

Her Baby Secret

A short novella

by

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Chapter One

Ashley Harcourt finally had a handle on her life.

Maybe.

She hitched her baby boy higher on one hip and opened the wooden back gate leading through the colorful gardens between the cottages and the blacksmith shop. The fragrance of lemony magnolia blossoms lifted to her nose while the metal clang of the smithy's hammer echoed through the summer morning.

A tiny thrill raced up Ashley's arms as it did every day since beginning her internship at the Colonial Williamsburg department of research and design. She loved everything about the historic Virginia town almost as much as she loved creating the clothes worn by the shopkeepers and tradesmen roaming the streets.

Best of all, here in Williamsburg she was just another intern, not a notorious Harcourt from Pine Grove. No one knew what she'd done. And no one recognized her notorious last name.

Though the worst had died down, the unpleasant publicity hounding her family's long-ago connection to the Family Blessings Adoption Agency in Pine Grove provided enough reason

for Ashley to love the idea of a summer away.

Pine Grove was only few miles down the road so she could be away from the scandal, both her family's and that of her own making, yet remain close enough to see her loved ones anytime she chose.

Yes, here in Williamsburg, she could enjoy America's past and hide from her own.

The smithy's hammering ceased.

"Ashley?" a male voice called from somewhere behind her.

Ashley stopped and whipped around, her long, eighteenth century-style skirt circling her legs with fresh air. She'd only been here a week. Who could possibly be calling her name?

A lean, muscular figure exited the open door of the blacksmith shop and came toward her, dusty black boots crunching softly on the glittering oyster shell path. Dressed in leather apron over knee-breeches and a loose, muslin shirt opened at the throat, he looked like a blast from the past.

The thought froze in her head as recognition dawned. He was a blast from the past. The near past. Hers.

"Christopher?" she squeaked.

The man she'd turned her back on when she'd been young and stupid was here, in Williamsburg.

"It's me," he said, the familiar, crooked smile saying he was pleased to see her.

So much for hiding from the past.

"I saw you from the window," he continued, motioning toward the blacksmith shop behind him. "Anyway, I thought it was you. What are you doing here in Williamsburg?"

His green-as-spring gaze took in her colonial attire. The frilly white mob cap, the snug brown waistcoat, and a long, flowing skirt covered by a white apron.

From her old acquaintance's behavior, he bore her no ill will and Ashley just didn't understand his reaction to seeing her again. Surely even Christians held grudges.

Well, what did it matter one way or the other what he thought of her? A guy like Chris would have found a great wife by now who was as good as he was. No doubt, he barely remembered the short-lived relationship with Ashley Harcourt.

Christopher didn't know it, but God had been looking out for him back then.

She shifted the baby a little higher on one hip and said, "I'm interning in the fashion department."

With a smile, Chris held his arms out to the side. "So you're the one making the interpreters' duds like mine?"

The full sleeves of his loose linen shirt flared out and stirred his smoky, fire-wood scent.

"One of several people making them," she said. "I'm still learning." And until this moment, she'd thought the internship was the answer to her prayers.

Guess not.

"That's great," he said. Laugh lines, always present around his mouth and eyes, deepened.

"So what are you doing here? I heard you became a minister, not a Williamsburg reenacter."

"I did both. My pastorate is in a little church in modern Williamsburg not far from William and Mary, but you know how I always liked history. This is the best of both worlds. I can work on my masters' thesis in historical trades, play with the forge and hammer, and still take care of my church."

History was one of the things they'd had in common back at Tarkington, the elite private school they'd both attended, she because her parents were filthy rich and he because he was smart enough to get a scholarship. She'd always envied him that brilliance. More than that, she'd envied his steadfast awareness of who he was and what he wanted out of life. Nothing ever shook Chris Sullivan. Faith and goodness emanated from him now as it did then.

"That's nice." She noticed he didn't say one word about taking care of a family. Could someone as handsome and kind as Chris still be single?

A tiny flame of something akin to hope flickered in Ashley's chest, but she immediately doused it.

If Christopher knew what she'd done, he wouldn't even speak to her. He was a nice guy. Good to the core. Holy even. And she was—well, she wasn't holy, that was for certain.

"So how have you been?" he asked.

"Busy." That was an understatement, considering the mess she'd made of her life. "You?"

"Yep. Crazy busy, but it's all good."

She wished she could say the same.

"What time is your lunch?" he asked. "We can go to Chownings for root beer and a sandwich and catch up."

Catch up? As nice as some extra time with Christopher sounded, she didn't think so, given he was a minister and she an unwed mother with a guilt complex bigger than a colonial hoop skirt.

God may have forgiven what she'd done to her baby, but she was still working on forgiving herself.

"I don't know, Chris. Sometimes the past is better left alone."

If he knew the depth of her sin, a sin far greater than having a child out of wedlock, he wouldn't even speak to her.

His green eyes turned serious. "Friends don't stop being friends because of a disagreement."

"You haven't changed at all, have you?"

He laughed. "Some. I hope for the better. So what do you say? Lunch later?"

While she struggled for a kind but firm way out of a reunion lunch, Chris turned his attention to the baby. "Who's this little guy?"

As usual, she'd waited too long to do the right thing. Story of her life.

Embarrassed heat rushed up the neck of her high lace collar, but she fought it off. She was ashamed of herself, but never of her baby.

"This is Gabriel," she said with quiet pride. "My son."

Something flickered in Chris's expression as he glanced from the baby to her. But his look wasn't the censor she'd expected.

"So, you married the guy," he said softly.

Heart thudding, she hitched her chin. "No. Actually, I didn't. He had other plans."

Gabriel's father had headed for Europe, denying responsibility, the day after discovering her pregnancy. According to his family, Ashley was a climber trying to lay claim to the family's wealth and position. Had her own family not been wealthy, she could have understood their point. As it was, Roman's behavior only proved how wrong she'd been to trust him in the first place.

All the girls had wanted the new guy. He'd been exciting and wild, everything Chris wasn't. She'd been flattered when the sophisticated heir to one of D.C.'s most prominent families cast his wandering eye and seductive smile in her direction. But no one had ever told her about men like Roman Fields.

To Chris's credit, he didn't press for the ugly details, though he had to be curious. Instead, he took Gabriel's reaching fingers and gave them a gentle shake. "Nice to meet you, little man."

Ashley's heart squeezed as her baby displayed four front teeth in a wide grin. There was something undeniably beautiful about a child's tiny hand wrapped around a man's long fingers. Especially this man's.

