've never been."

"And he remembered who you were outside of school?"

"Yes. He always knew. My mother dragged—*brought* me to church. Sometimes. Sometimes every Sunday for months. Then not at all for just as long. But, well, Pastor Samuels attempted to counsel me for a long time as well."

Dr. Tyler's expression looked far too amused at her words. Clearly, he realized he'd been as ineffective as her previous therapist. Over the years, Dr. Tyler had been shooting missiles at the target—her mind or heart—and she'd easily detonated and defused each and every one. *Am I losing control of this session? Dr. Tyler knows nothing about me. Pastor Samuels never knew anything either. And Jay...Jay knows a few things only because he was there at the time. But I've never been willing to share much. He knows me and he doesn't know me. That's always been the safest way.*

"So, the two of you began talking in math class?" Dr. Tyler urged.

"That class and others. After school. In church sometimes." *In truth, every single time Mother hauled me there. If I had a reason for attending, it was Jay.*

"The two of you talked and got to know each other during these times."

Ashley couldn't seem to deny the heart of the matter. "He talked. I...listened...to his voice. I read his voice."

"His voice. You read his voice?"

"Read... See, he kept a journal of his thoughts, his musings. Sometimes he'd leave it lying around. He'd leave the room for a few minutes. And I would read what he'd written. Later, after I was brought back home, I would sometimes write questions in his journal—mostly questions about God and His unfairness. When I went to read the journal later, I would find Jay's responses to my questions. I would read his voice."

Dr. Tyler nodded his understanding, seemingly unaware that her throat felt nearly closed up. Jay's voice. There was no way to hear or read it and remain unaffected. Oh, how she'd hated that! But she'd needed to hear his voice, whether in speech or in writing, sometimes more than she'd ever needed anything else. She found herself speaking, trying to sort out her own quiet, insane desperation in this regard. "Back then, I didn't think I could live without his voice. Not even for a day. I tried. God, how I tried! And maybe it was part of the sanity I found during that time. Maybe I couldn't have rebuilt..."

Shut up! He doesn't need to know this. No one does. No one needs to know anything about who I am and where I come from. I don't want to remember. My past is gone. It's dead. I buried it myself. Gratefully.

Why do I talk about Jay when I come here? If only I could avoid the subject of Jay altogether. But this is the only place I can...God, the only place I can discuss the problem I've been having since I fled home when I was seventeen. Jay. Jay Samuels is the problem I've been having since then. Our separate lives and my strength in living successfully without his voice for so long should make me victorious. But Jay won't leave me alone, no matter how hard I try to push him away.

She wasn't in the least bit surprised when Dr. Tyler said what he did nearly every session: "You've come here for more than three years, Ashley, yet I know nothing about you. You—the *inner* you, your past, what led to your trust issues."

Ashley didn't react, expecting him to close the session the way he always did on that sad note. But then he added something new that threw her. "And I suspect Jay knows nothing about that person buried deep inside you either. Why do you come here, Ashley? *Why?*"

"I don't know," she answered automatically, her tone stiff and uncooperative.

"You come here *before* Jay visits. Never *after*. Not *while* he's there, away from you once more. Only before."

"What are you implying?"

"In all this time, you've resisted every implication that Jay sees you in the context of girlfriend—his only girlfriend. You come here before he visits,

always looking utterly untouchable—encased in oblivious ice, as it were.”

“Excuse me?”

“Isn’t that the projection you’re striving for? That you’re made of ice. That you’ve locked yourself in a cage where he won’t be able to touch you. That you can’t feel anything at all.”

Ashley didn’t dare even breathe. Anything she did or said would confirm the truth to him, the truth she knew and hid from. Every single time she saw Jay, she had to fight him. There was no other option. The alternative... No, she couldn’t give herself to Jay Samuels. *Never Jay. Anyone but him. Because, if I let him, he’ll consume me.*

Dr. Tyler spoke softly. “Perhaps you have feelings for him that you won’t admit to yourself or him. And perhaps he has feelings for you that you refuse to acknowledge because it feels safer to you to keep him outside.”

Ashley struggled not to let go of the manic laughter in her head.

“Trust is fundamental in any relationship. From what you’ve told me, or shall I say what *little* you’ve told me all these years, it’s obvious to me that you don’t trust anyone, Ashley. In some ways, you don’t even trust yourself. But you must realize that human beings can’t survive without basic trust. Frank Crane said, ‘You may be deceived if you trust too much, but you will live in torment unless you trust enough.’”