The thought jerked her to her senses. She could not, would not, let herself think such things.

Abruptly she said, "I have to go now."

As she deftly pried Gabriel's fingers loose, her skin brushed Chris's hand. The flutter in her belly was a warning she couldn't deny. "Can't be late to work. Sorry."

And she was. Sorry for all that she'd ruined. Sorry for the wrong she'd done. Sorry she'd lost all hope in the relationship department.

Chris took one step back, his arms falling to his side. "Sure. Okay."

She could hear the disappointment and hated herself for putting it there. But common sense screamed for her to escape before she did something really stupid, like ask if he was married.

If Ashley had hit him in the face with a mud brick, he

couldn't have been more surprised. Or angry.

Though heat billowed from the fire, and sweat ran down his face, Chris didn't take a break from the forge.

Ashley Harcourt, the girl he couldn't forget--Make that the woman he couldn't forget--was back in his life. They'd lost touch when he'd graduated, considering she was with Roman and he was the voice crying in the wilderness, scared of what a cad like Roman would do to a gentle, insecure girl like Ashley.

Might as well admit the truth. He'd been jealous too.

He figured the Lord would understand if he wanted to punch the blue blood right out of Roman's nose.

Instead, he slammed the hammer down on the anvil with grim satisfaction.

She'd changed, matured. There was a sad wisdom in her brown eyes that hadn't been there in the old days. But she was still Ashley, the only woman he'd ever entertained any thoughts of marrying. From the first time he'd seen her in some funky looking vintage hat he'd been in love with her, though she hadn't known it.

He'd prayed a lot about her, especially after Roman came into the picture, and finally decided he'd let his own will get in the way of God's. Sometimes it was hard to tell the two apart.

But now she was back.

The idea gave him pause. He stopped, hands on hips, and

stared out the window in the direction she'd gone. She was here, at least for the summer. So was he.

That had to mean something.

Chapter Two

"Ow!" Ashley stuck her index finger into her mouth and sucked hard.

Milly, her boss, looked up from stitching a lace-edged cap. "Did you stick yourself with a needle again? What's wrong today, Ashley? I've never seen you so fumble-fingered." Then with a sly smile, the middle-aged woman added, "Wouldn't be that handsome smithy I saw you talking to, would it?"

Ashley's nerve endings jittered. She'd thought of little else all morning. It seemed as if every time she started making progress in her life, something came along to knock her backwards.

No, that wasn't fair, nor was it correct. Chris Sullivan had been a good friend at one time. He'd never done one thing to cause her pain. She'd caused her own problems. Didn't the Bible say she had to reap whatever she'd sown? And she had sown some very bad seed.

"Chris is an old friend," she said simply.

"That's good." Milly hitched a square chin toward the door as the bell jangled overhead. "Because here he comes."

This time Ashley's stomach jumped into her throat.

Chris had discarded the tradesman's apron but still wore eighteenth century garb as was required of all who worked in the town. His dark brown hair was slicked back and caught at the nape in a very short ponytail. She wondered what his congregation thought of that.

"It's lunchtime," he announced without preliminaries. "Right, Milly?"

The designer glanced at the watch pinned to her gingham bodice. "That it is, young man."

"Then you won't mind if I escort Miss Harcourt to Chownings. We have some catching up to do."

Milly, mob-cap slightly askew, eyed him over the rim of her skinny little bifocals. "Only if you promise to bring her back by one o'clock. Patrick Henry expects his new waistcoat today."

Chris chuckled. "Far be it from me to upset the fiery Mr. Henry. I'll have her back." He aimed a challenging grin at Ashley. "Grab whatever you need, and I'll get the little guy."

While Ashley grappled for bearings, Christopher went straight to the playpen. Gabriel held up chubby arms and babbled happily as Chris scooped him up.

"Chris, I can't." She didn't need the grief or the reminders of what an idiot she'd been. Still was.

"Can't what? Eat?" By now, Gabriel had latched onto Chris's ear and was making happy baby noises. "Is this a medical problem I should know about? Everyone eats." He gave Gabriel a little

bounce. "Isn't that right, champ?"

When Gabriel laughed, one of those ear-tickling belly laughs everyone loved to hear, Ashley cracked a smile. "There's nothing wrong with my appetite."

"That's a relief. Sickly women scare me." Chris scooped the diaper bag onto his opposite arm and started toward the door with her baby. When she didn't move, he said, "Are you coming or is it just me and the little guy for lunch?"

The man had certainly changed from a docile, studious youth to a strong, forceful man. And the difference was rather thrilling.

"You'd kidnap my son?"

A dimple flashed in his right cheek. "Want to find out?"

"I might stand right here and see if you would do it."

He opened the door. Gabriel looked at her, puzzled for a moment, and then he waved bye-bye. Christopher burst out laughing. "I think he likes me."

So did she. That was the trouble.

She studied his teasing expression for two beats before making up her mind. Chris was a friend. They were far enough away from Pine Grove to keep him from discovering her shameful secret, and right now, she could use a good friend.

"All right," she sniffed, fighting the urge to laugh too. "Anything to protect my son."

Behind her Milly snorted. Knowing her boss's propensity for

romance novels and Hallmark movies, Ashley let that slide right by. She needed friends, not a matchmaker. Later, she'd make it clear to her boss and design mentor that there was nothing but friendship going on between her and Chris.

As they stepped out on the boardwalk, Christopher offered his elbow.

Ashley shook her head. "You have a diaper bag on there. I think that's probably enough."

Instantly, he shifted both baby and bag to one arm. "What's your excuse now, Miss Harcourt?"

She batted her eyelashes at him playfully. "And they say chivalry is dead."

His answer was a cocky grin.

She slid one hand into the crook of his elbow, the blacksmith's muscles hard and strong beneath her fingertips. As they strolled along Duke of Gloucester Street, Chris kept up a joking commentary on the peculiarities of the various shopkeepers. Christopher had always known how to make her laugh, had always been there to listen. For the first time in a long, she felt relaxed and carefree again.

A summer in the company of an old friend, far from the gossip of Pine Grove, might be a good thing after all. Catching up didn't have to include a revelation of every single moment of her life. She could skim right over the bad stuff. Although, in her case, it would be more than an easy skim. It would be a

giant leap across Grand Canyon.

When they reached Chownings, tourists crowded the place, an eating establishment first opened in 1766. George Washington himself was thought to have dined here as did many other of America's founding fathers. Ashley still got a little thrill thinking about the history that surrounded her at every turn in Colonial Williamsburg.

While dressed in the clothing of the Colonial period, she and Chris were obliged to act the part of early American citizens wherever they went. Chris was far better at the acting portion than she, doing so with grace, humor, and amazing historical accuracy.

"You're good at this," she said when they were finally alone.

"Thanks. Do you like my pony tail?" He patted it. "It's new this summer."

"Charming. But it's the buckled shoes that really grabbed me."

Humor sparkled in his green eyes. "That's what all the women say. Wait until I don my tri-cornered hat. Turns me into a regular chick magnet."

They both laughed, but Ashley realized Chris *was* a chick magnet. He hadn't been in their elite private high school, but that was because of the snob mentality which deemed him unworthy because he didn't come from a prominent family. He was on

scholarship, something looked down upon by her snobbish friends. Even then she had recognized how wrong that was. A man like Chris, with his hard work, integrity, and kindness to everyone had been worth more than all the money in that school. She just wished she'd realized it sooner.

The waitress came, also dressed in period costume and playing the part to the hilt in her mob cap and white apron. She chucked Gabriel beneath the chin, received a grin in return, and handed him a cracker.

"He's a charmer, for certain," she said. "So handsome."

A swell of love filled Ashley. Gabriel was a charmer and so much more. To have others notice was a source of pride. "Thank you."

She and Chris ordered cheese burgers, both of them grinning at how *un*-colonial their food choices.

When the server left, Chris laced his fingers together on the table top. "All right now. Catch up time. Where have you been? What have you been doing?"

She glanced at Gabriel in his highchair. "Well, I had a baby. Obviously." She gave a nervous laugh, expecting to be judged somehow less because of that.

Gabriel chose that moment to slap his chubby hands against the high chair. Cracker crumbs flew and he gurgled with joy, reaching to catch them.

"He's a happy baby," Chris said. "You must be a great mom."

Considering how bad a mother she'd once been, his compliment buoyed her. "Thanks. I'm trying."

"Raising a baby alone can't be easy."

"It isn't, but my parents help out some." And that was all she wanted to say about that subject. In a quick segue, she handed the baby a toy from the diaper bag. "So, tell me about you? I thought you'd be a missionary in India by now."

"Those were my plans. The Lord had another one. My mom was diagnosed with Lupus so I needed to remain close to home."

"I'm sorry. I hope she's doing okay." Chris was all about family.

"Mom's tough. Highs and lows and flare-ups, but overall, she's doing pretty well."

"What about your brothers? I thought they lived in Williamsburg too."

"Mark does, but Sean's in the military. Mark has four kids now, can you believe it?" He chuckled. "Including a set of triplets. I figured he had his hands full caring for them."

She widened her eyes in pretend horror. "No kidding. One baby is a handful for me most of the time. Are you sorry you didn't make it to the mission fields?"

"Not even a little. The Lord showed me something pretty cool. There are mission fields every where, even here in Williamsburg. And He's such a good God. As soon as I made the decision to stay home, a new church plant opened up and asked me

to take over the pastorate. It's small, but growing so I'm bi-vocational for now. And even that's a good thing, a gift, because I can work here doing something else I love."

"So everything worked out perfectly for you."

He gave her a quizzical look. "Not everything. No luck yet finding the perfect woman. But I have a feeling God's not finished in that department."

Ashley let the sentence soak into her consciousness. For his sake, she hoped he didn't mean what she thought he meant, but just in case, she didn't ask.

Instead she said, "I'm a Christian now, too."

Saying the words still felt odd, but odd in a good way.

"I knew there was something different about you. Besides being a new mom."

"Is it a good difference or a bad difference?"

"Definitely good. You're more confident. More peaceful. Grown up, I guess."

If only he knew how scared she was all the time.

"When I was pregnant with Gabriel, I remembered what you'd told me about Jesus, about how he loves us even though we've messed up. Then I had some problems after Gabriel was born." Some of which she prayed he never heard about.

Christopher's eyes flared alarm. "Are you okay?"

"Oh sure. I'm fine now." Physically anyway. "But the crisis opened my eyes, and I gave my life over to Him. I figured He

could run it a lot better than I had."

"This is awesome, Ash. The best news ever."

Though she'd expected nothing less from Chris, she felt a little self-conscious. She might be a Christian, but she was far from perfect like Chris. "It's all still new, but I know I made the right choice."

"Yeah. Absolutely." He leaned forward as though he wanted to touch her but instead kept his elbows glued to the rough-hewn wooden table. The deep spirituality that had marked him as a target for both ridicule and respect at Tarkington flowed from him. He had always had a passion for God that she was only now beginning to understand.

"You don't know how happy that makes me," he said. "I remember all that time whenever I talked about Jesus, you acted bored."

"Not bored, really. Uncomfortable and puzzled. I didn't get it. Couldn't really comprehend the whole faith thing. But I was listening too. You had something none of the rest of us at Tarkington had. A sense of purpose, a sense of who you were and what you wanted out of life."

"Oh, I had my doubts at times, especially at Tarkington."

"You?"

"Sure. It's not easy for any teenager being the odd man out."

"I suppose not." In truth, she'd never considered how

difficult it must have been for him. He'd never complained, but he'd also never had the money for the kinds of clothes and car and entertainment the rest of them enjoyed.

She'd had all those material things but still lacked the one thing he did have: joy.

"So what are your big plans for the future?"

She hitched one shoulder. "To raise my son and hopefully to work my way into the head designer's job here someday. I'm entering the Independence Day contest with some of my best work. If I can win that, I'll automatically be invited to stay on as an apprentice."

The Independence Day Committee was holding a design contest this year in conjunction with the usual celebrations. Quilts, clothing, hats, and any number of other stitched goods could be entered by contestants around the globe. The prize winner could choose between a cash prize or an apprenticeship with the museum. Only a few apprenticeships were given out each year and Ashley wanted the coveted job badly.

"You always did have a sense of style." Chris tilted back in his chair, fingers absently rubbing the condensation from his root beer bottle. "I remember some of the outfits you put together. The floppy old hats and scarves and crazy color combinations you wore. A total individualist."

She'd been dying for attention while trying to hide the scared, confused Ashley behind her crazy costumes. She

understood that now.

"When your sister is a beautiful fashion model that everyone goes ga-ga over, you have to do something to stand out."