Shards of ice seemed to fall directly into her conscious mind, giving her the piece of armor she needed to defend herself. “Stephen Leacock: ‘Men are able to trust one another, knowing the exact degree of dishonesty they are entitled to expect.’”

Her therapist blinked as if shocked. “Touché,” he murmured sadly an instant later.

Trust? What is trust? I’ve lived without it all my life. If I ever trusted, it was for a nanosecond and then I knew exactly why I shouldn’t trust. Because trust leaves a person naked, bleeding and vulnerable to further attack. Why should I trust now? I’m strong. No one can touch me. And I come here to make myself strong before I have to face Jay. Dr. Tyler doesn’t get to me—or he never has before. He’s always helped me construct my armor instead of face things I’d rather not see or remember.

From the very first time Jay had returned home on military leave, Ashley had been aware that she would fall apart in degrees throughout the time. One week or less she could handle, but it wasn’t easy because Jay refused to allow her to drive him away. Plain and simple, he *would not* leave. He made a joke each time, as if he didn’t believe for one second she might want what was between them—the *thing*, for lack of a better description—to end.

The thought of an end, of never seeing Jay again, caused equal parts of pleasure and pain to erupt in her. She’d never understand what had happened the first time Jay kissed her. A part of her had died that day. Or, more accurately, had run and hidden from any implications about why he would want to kiss her that way—kiss her and expect her to kiss him back.

Ironically, she always came back to the fact that he knew her and didn't know her. *Knows too little and too much.* If he found out the truth, she didn't have a single doubt he wouldn't want anything to do with her ever again. Considering the little he did know about her... *Why does he kiss me? Why do I let him? Why does he come home...to me?*

God! Don't think about it. Stay inside the cage where you're safe. The cage that Dr. Tyler has accurately assessed is built on the strength of never trusting anyone, not even myself.

"Ashley, does Jay's voice still affect you the way it did when you were a teenager? Do you still need it? Can't live without it?"

She drew in a deep, fortifying breath. "I can live without it. He's gone for months at a time. We don't communicate in any way during that time. And when he's here...we don't do that thing with his journal anymore."

"You're saying you can live without his voice temporarily at least. How long before he's discharged from the military?"

Swallowing with difficulty, she tried to make her voice level and casual. "In about six months. He's resigned his commission. He's going to pastor the church his father founded. Pastor Samuels retired about three years ago, and they've only had interim pastors since. Jay will be the permanent pastor once he's officially released from his commission."

"And how do you fit into all that?"

She stared at him in disbelief. "I don't."

"Are you sure Jay sees it that way?"

Ashley tamped down on her bark of amusement. "Of course. Believe me, no one is ever going to mistake me for pastor's *wife* material."

That Dr. Tyler could look genuinely surprised and distressed was even more laughable. "Why do you feel that way?"

"I'm all wrong for that life. It would be *wrong* for me to be in that role."

The therapist frowned. "Because you have no plans to make a commitment to Jay?"

"You're implying he wants a commitment with me. You couldn't be more mistaken. It's not like that between us." *I won't let it be.*

"What would you do if he asked you to marry him?"

Okay, this was getting crazy. She had to end this. "He wouldn't. That would never happen. And that's not even the reason why I can't be a pastor's wife. I'm just not...holy enough."

Comprehension dawned in Dr. Tyler's face. "Ah. So you're prepared to live without him, without his voice, in your life permanently?"

Ashley closed her eyes to that particular stinger missile. She rebuilt her armor, diverting any pain from its intended course, and forced it to fly right by her without making contact. "I have to go."

"Of course. But perhaps you'll consider coming to our next session. For the very first time, I feel we've made some progress here."

Even more reason to have my assistant reschedule the next

appointment, like always. Maybe indefinitely.

After she gathered her things, Ashley couldn't prevent herself from glancing at her therapist. She could see in his expression that he knew she'd reschedule. She even considered that he suspected her sanity depended on doing so.

Rushing out to her car, she shoved her briefcase, sample book and purse inside, closed the door after her and poised the key at the ignition. A strange sensation descended on her. With only that as a warning, sobs crammed into her throat. For the first time in years, she didn't have the strength to push back the horror leaking through a crack that had opened up inside her.