"You're every bit as beautiful as Samantha."

"I wasn't fishing for a compliment."

"Take it anyway. You always did sell yourself short."

"And you were the nicest guy on campus."

"Well, you know what they say about nice guys," he joked. "Last place."

She laughed. "Not true. Look at you."

A funny expression move across his face, but before he could say more the server brought their food. Gabriel slapped the top of his highchair and made excited baby noises.

"Don't you ever feed this kid?" Chris softened the question with a grin so that she knew he joked.

"Trust me, he eats all the time. He loves food." As was evidenced by his chubby cheeks and thrashing legs.

"Even those?" Chris gave a pretend shudder as he pointed at a bowl of English peas. "Poor kid. Mind if I give him a French Fry?"

"You'll be his best friend forever if you do."

"Can't beat a deal like that." He dipped the potato in ketchup and offered it to the wiggling child. "What about us, Ashley? Are we sill friends?"

"I hope so." Friends she could handle.

"Cool. Very cool."

He popped a French fry into his mouth while handing another to Gabriel. In the moment of silence while they ate, he seemed deep in thought. He took a sip of root beer and then stared into the dark sweet drink as if it held the mysteries of the universe.

Some of the tension left Ashley's shoulders. If Christopher only had friendship in mind, he was safe...and so was her secret. They'd both be just fine for a summer.

Chapter Three

Christopher didn't know how much longer he could keep up the charade. After two weeks of finding excuses to see her, he was going a little crazy. But Ashley still held part of herself aloof, as though she was afraid of letting him get too close. Like a butterfly in one of Williamsburg's glorious gardens, she flitted just out of his reach.

She liked him. He was certain of that, but frankly, friendship wasn't enough. Smile rueful, he shook his head. *Friends*. What had he been thinking when he'd said such a goofball thing? He had lots of friends. He wanted a wife. He wanted Ashley. He wanted to be her white knight whether she needed one or not, the man she looked to, the man she needed in her life.

In weaker moments, he wondered if she held him at arms' length because he wasn't from her world. He had no rich daddy, no blueblood social standing. He was blue collar, not blueblood. He was fine with his spot in this world. But he wondered if that kind of thing still mattered to Ashley. He didn't think so. He didn't think it ever had.

So, this time he refused to be the odd man out, the kid that didn't fit. Here in Colonial Williamsburg, in their eighteenth century attire, surrounded by American history and tourists, they were on equal footing.

He turned the lock on the blacksmith shop and crossed the short distance to Ashley's cozy cottage. Last night, he'd weaseled an invitation to her place for spaghetti. Tonight it was lasagna. She was a horrible cook, but he would have eaten dirt and asked for seconds to see her smile.

He'd also promised his unbiased opinion of the historical gown she was hand-stitching for the July 4th contest. Never mind that he was completely ignorant in the matter, he'd use any excuse to spend time with Ashley and little Gabriel.

Behind the heavy drapes of her living quarters, a light glowed. The cottage, like all of the historical section, was restored according to the time period. Although the insides had been modernized to accommodate employees of the town, the décor retained its historical flavor.

He lifted his knuckles to knock, but before he made contact

with the white wood, Ashley ripped the door open.

"Get in here, quick." She plucked his shirt sleeve and yanked him inside.

He cast a furtive look behind him. "Don't tell me. The British are coming--again."

Her eyes twinkled.

"Not that I know of. I want to show you something." She pointed to Gabriel, who stood hanging on to the couch, his fat knees bobbing up and down in a baby dance.

Christopher softened, feeling the same excited awe he saw reflected on Ashley's face. In a very short period of time, her little boy's constant smile and sweet nature had easily won him over. It hadn't taken much. He was a sucker for kids.

Ashley motioned him toward the couch where she went down on her haunches in front of the baby and held out both arms. "Come to Mama, sugar pie."

Gabriel's bouncing stopped while he considered the request, but he didn't turn loose of the couch. Ashley tried again. "Come on, baby. Show Chris what a big boy you are. Walk to Mommy."

Still the baby didn't budge. The situation would have been funny if Ashley hadn't looked so disappointed.

"He took some steps not five minutes ago, and now he won't do it."

Chris squatted down and held out his arms. "Come on, champ. Show off for your Mama."

To his surprise, Gabe's eyes lit up. He stretched one hand in Chris's direction, hanging to the couch with the other. In the next instant, he turned loose and toddled two steps before falling into Chris's waiting arms.

"He did it, he did it," Ashley squealed, clasping her hands together beneath her chin, her shoulders hunched in delight.

Chris knew exactly how she felt. Holding Gabriel to his chest and grinning, he pivoted toward to the excited mommy. With a whoop, she threw her arms around both the baby and him. Reflexively, he pulled her close.

The next thing he knew he was drowning in eyes as soft as brown velvet.

Was it his nearness that set her pulse tick-ticking against her collarbone? Or the thrill of seeing her baby walk?

Just in case it was both, he murmured, "Ash."

The corners of her lips tilted upward. She didn't move away, but held his gaze with hers.

In that sweet, celebratory moment, Chris knew that this was meant to be his family. He, Ashley, and Gabriel.

But before it could happen, he needed a small miracle. He needed Ashley to love him too.

Ashley felt the rumble of Christopher's merry laughter give way to the steady thud-thud of his heartbeat. This close the gentle scent of shower soap and the strength of arms that

wielded a smithy's hammer were a powerful combination, and a reminder that Chris might be a friend, but he was also a man.

She started to pull away, but Chris held fast.

"Ash," he said again, eyes searching hers, sculpted smile questioning.

He wanted to kiss her.

Not good. Not good at all.

Especially since she struggled with the longing to place her palm against his strong, square jaw and let him. But she liked him too much to go there. That was the trouble. She liked him way too much.

Gently, so as not to hurt his feelings more, she transferred her arms from Chris to her son, putting the focus on Gabriel. Chris got the message and tilted back on his heels, still watching her.

While she fiddled with Gabriel's downy blond curls, he spoke quietly. "I have a confession to make."

Her gaze flicked up to his and back down to her son.

"Sounds serious."

"Remember a few weeks ago when I said I wanted us to be friends?"

Her fingers stilled. "Yes."

"That wasn't exactly true."

Ashley's heart skipped a beat. Either Chris had judged her and found her wanting, or worse, he hadn't. Either way, she was

in trouble. She opted for what she deserved--judgment.

"It's okay. I understand."

"I don't think you do." Chris's voice remained soft, the tone mesmerizing. The muscles in Ashley's shoulders, already stiff from hours over a needle and thread, bunched to a spasm.

Gabriel wiggled loose and crawled onto Chris's knee. As if he hardly noticed his actions, Chris bounced the baby up and down. Ashley cast around for something to say but her brain, like a drained battery, no longer functioned.

"Friendship is a good start, Ash," Chris said. "And I want that for us. But I want more."

The skittering pulse stopped and restarted.

"I don't understand." Or maybe she did. And the idea scared out of her mind. Regardless of her feelings or of his, what he wanted was impossible...

"Here's the deal." Strong, calloused fingers found hers and squeezed. "I let you get away once before. I'd be a fool to let it happen again."

Fighting off a futile surge of hope, Ashley shook her head. Chris the Christian, the nice guy turned minister, hadn't a clue what he was talking about. She was no prize. She wasn't even the same innocent girl he'd known at Tarkington. As much as she liked him, she couldn't let him do this to himself.

She tried to tease away the seriousness. "Oh, no you don't, Christopher Sullivan. No fair changing the rules in mid-game."

"I'm serious, Ashley."

"Get real. You have a ton of women sending messages your way every day. I've seen them in the blacksmith shop, on the streets. You don't need me."

He drew in a ragged breath and blew it out. The puff of air stirred Gabe's curls. The baby gurgled.

"Wrong. I do need you."

Yeah, like he needed to stick his hand into an open fire.

She was stuck between telling a lie, which was a sin, and moving their relationship into a new realm, which would also be a sin. She didn't know what to do.

"I care about you, Chris. It's just that..."

His mouth formed a hard line. "What? My bank account's not big enough for a Harcourt."

"No." She grabbed his shirt collar. "Don't think that. Don't ever think that. I'm worried about you, not me."

"Worried about me? Why? What are you talking about?"

Dismayed to have blurted out the worry, she tilted away and grew quiet. "I have a baby, Chris. You're a pastor."

His expression went rock hard. "So?"

She flushed red hot. "Don't be naïve. It matters."

"Not to me. The way I look at it, everyone makes mistakes. Some are more obvious than others." He glanced down at the baby on his knees. "And to tell the truth, it's kind of hard to look at this little guy and even think the word mistake."

"I know," she said softly. Gabriel wasn't a mistake, but she had made plenty that Christopher didn't know about. "I just think we'd be better off as friends, that's all."

If only he knew how despicable she really was, he wouldn't even want that much.

"Don't you believe in second chances?"

Couldn't he see how damaging a relationship with her could be to his career as a minister? "I don't think so."

"What about the second chance Christ gave you?"

"That's different."

"Is it?" he asked.

She didn't know.

Eyes narrowed in thought as though some grand scheme took shape inside his brilliant mind, Christopher said, "Give me the rest of the summer to prove you wrong."

When she hesitated, torn between what she wanted and what she knew was best, he laughed and tapped her on the chin. "A couple of months. That's all I'm asking. I might be worth it."

Oh, he was worth it all right. But was she?

The sun was moving toward the western horizon and in the near distance, on the square, the drum and fife corps warmed up for the evening march through town. Ashley slid a mini-diaper bag onto the handle of Gabriel's stroller while Chris lowered the baby into the seat. Her son chattered and kicked as if he'd

been waiting all day for Christopher's company.

She could totally understand the feeling. On the days she didn't see him, which were few, life felt flat and gray.

In civilian clothes as they jokingly called jeans and T-shirts, they headed out of the old section of Williamsburg, past William and Mary College toward modern Williamsburg.

Ashley was playing with fire and she knew it, but like some kind of warped personality, she couldn't seem to resist Chris's gentle courtship. He didn't push hard, but he did push. Showing up at odd moments to whisk her off for a stroll through the gardens or a refreshing soda or times like these when he came by after work with the offer to walk her and Gabriel to the town park.

Dating was difficult with a baby along and she figured that was a good thing. She didn't date. Couldn't date. But Chris never let Gabriel's presence bother him. In fact, he seemed to enjoy her son. And to tell the truth, her heart melted at the sight of this big strong but gentle man giving her son the masculine attention he craved.

Gabriel needed a father. A father like Chris.

She shook her head to dispel the thought. Chris had asked for the summer and she'd give him that. She'd give herself that. But from there, they had no future. Here in Williamsburg for the summer only, he and his career as minister were safe from her sins. Outside this town, her mistakes were waiting like hungry

wolves to hurt everyone.

Chapter Four

Ashley stood back to admire the glorious hand-crafted dress she'd designed for the contest.

Made of watered silk, only the wealthiest planter's wife could have worn this in the eighteenth century. This was her masterpiece and after weeks of painstaking work both in the shop and at home, the rich burgundy gown was completed.

"It's perfect, Ashley," Milly said from her spot at the design table. "You've done an excellent job."

Ashley fussed with the lace sleeves. "Do you think it has a chance to win?"

"As good a chance as any other." Milly pushed her wire-rims higher on her nose. "Are you wearing it to the Garden Party after the judging?"

Ashley nodded. Each year on July 4th, a garden party was held at the Governor's Palace. Employees and interns were requested to attend in full colonial dress to create the perfect atmosphere for the tourists.

"I designed a cute little suit for Gabriel too."

"What about your young blacksmith?"

"Milly, you are hopeless." And so was she. Sometimes she wondered why God brought Chris back into her life now, when she'd destroyed any hope of them being together for more than

the summer. "Christopher is not my anything."

"Well, he wants to be, so wake up. He's a catch."

With a roll of her eyes, Ashley draped the carefully folded gown over the handle of Gabriel's stroller and started out the door. As much as she'd like to talk to someone about Chris, about the terrible confusion inside her, Milly was not the person. Since Gabriel's birth, she and her sister had been close enough to talk. Though Samantha was on a modeling assignment in South Africa at present, maybe she'd give her a call tonight anyway. She needed some advice badly.

"Talk to you later, Milly. I have to get this dress up to the ballroom before five."

She pushed out into the muggy July afternoon with Gabriel fast asleep. Though the sun shone brightly, thunder rumbled in the distance like an empty train. Hesitating, Ashley cast a cautious eye to the clouds. Water would ruin the gown, but unless her entry arrived on time, she hadn't a chance of winning. One disadvantage of Colonial living was the lack of modern conveyance at times like this.