Chapter 1

Jay Samuels knew exactly where to find his girlfriend. Not in the waiting area, eager to throw herself in his arms the minute he deboarded the plane and appeared. No, Ashley would be in the gift shop, trying to convey blaringly that picking him up was an afterthought. She'd act like coming to get him from the airport (twice a year or so) was a major inconvenience to her. Maybe it was. Maybe he'd prefer to have her tackle him with enthusiastic love. But he'd always delighted in Ashley's mystery, her unfathomableness.

He smiled eagerly, making his way around other passengers in the tiny La Crosse airport. Even knowing he and Ashley would spend the entire week he was on leave butting heads, he couldn't wait to see her. Since she'd moved to La Crosse when she was seventeen, he'd had to take charge to get what he wanted. She never made it easy, never fell in line with his plans without a good argument. He had a big one on his hands tonight, but he was up for it. He was spoiling for it.

Still grinning, he entered the gift shop and saw her immediately. A woman as elegant and breathtakingly gorgeous as Ashley Savage was hard to miss. She wore an utterly feminine, utterly sophisticated expensive business suit that she couldn't have imagined even *touching* a decade ago. The suit she wore today was in shades of pink, a floral print, with a form-fitting jacket that followed her exquisite curves, and a little skirt. Three inch pumps showed off deeply tanned, mile-long legs. She was five-ten, only a few inches shorter than him, but taller than most women, especially in the heels. As usual, she wore her waist-length, champagne brown hair in a twist at the back of her head. Wisps hung around her delicate face. He had the feeling she thought tying up her hair the way she did made her unapproachable and unattractive to men. She couldn't have been more wrong. While she didn't need the make-up she wore, he had to admit she applied it with an expert hand. She looked completely natural, as if she wore no cosmetics at all. He wondered if she had any idea how beautiful...and intimidating...she was to men. Heck, she probably intimidated women just as easily. But he expected that was her goal. She didn't allow anyone or anything to get to her.

An ache started inside him that he knew would only get stronger with every minute they spent together in this short time. *Does she have any idea what she does to me?* For him, no other woman could come close to her. That had never been what she intended, of course, and he'd well known it after they graduated high school and started independent lives. She'd purposed for them to become separate from each other in every conceivable

way.

She'd met rich-from-birth humanitarian Amanda Grant, who'd hired Ashley at her interior design company and taught her the ropes. In a very short time, Ashley had obviously learned a lot from her mentor—she'd mastered how to dress and talk properly, but she'd also designed her own style and it was worth gold. Amanda's clients had fallen for Ashley left and right, and she'd become a success in every sense of the word.

Since then, Jay had to concede that what they'd shared no longer *fit*—she'd been right about that, in not so many words. He'd ceased to harbor any more illusions about befriending someone who'd seen so much pain. Plain and simple, friendship could no longer satisfy him. Not when he'd seen her strength, the way she'd picked up the pieces of her shattered life and rebuilt herself from scratch. Wanting their relationship to move into something more romantic had become a priority to him, but she hadn't made it easy for him. To this day, getting anything from her was a never-ending battle, but a worthwhile one that he hadn't and wouldn't tire of, not when she allowed him to be with her despite "the inconvenience." *I never made it easy for her either. Just the opposite. I was hell on her when we were younger—just because I enjoyed our sparring so much.* Unfortunately, he couldn't deny that he still derived pleasure from that. But sparring wasn't all he desired anymore.

Jay's hands clenched. He loved her, wanted her. While that desire felt old and familiar, the torture in his longing was new and nearly unbearable. The feelings between them used to be so light and fun. The last time he'd come home... *Being with her constantly wasn't enough. Having her next to me, allowing me to touch her...the ache to kiss and hold her won't be satisfied until she belongs to me wholly.* At the time, he hadn't been sure how to make that happen. He'd wondered countless times what she would do if he told her the only future he could envision beyond being a chaplain and a minister outside the military was all about her. If his life didn't include her forever, he wasn't interested. This time, he'd discover one way or another what she would do when she learned he'd already taken a step into a permanent life with her. He planned to ask her to take a step of her own.

Looking at her guarded face now, he already knew the answer to that. She saw him standing here, aware he was watching her, but she wouldn't admit it a moment sooner than she willed. She wanted to make *him* wait for *her*. That was all right with him. Her control issues had given him a chance to look at all he'd missed for months on end.

In a calculated move, she glanced up from the magazine she was perusing, pretended she'd just now realized he'd arrived, and murmured, "Oh, you're here. Let me pay for these, then I'll take you home."

She dropped another fashion magazine into the basket she carried. Jay followed her to the checkout counter, stepping right in front of her just before she got there. Her expression was irritated, just as guarded as

before, and it should have reminded him of something hard as ice or stone. Ashley's intentions to keep everyone away no longer worked on him. Everything about her spoke of soft femininity to him.