After a minute of indecision, she pressed on, hurrying down the street. Most evenings this week thunder had rumbled but they'd had no rain. Today would likely be the same.

Three blocks into the walk, she was calling herself an idiot. The wind picked up and the sky darkened.

A block later, fat drops of rain splatted the top of her

head. Frustration and dismay mounted with each hurried step.

After making certain Gabriel was covered, she flipped open her umbrella, held it close to the gown and pushed the buggy faster. Like always, she'd made the wrong decision and now she'd suffer the consequence.

She glanced behind her, considered turning back. She'd already passed all the open businesses but the palace was still some distance. Wheeling around, she headed toward an eatery one block away and directly into the now driving rain. Every one with any sense had already ducked inside the shops and open buildings. Leave it to her to be caught out in a cloudburst. Holding the umbrella like a shield, she pushed forward, blinded to all but the next step. By now, Gabriel was awake and howling. Water sluiced off the tip of the umbrella into her face, onto the buggy and the voluminous silk skirt.

Tears prickled the back of her eyelids. Sometimes she hated herself. She could do the stupidest things. Even God must think she was stupid today.

"Ashley!" Out of nowhere, Christopher appeared in front of her and in the next moment a canvas tarp blocked the rain.

"Chris, what are you doing out in this?"

"Rescuing the damsel in distress, I hope." He guided them, tarp aloft like a giant kite, down the street and into the restaurant. "I've always wanted to add that to my resume. Minister, blacksmith, knight in shining armor. Kind of has a

ring to it, huh?"

Normally, his joke would have made her laugh and she would have replied in kind. Not this time. She was too busy hating herself.

Once inside the old building, Ashley bent to soothe the startled baby and examine the burgundy gown. All the while, she fought tears. "I should have known better than to chance it. I'm so stupid sometimes."

Reaching around her to take Gabriel, Chris frowned. "Why do you do that?"

"What? Tell the truth? That I'm a total screw-up?"

"Everyone messes up occasionally, Ashley. Cut yourself some slack. No one expected a cloudburst. I sure didn't." He hitched his chin toward a table. "Come on. Let's sit until this blows over."

She left the elegant dress draped inside Gabriel's perambulator. "This gown is probably ruined now anyway."

"Maybe not. But if it is, would that be the end of the world?" He settled into a chair with Gabriel on his lap. The baby snuggled into Chris's chest and closed his eyes.

"No, I suppose not, but I wanted to win that contest."

Still, Chris was right. Rain on the gown wasn't the end of the world.

A spark of the ridiculous struck her as she cast a baleful glance toward the water sprinkled dress. "I learned one thing

from this. Watered silk does not really need watering."

"That's my girl. Turn that frown upside down." The corners of Chris's eyes crinkled at the childish rhyme. "Do you have anything else to enter?"

She shrugged. "Nothing that has a chance. I designed a fancy outfit for Gabriel, waistcoat and britches, everything, but it's not as elaborate as the gown."

"It's worth a shot, isn't it?"

She had little hope for winning now, but the contest was still an opportunity to get her work in front of interested people.

"Well, maybe." Her spirits lifted the slightest bit. Leave it to Chris to encourage her this way. No wonder she'd fallen in love with him.

Her heart stuttered and stopped, then started again. She loved a man of God, a man who needed a perfect wife, a wife with a clean slate. She wondered if God was angry at her for even considering such a thing.

"There you go then," Chris was saying. "When the rain passes, if the gown is too damaged, we'll get Gabriel's duds and head on over to the palace." He glanced out the window at brightening sky. "I stopped by your shop to ask you about the Garden Party this Saturday. Maybe we could go together."

Ashley didn't hesitate. She'd promised him the summer. And even though there was no hope for them beyond this, she wanted

to be with him now.

"Don't we both have to attend anyway?" she said, teasing her way past the band of worry determined to strangle the joy of loving.

One masculine hand slapped the spot above his heart. "Ouch. There went my ego. A few minutes ago I was your white knight."

He still was. Always would be. "Do you still want us to come to church with you Sunday?"

"Yes, and no backing out now. I've already told my friends that I'm bringing someone very special."

She had yet to hear him preach though he'd asked her several times. This Sunday, a special Independence Day celebration was planned with fellowship afterward. The idea of meeting his congregation gave her the jitters but she'd promised.

She breathed a secret prayer that no one in the congregation would recognize her name.

In the walled confines of the Governor's Palace music from a stringed quartet lilted over the lush, green maze of boxwood and the vibrant flower gardens.

History interpreters in fancy dress milled about, chatting eighteenth century business with one another and the guests who had paid handily for the honor of attending the formal party.

Ashley wore the silk gown, and to Chris, she was the most

beautiful woman in the gardens. He knew she was disappointed about the contest and so was he. If she'd won, he could guarantee keeping her in Williamsburg for longer than a summer. Now, there was only one way to keep her here.

She cared for him. He was sure of it, but each time he tried to move their relationship closer to commitment, she backed away. Something bothered her.

He wished she'd trust him enough to confide in him. Somehow, someday, he'd break down the wall that separated them. He'd prayed all week about tonight and tomorrow, when she'd promised to attend church. He was certain once she met his friends and congregation, she would see how well she fit in, how much she could enjoy the life here, and how much he needed her at his side. Tonight and always.

He took two glasses of foamy pink punch and moved through the murmuring crowd to her side.

"Beautiful lady," he said, offering a glass.

"Flatterer." But she beamed at the compliment. "You're looking very handsome yourself."

He stroked four fingers over his embroidered weskit. "I happen to know the town's best seamstress. She makes me look good."

"Really? And who might this talented lady be?"

He leaned closer, loving the golden flecks in her brown eyes. "If you and your handsome son would care to accompany me

around the lawns, I might be persuaded to tell you."

They both chuckled softly at the silliness and began to stroll the narrow pathways through the enormous gardens.

When he reached for Ashley's hand, she slid hers easily into his. Such a simple act and yet he loved holding her hand, touching her soft skin, being with her. He wondered if she had any idea how much her quiet laugh and gentle insights meant to him. When he shared his dreams, she encouraged and admired. When he shared his worries, she listened.

Yes, he loved Ashley Harcourt, a girl some would call out of his league, but he knew God was the great equalizer. Their shared faith was enough.

The palace gardens encompassed several acres and before he realized it, they were deep inside the elaborate holly maze.

"A person could get lost in here."

"Would that be so bad?" he asked.

Her smile was his answer, so they settled on a bench in a verdant nook and talked as night fell around them.

Lanterns were struck and the glow of gas lights lit the evening with a romantic glow. And they talked on.

Chris felt a contentment tonight that had been missing in his life. Ashley and Gabriel gave him new purpose.

"We can watch the fireworks from here," Ashley said. "if Gabriel cooperates."

Though he'd been awake most of the evening, the baby now

slept, his long eyelashes shadowed on chubby cheeks.

"Sounds good to me." The fireworks were on the palace green in front of the palace. "As far as I'm concerned we can stay here forever."

"Why, Mr. Sullivan. You would compromise my honor by keeping me out here alone forever?"

Though Ashley joked, Chris didn't.

"No, ma'am. I'd never do anything to compromise you in any way." He turned to face her, pulling her hands into his. "I was going to wait until summer's end to do this, but I've been waiting for you for years. I love you, Ashley."

She touched his cheek. "I know."

He held his breath, waiting. Would she finally admit what he knew was true? That she loved him too?

Her answer came in a rustle of silk as she slid her arms around his neck and moved closer. Her soft breath mingled with his until he thought he'd die of waiting.

"I love you, too, Chris, but--"

He cut her off with a kiss. Tonight he wanted no buts, only the joyous knowledge that she loved him too.

Chapter Five

Ashley awakened with a sense of hope so powerful, she slid to her knees beside the bed and said a prayer of thanks.

Last night, she'd told Chris all that was in her heart.

For once, she couldn't avoid the love growing inside her and hadn't wanted to. He deserved to know how loveable and wonderful he was. So she'd told him.

She'd shared how happy he made her and how he filled her heart with plans and hopes and dreams. She'd admitted how she admired and respected him and how much she'd grown in her faith from spending time with him.

And she'd pledged her love.

Part of her wanted to laugh and sing and shout from the courthouse balcony the great good news. The sensible part of her was scared silly. They were in love, and for now, that was enough.

But would marriage be down the road? Could she take that chance?

Chris kept telling her everything would work out, and he was so smart. Maybe he was right. Maybe she could move past her mistakes. Maybe God had forgiven her enough.

She watched her love in the pulpit, saw his eyes twinkle when he looked her way, and felt more special than she ever had in her life. Pastor Christopher Sullivan loved her.

When church ended, he made his way through the small congregation to her side.

Friendly faces gathered round to meet her. Though Christopher introduced her only as "my friend, Ashley", the parishioners smiled knowingly. Anyone watching them could see

they were in love. Didn't it shine from her eyes like noonday sun?

Chris hoisted Gabriel onto one shoulder and placed his hand at her elbow, guiding her down a short hall to the fellowship room. A handful of church members ambled alongside, chit-chatting. Some discussed the sermon, others asked about Gabriel, and still others discussed yesterday's Independence Day celebrations. They smiled and talked to her, not one of them suspicious or cold in any way.

Ashley breathed a prayer of thanks for the warm welcome. Maybe the dream was possible after all.

Ladies of the church bustled about setting out covered dishes and preparing the tables. Their good humored chatter blended with the clatter of pans and spoons and scraping chairs. Two teenage girls begged to play with Gabriel and swept him away like a special toy.

With Christopher deep in conversation with one of his elders, Ashley decided to be useful. She stepped into the kitchen section. The warm scent of fried chicken hovered in the air like ministering angels.

"This room smells heavenly," she said and then laughed along with the others, feeling better by the minute. "How can I help?"

A redhead with glasses looked up from the oven. "You could start filling the glasses with ice. Or slice the pies and

cakes."

Ashley dove in, happy to be useful and accepted. "There sure is a lot of food here."

A grandmotherly lady with rosy cheeks said, "Sure is honey. Pastor Chris has a thing about feeding the needy. Well, we all do, but you know he is."

The other ladies looked at with smiling speculation.

"What Margie means," said the redhead, "is this. After our fellowship, the real work begins. We pack carry-out trays, load up the van and take dinner to all the shut-ins we know of and the rest goes to the shelter down by the free clinic. Pastor does a lot of ministry work down there."

For half a minute, Ashley was transported back in time to the free clinic. A cold fist clenched her insides. Would Chris expect her to go down there? Would she be recognized?

"Honey, you're the color of wallpaper paste. Are you okay?" Margie took Ashley's arm and guided her to a chair.

A fashionable woman near her age, who'd said little, thrust a glass of iced tea into her hands.

With a self-conscious laugh, Ashley said, "I'm all right. It's kind of warm in here."

"Hotter than the Fourth of July." Margie swiped at her brow.

With the bit of humor, Ashley's uncomfortable moment passed, but she couldn't shake the feeling that disaster waited

like a crouching tiger.

When the meal was served Ashley, nerves still jittery, sat at a long, plastic covered table next to Chris and picked at her potato salad. The fashionable young woman, whose name was Paige, sat across from them. It didn't take a rocket scientist to know that Paige was interested in the handsome young pastor. A twinge of jealousy caught Ashley by surprise and she doubled her efforts to talk to the woman.

"Have you attended Cross Point long?" she asked.

"A while." Paige smiled, but she looked at Ashley with an odd expression. "Something about you seems so familiar to me. What did you say your last name is?"

Ashley swallowed a new attack of nerves. "Harcourt. I'm not from this area."

"Harcourt. Harcourt." Paige tapped a fingernail on the table edge and stared. "You aren't related to the man over in Pine Grove that used to run the adoption agency, are you?"

Ashley's jitters turned to knee-knocking anxiety. Area newspapers had been filled with the black-market adoption story for months. "He was my grandfather."

"Ashley and her folks had no idea what her grandfather was doing," Chris said over a fork of baked beans.

"No, we didn't. No one is sorrier than we are for all the problems he caused."

Her grandfather Barnaby Harcourt had falsified birth

records and basically bought and sold babies through the years. She shuddered to think his blood flowed through her veins.

Some would call her a chip off the old block.

"I remember reading about that one girl, Kelly-something I think." Paige pressed a red-nailed finger against her cheek. "Fascinating story. Her birth mother had been living right there in town all those years and neither of them knew it."

Ashley wanted to change the subject, but her mind had frozen in fear.

"And then the mayor's wife tried to kill her so no one would discover that the mayor himself had fathered the girl and paid Barnaby Harcourt to get rid of her." Paige gave a happy shiver. "The whole scandal was better than a soap opera. You remember reading it don't you Chris?"