"Not exactly the hello I was hoping for," he said under his breath. He pressed up against her, and she glared at him.

"Can I help you?" the clerk called pleasantly.

Ashley stepped around him, effectively dodging his embrace to put the basket on the counter. Undeterred, Jay put his arms around her from behind. She stiffened defensively, but he held her a little tighter. He put his mouth right against the shell of her ear while the clerk went about the business of tallying her purchases. Breathing in her expensive, mesmerizing perfume, he murmured, "I'd rather not go to my parents' right away."

"They miss you."

"I miss *you*."

Impossibly, she stiffened even more. He nuzzled her neck, becoming increasingly intoxicated by the scent and feel of her so close. He wanted to get out of here. *Now. I need to be alone with her.* This wasn't the time or place, but he couldn't get himself to back off. Instinctively, his counselor brain started to analyze both of their actions, but he shook off the need to do that with her. When he was home, he wanted to relax and enjoy his time with her.

She paid and took the bag the clerk handed her. Gently, she nudged him away, turning to ask, "Have you gotten your luggage?"

"Nah." Seeing Ashley had been his first and last thought when the plane landed.

She led the way to the baggage return across the lobby from the gift shop. When they arrived and watched the bags coming through, she said, "I have to drop off this fabric sample book with a client and then go back to the office..."

He didn't care to hear the list of things she'd prepared to keep them apart. He slipped through her defenses and put his arms around her while she was still talking.

"Jay," she started in alarm.

People milled around the airport. Others sat in the waiting areas. The two of them weren't the only ones embracing. Though he knew she hated displays of public affection, he didn't care if every person here was looking. Her gaze scolded him again, but he recognized she wouldn't stop him. When he took her face in his hands, he noticed that her eyes looked red. *Crying? Ashley? Never. More like she isn't getting enough sleep, what with working fourteen-plus hour days seven days a week.*

Eyes the color of a dark forest shifted to his mouth skittishly, and Jay's pulse soared. *She wants me to kiss her.* He didn't hesitate. His lips covered her soft, full mouth, and in that moment, he remembered what heaven tasted like. She didn't struggle despite an initial protest that faded away

almost as if forgotten. He pulled her against him, molding her sides, bringing her yet closer as he deepened the kiss. *This is how I know you feel the same, Ashley Savage. You need this physical connection as bad as I do. How did I survive so long without seeing you?*

As much as it was possible for Ashley to soften, she did, fueling his hunger and hope. He had to have this. Her "errands" would keep them hopping until he made his aggressive bid to take her out to dinner. The reservations had already been made. He didn't dare admit that his baby sister, Samantha, and her fiancé would be dining with them tonight. Ashley wouldn't be able to argue once it was too late. Somehow he'd have to convince her to attend Sam's wedding on Saturday, too. But that was a battle best put off until the very last minute. Getting her to agree to dinner and spending time together at her condo after dinner were all the skirmishes he could handle tonight.

She broke the kiss abruptly, gasping for breath as she insisted a little desperately, "You're going to miss your luggage."

"Miss you more."

She looked up at him in confusion as he swooped in for another kiss. What was confusing? He loved her, wanted to immerse himself, body and soul, in her. When he delved his fingers into her silken hair, he felt her body responding to his. He'd concluded long ago that the warrior woman was a kitten under the surface, a kitty craving love and affection—but Ashley would never ask nor take what she really wanted from him. *Sometimes I think she just goes along with all this because it's her way. To put up and shut up. To offer no resistance and hope it's over soon. Not because she wants it. Because I want it. If I didn't make contact...she would let it go. Let me go.*

The thought was more than a little uncomfortable, but he'd never been able to shake it, not when the conclusion was borne from her unwillingness to let him past her defenses further than a grueling inch at a time.

The fact was, he was losing control. The anchor he'd had since he and Ashley's relationship became romantic hadn't been a bit reliable of late. Since the last time he came home, each encounter with her in his arms, he accepted that he was in danger of drowning in what he wanted with this woman.

He turned just enough to see his seabag on the luggage return. He scooped it up as if he'd willed it into his hand. His arm still around her, he led her out to the parking lot right out the front door.

"Why do you do that?" she demanded. "In front of everyone."

He could hear that her teeth were clenched around the mutinous, whispered words. Jay grinned, looking down at her. "Nothing I like better than driving you crazy, babe."



Ashley knew exactly what would happen if she didn't start talking as soon as they got inside her car. Unfortunately, she was still reeling from Jay's kisses. Her resistance was shaky at best.

They approached her brand new silver Jaguar, a present for herself six months ago. After Amanda married and signed over the business to her, Ashley had feared night and day that it would go belly-up in her hands. Instead, it'd excelled and thrived in a way neither of them could have expected. Sometimes it seemed that she got new clients every single day.

Since Amanda had taken her under her wing and made her a partner in her interior decorating business, re-naming it A&A Design, Ashley had been waiting for the other shoe to drop. How could someone so worthless, someone with her horrifying past, possess any talent? How could she ever make anything of herself? Impossibly, she had. The expensive luxury car, her first new car ever, had been her only true allowance that she wasn't destined to fail.

"I have all this work. I'll just take you home..."

"I'll come with you. And then we'll go out to dinner. I've already made reservations."

"Jay, I have a job. I can't stop everything just because you're back in town."

"Why not? It's not like I'm here often. A few days a year. You should plan your vacations around my leaves. What's a couple hours, a couple days, a week? We could spend every minute of this time together. It sounds like paradise to me."

Oh, he made her crazy. "We couldn't spend every minute together. What would your parents think? Your family?"

Jay was a man of luck. One who always got what he wanted and needed. Why in the world did he have to be so attractive? She convinced herself sometimes that if only she didn't find him so handsome, he wouldn't get his way so easily with her. Tall with black hair in a high-and-tight that somehow made him even more masculine and rugged than every other guy, she barely missed the thick hair that used to fall over his forehead and collar roguishly. None of that mattered. Not when he was lean and sexy in black jeans and a Henley shirt unbuttoned just enough to be casual without being sleazy. She could see a tantalizing glimpse of his bronze, muscular chest.

Have you even heard of the word 'resist?' Ashley scolded herself. Jay was grinning at her, his dark brown eyes crinkled and sparkling in a way that made her feel like a mouse he was toying with. Lord, sometimes she found it almost impossible to hold her fist back from smashing into his arrogant jaw. What she wouldn't do to take *him* by surprise, make *him* lose control, instead of always being the one manipulated by his seductive power. With all the other men she'd been with, she'd given herself because she'd never had a choice, because it didn't seem to matter one way or another. What was

another glimpse of hell when it was all you truly knew? But with Jay... *I don't want to give myself to him. Anyone but him. Jay can destroy me. Maybe he can even save me. No! I won't believe that.*

He walked around to the passenger door, tossed his bag into the back, and they slid almost as one inside their seats. Knowing what was coming, the soft-grain leather felt even more sensual and unbearably irresistible against her skin. *Whatever you do, don't look at him.*

But she couldn't help herself. They'd done this so many times before. It always ended up the same. She picked him up from the airport. They got in her car. And he reached for her like he couldn't wait another torturous second. The last time he'd been in town... Yes, she had to admit that something about that time had been different than all those before. Jay had forever been in control of their interactions—almost smugly so. When he'd kissed her and she'd felt all those scary things she'd never experienced with any other man, he'd never been truly affected by the contact. He could walk away as if he felt nothing at all. Even while she was shaking, shattering, terrified of what she was going through, he'd been in blithe control. Dear God, had she despised him for his upper hand. *Only, last time he wasn't in control. Not even a little. And I have no idea what changed.*

The thought of turning away and starting the car, avoiding him, never occurred to her. As soon as she helplessly looked at him, he dragged her as close to him as he could and kissed her with full, firm lips that demanded a response or else—one she desperately didn't want to give him. The entire time she fell under his spell, she struggled not to lose herself completely, not to reveal anything that was crucial to her separation.

Her fight was beyond pitiful. She'd already been so weak today. Dr. Tyler was supposed to reinforce her resistance against Jay. But this time he'd exposed a part of her she'd tried so hard to hide from the world. She even shielded herself from the memories. She'd left his office, got into her car, and the tears she'd avoided for more than ten years had been ripped from her. They'd burned her like acid. *Why now? Why were all her carefully constructed defenses falling apart now? Within minutes of being with Jay again? In the past, she could keep herself in hand for most of the time they were together with the breaks they had to take each night apart.*

His lips and tongue seduced her, and she couldn't help her eyes from drifting closed, her body from turning into warm caramel. She was trembling... No, *Jay* was.

"Look at me, Ashley," he whispered, jarring her a second time.

She didn't want to, but her eyes fluttered open obediently. She'd never seen his expression so stark and agonized. "Kiss me, honey."

"I did."

He shook his head. "Kiss me because *you* want to. Not because I want you."

No. He always wins. I never do. I won't let him this time.

She turned away, blindingly trying to get the key in the ignition. "What do you want from me?"

She heard him inhale sharply. "I told you. I want you to want me. Sometimes it feels like you just go along with what I want."

"And isn't that ultimately what you want?"

"No." His teeth sounded clenched around the devious word. "Look, I know you're not new to all this. But it feels like..."

"New to this?" she repeated in disbelief. If he'd physically struck her, she wouldn't have been more shocked. "What does that mean?"

"I just mean that you've done this before."

Ashley went rigid. "Had sex, you mean? Believe me, that term is too polite."

The look on his face was unfathomable. Jealousy? Anger? Betrayal might have fit it best, but she wasn't sure what he was feeling.

"Just going along with what's happening comes with the territory, I've heard," Jay offered as an explanation.

"Territory? You mean, the sex and drugs lifestyle? Yes, the two go together perfectly. Can't have one without the other." She wouldn't argue with him there. "What's your point?"

"I just mean that maybe those guys expected it of you. That you didn't really want to do all that stuff. You just gave in because they made you or pressured you."

"And you think that's what I'm doing now?"

"Well...yeah."

He really did delude himself. She supposed it was easier for him to accept "all that" than that he was dating a sinner from start to finish. Frozen now, Ashley found herself asking him what Dr. Tyler had asked her. "Why do you come here, Jay? Why are we continuing this whole thing?"

"What whole thing?"

"This ridiculous charade. Friendship. Whatever. I don't know what it is anymore, but it doesn't make sense. You're who you are, who you've always been."

"And who am I?" he asked warily.

"A man of God. That's your life. It's what you've always been and always will be. And I'm..." She laughed without mirth. "I'm not the kind of woman a man of God would want to be with. I'm not what you need." *What anyone needs.*

"Who decided that? You?"

"Anyone would tell you the same. Don't act like you don't realize that everyone in your family, in your father's church, wouldn't say that you shouldn't be involved with a notorious sinner. I've done all the things you've heard and worse, Jay. I've slept with countless guys. I've fried my brain with drugs galore. Almost destroyed myself with that lifestyle, as you call it."

"You believe in God," he insisted.

Ashley couldn't help herself. She slid a cold glance over to him. "So does the devil."

As soon as the words were out, shame flooded her. She looked away quickly, angry at herself. She remembered how Jay used to talk to her about God in his journal. She remembered the love and reverence in his "voice." She never wanted him to stop sharing his faith. But now she didn't want to hear or read it anymore. She liked her empty life, one made up of all work, no play, no emotion, no memories she didn't want to face. She was a woman without a past, or she would be if she could just bury it deeply enough. If she could leave behind everyone who remembered what she'd been. In this life she'd rebuilt for herself, she was never disappointed because she didn't expect a thing of anyone but herself. *I don't even expect anything of God. Because I know He'll never be there when I need Him and He'll never give me what I ask for. He knows better than anyone else how many times I reached out to Him, cried and begged Him to save me. He didn't. No one can help me, especially back then when they all wanted their piece. So I saved myself. I don't need Him. I don't need anyone.*

But she didn't believe herself. Not completely.

Skirting another glance over to Jay, she saw that he seemed surprised at her words, as if he couldn't have guessed how far she'd fallen from the grace he'd tried to tell her was hers if she just accepted it.

She started the car, looking away once more.

"I thought you went to church with your friend Jasmine," he murmured, obviously shell-shocked.

"So what if I have?" She hadn't been back in months. Now that her best friend was in love with the pastor at Peaceful Pilgrim's Christian Church, she was no longer forced to tag along because Jazz didn't like to go alone. As soon as the service concluded, Jazz and Pastor Wesley Horace would spend the rest of the day together. *Jasmine Pepowski, as much of a sinner as I was—in love with a man of God. Unbelievable. And yet, in some strange, insane way, it does make sense. She's spent her life looking for salvation. She finally has it and everything else she wanted with it. All I have is survival. Skin-of-the-teeth, don't-rely-on-another-soul-for-help survival. That's never changed.*

She pulled out of the airport lot, and Jay asked point blank, "Why do you always try to push me away, Ashley?"

She realized at that moment that he'd taken her comment about the devil believing in God—not as a statement that she was an atheist or a heathen—but as a means of putting distance between them. He was exactly right, too. She'd said it for that very reason. She'd assumed he'd be so offended by the comment, he'd drop her in a heartbeat. What would it take to force him to give up?

"You're who you are, Jay, and I am who I am. Nothing you do makes sense in light of that."

"I don't even know what you're talking about, babe."

"Of course you do."

He sighed, surprising her again when his hand tenderly cradled the back of her neck. "Let's not fight. Let's drop off that book, go to your office, then go out to dinner at The Waterfront. Okay?"

Silence screamed discomfort while he slid strands of her hair through his fingers and she thought, *If we're in public, we won't be alone together. Easier to fight him. Harder for him to touch me. Expect nothing, and you won't be disappointed.*

"Fine," she murmured, refusing to look at him and see his smug satisfaction at winning again.

Chapter 2

"Fine" wasn't exactly the resounding "Let's do it" Jay had hoped for, but he was more than willing to accept the bone. And when she pulled up behind a stoplight he leaned over, gently turned her face to his, and kissed her. "You're more beautiful every time I see you, honey."

She blinked in surprise, then quickly turned away from him. She didn't let the moment die away the way he expected though. She muttered, "You mean, I'm not the two hundred pound, strung-out addict going through the iron cure you remember?"

If Jay had ever doubted Ashley liked a good fight, he stopped at that moment. At the moment, he failed to see what had made all this relentless sparring so enjoyable for so long. Now he found it wearying. She went out of her way to twist everything he said until there was no possibility of *good* existing in his meaning. *But she hasn't changed. I have. The back-and-forth is no longer fun for me because it's not enough. I knew all this time she needed the fighting to keep her defenses intact. Considering what's happened to her, who could blame her for that?*

Jay had begun to wonder why she wasn't healing from her past. After all, she wasn't taking drugs any more, wasn't sleeping around. But she wasn't happy, wasn't a whole, content person despite all the outer evidences of recovery and success. The last time he was home, he'd realized the heart of the matter: Ashley didn't trust him, didn't trust anyone. He wasn't even sure why. Did she believe, given half the chance, he would hurt her? Did she not trust him to be serious in pursuing a relationship with her? He couldn't answer those questions. All he knew was that she pushed him away eventually, every single time. Today she'd even gone so far as to deny she was a Christian. *Did she do that to get rid of me? Get me out of her life? And she thought that would be an effective way to do it?* He'd never allowed himself to consider she *really* wanted to end this thing between them. Maybe his optimism was wishful thinking or just plain conceit, but he couldn't let her go. Even if she wanted him out of her life, he wouldn't let her push him away too far. He loved her too much. Deep down, he believed she loved him, too.

He didn't rise to the challenge she'd issued with her words. Instead, he asked, "So how's the business? Must be good if this is your car."

"It is. My first brand new one."

"She's a beauty."

She nodded. "I had to take on an assistant. Even working fourteen hour days, I couldn't keep up with the number of assignments coming in."

"Assistant, not partner?"

Ashley and Amanda Grant had been equal partners in the business, though Amanda had owned and founded it. Amanda was well known in the area for being a person who gave back. For many years, she'd been helping underprivileged kids get a chance to succeed, and that was what she'd done with Ashley. While Ashley's pride might not have accepted it now, Jay knew back then she'd been desperate to get away from her old life. She'd taken everything Amanda offered her with open hands and she'd proven herself over and over. Last Christmas, Amanda had gotten married and moved to Texas. Proving that she trusted her partner, she'd signed the business solely over to Ashley.

"I'm too controlling to have a partner," Ashley admitted a little sheepishly. "You probably realize that. I only went along with it before because it was essentially Amanda's business. She started it. Now that it's mine lock, stock and barrel, I won't share power."

Jay couldn't help laughing out loud. She glared at him. "You're a formidable woman, Ashley Savage. I'll never underestimate you again. So you hired an assistant?"

She nodded. "He does all those little things that I no longer have time for, like meeting with new clients for consultations, handling the financial end of things with my accountant—that most of all. Give me a yardstick and architectural design, and I'm totally in my element, but crunching numbers makes me go pale."

Jay had heard almost nothing she'd said past that first word. "Wait a minute. He? *He?*"

"Keith Lovett."

"Your assistant is a man." Jay had never seriously worried about Ashley being attracted to another guy. *More wishful thinking or sheer overconfidence?* In truth, he'd assumed she was secretly committed to him, the way he was to her. Other women had never existed for him, not the way Ashley did. Since they'd connected in high school, he'd set his heart and future on her. That feeling only intensified and solidified each time they were together. Right now, hearing that someone she worked very closely with every day of her life was male put him on edge.

"Keith had the most experience to fit the loose job description. He's worked out amazingly these past three months."

"So he's married, old and fat?"

Curiously, Ashley looked across the car at him. "None of the above. What's your point?"

"How well do you know him?"

"I know hiring him was the best thing I could have done for the business. I don't understand what you're getting at here. He's an employee. How should I know anything beyond that?"

"What *do* you know about him personally?"

She sighed and shrugged. "Very little actually. Not that it matters. He's

not married. In fact, he strikes me as a playboy who'll be a bachelor until the day he dies. He's about my age. He works out often."

"Has he asked you out?"

Ashley didn't look at him this time, not even to give him that haughty *What in the world are you getting at?* expression. She didn't need to say the truth anyway. The answer was clear. "So he has?"

"Keith flirts with anything that has breasts."

"And yours are the most beautiful, hands down."

Her cheeks flared red. "How would you know?"

"I'm not blind, sweetheart."

She shook her head. "Flirting's like breathing for Keith. He's always on the lookout for his next conquest. His interest in me is meaningless."

"Is *he* attractive?"

"How he looks is irrelevant. He's my business associate. What are you doing, Jay? What are you implying? This is ridiculous."

Jay couldn't deny that. But he couldn't stop his jealousy. "Do you date other men while I'm gone?"

"I don't want to talk about this anymore. It's not worth my time."

"Ashley, do you?"

She swallowed, obviously irritated. "No. But we're both free. If you want to, you're free. It's not as if we're..." She'd pulled into the circular drive in front of a mansion, shut off the engine, and glanced at him like she couldn't believe the conversation they were having. "This is so beyond ridiculous, I refuse to say another word."

She grabbed her briefcase and a huge, fat book and exited the car, throwing, "I'll be right back" over her shoulder.

Jay sat in the silence with her words reverberating in his head like shrill echoes. She wasn't dating other men. Yet she considered herself free. She acted as if it would be fine with her if he dated other women. He didn't. Wouldn't. Had absolutely no interest in anyone but her. But she considered herself free while she didn't date. Why not? Why wasn't she attracted to her "charming" assistant?

While Jay wanted to assume she was committed to him, he had to acknowledge that it was no longer that simple or clear-cut. If she didn't believe he was totally committed to her... *In that case, I can't blame her any more for that than if she questions why I come back to her each time I'm home on leave.* He'd avoided being too direct with her about his feelings all these years—aware that she'd wanted it that way. He knew too well that she would run at the first sign of trouble—trouble of the too-close-for-comfort variety. Whenever he said anything about their relationship, she went out of her way to make it clear that his feelings weren't reciprocated. The rejection got to him, but he understood—or he'd *thought* he understood all this time—why she did and said the things she did. He wondered now if he really did.

On a frustrated sigh, Jay sat back in the seat. What was he thinking?

Their relationship was too insane. What had made him go ahead with his plans to convince her to marry him sometime in the next week? He'd bought the ring. He'd made arrangements with a family friend in the County Clerk's office. The marriage license only needed Ashley's signature and her identification and citizenship papers to go into effect—given his extenuating military situation, it'd been back-dated so the waiting period could be waived...and to allow him to make his proposal spontaneous and romantic. His father's friend believed that was why anyway. Jay had told him that story to get him to work out the arrangement. In truth, he knew he'd have a hellishly hard time convincing Ashley to marry him in the time he had.

I must be insane. She considers us free. She doesn't want to be my girlfriend, let alone my wife and the mother of a healthy number of children.

After almost fifteen years of what he'd considered "together", they'd made no progress whatsoever in moving closer to an exclusive relationship and the intimacy that went with it. He was as much at fault for that as she was. She was so guarded and unwilling to give herself to him, to anyone really, and she would never accept that she belonged to him. She didn't want to belong to anyone—belonging implied chains. She would never accept that he was hers from start to finish. *Give me the chains. I have no idea why she is the way she is, why she feels the way she does. Heck, I don't even know how she really feels. About me. She won't let me in more than an inch.*

One way or another, he had to find out all the answers to his questions. Even if he didn't get the opportunity to propose to her during this visit, he was going to find out *why*. He would discover who Ashley Savage was and make her see that she could trust him even if she couldn't trust a single other person.