She cast baby blues at Chris whose countenance had darkened. "And then if that wasn't enough, someone found an abandoned baby on the doorstep, and he turned out to belong to one of the Harcourts."

The moment the words flew out of her mouth, Paige pretended to be surprised. She laid a manicured hand over her mouth and stared at Ashley. "That wasn't you, was it?"

Immediately, Ashley realized she'd been set up. Paige had known about Ashley's ugly past all along.

Shaking all over, she glanced at Chris. The shock on his face was all she needed to see.

With as much grace as she could muster with her whole world crumbling, she said, "Excuse me. I need to change my son."

"Ashley?" Chris shoved back from the table, cheeks flushed, expression wounded. "Wait."

But she couldn't. Grabbing Gabriel without explanation, she hurried out of the building and hailed a taxi.

The worst had happened. Christopher now knew her darkest shame.

Worse, she had embarrassed him in front of his congregation.

Shame was a tidal wave, sweeping her back to that frightening time when she'd made the worst mistake of her life. No excuse was ever enough to justify the sin she'd committed the day she'd left Gabriel on the doorstep of Family Blessings Adoption Agency.

How could she expect Christopher to understand? She didn't understand herself.

"Where to, Miss?" the cabbie asked.

Her summer of hope and love was over. She'd known all along she couldn't have Chris. She'd even known better than to attend his church.

Still, for that shining moment last night, she'd almost believed things would work out the way Chris promised.

But life *didn't* work that way. God might forgive but like Paige and hundreds of others, He hadn't forgotten.

Might as well face the end and be done with it. Christopher didn't need a woman like her in his life.

She replied, "Pine Grove," gave her parent's address, and, gripping her baby tightly, let the tears come.

At dusk, Ashley sat in the shady garden patio alongside her parents' swimming pool.

After explaining what had transpired with Chris, she wanted to be alone. Mother had Gabriel inside. She'd tried to pray but she was too depressed.

The patio door slid open but she didn't turn around. "I'll take him now, Mother, if you're tired."

No answer. She twisted around in her chair and her heart dipped low.

She might have known he would come. Chris wasn't a man to leave loose ends.

She held up a hand, stop sign style. "I don't want to talk."

"Too bad. I do." He scraped a chair over the cobblestones and parked it beside hers. "After you left, Paige told me the whole story. Anyway, the one she read in the paper. I want to hear the truth, the whole truth, from you."

Shame suffused her. "Why?"

"Because I want to hear your side, what really happened."

The scent of hamburgers wafted on the wind. Someone in the neighborhood must be grilling. "I abandoned my newborn baby.

Period."

"There's more to the story than that. I know how much you love him."

"That's why. Because I loved him. Because I was confused and stupid and sick."

"Sick? What kind of sick?"

"Mentally. Physically. Every way." She picked at her fingernail ashamed to look at the man she loved now that he knew what kind of person she really was. "Mother and Dad were out of the country because of the adoption scandals. They didn't even know I was pregnant. We never talked anyway. I didn't think they'd care or help." Her voice fell to a whisper. "I was so scared, so very scared. And when the fever started..."

She shivered at the memory of the terrible sickness, a sickness so powerful she hadn't been able to remember where Gabriel was, couldn't remember if she'd fed him.

Chris's hand covered hers. Even in the heat of July her skin was cold. "You were sick?"

She nodded numbly. "I sneaked out of the clinic with Gabriel an hour after his birth to come home. I wanted to think things through, figure out what to do. But then I got so sick. I couldn't take care of my baby. I couldn't stop shaking. And the fever was so bad. I thought I might die. And if I died, so would he. All I could think of was getting Gabriel to some place safe."

"So you took him to the adoption agency."

She nodded. "Stupid, I know. So stupid."

"No. The natural instinct of a loving mother to protect her baby."

"Don't make excuses for me, Chris. I abandoned my son."

"And you can't forgive yourself."

"Could you?"

Instead of a pat answer, Chris took his time and thought about it. She appreciated that. Platitudes wouldn't cut it today.

"I don't know, Ash. But I do know this. God forgave you when you asked him into your life."

"But He remembers. I have to pay for what I've done."

"If you think that, you're aren't reading the same Bible I do. Jesus paid for your sins and your mistakes, Ashley. All of them, even the ones you have trouble letting go of. Your past is washed away in a sea of God's forgetfulness, as far as the east is from the west. God doesn't hold your sin against you unless you keep on doing it."

The smallest flame of hope flickered. "Is that true? Or are you trying to make me feel better?"

"Both. I knew you were struggling with something heavy. I wish you would have told me a long time ago."

"I'm sorry you had to find out this way, in front of everyone in your church. I was so ashamed. Still am. Even more

so because I embarrassed you in front of your congregation."

In trying to protect the man she loved, she'd only hurt him more.

Since giving birth she understood love in a new light. Love was giving. Love never did harm. By not telling him everything, she'd set Chris up for harm.

"Now you know why I can't be with you. A fallen woman, a woman who would abandon her own child would be a detriment to a pastor. Just like today, no congregation would accept that. I'd ruin your career."

She couldn't do that to him. Not if she really loved him.

"You're wrong about that."

She shook her head, loose locks tumbling from the knot she'd twisted atop her head. "I don't think so."

"What if I left the ministry?"

"Absolutely not! You're a wonderful pastor. The people love you."

"After you left, I offered to resign."

Horror filled her. This was worse than she'd thought. "Oh no, Chris. Oh, please say you didn't resign."

"I didn't. The church wouldn't let me. But we had a long, fruitful discussion. That's why it took me so long to get here.

He shifted toward her. "For a while now, the church has been helping me pray for a wife. I told them I'd found her. But like them, and like me and everyone on the planet, she wasn't

perfect."

He tapped her on the nose and smiled. "But she's close enough to perfect for me. And if they didn't have it in their hearts to follow the teachings of Jesus in matters of forgiveness and restoration, then I couldn't be their pastor."

"I can't believe you did that."

"Believe it. Being a Christian means following the teachings of Christ. He taught love and compassion, not judgment and condemnation. Paige is a new Christian, too. She made a mistake today. She knows that now, and I hope you'll forgive her."

Forgive her? Ashley wanted to strangle her. "She likes you."

"I know. But I'm in love with you. God put us together, Ashley. Don't tear us apart again."

Like chocolate in July, Ashley's resistance melted. "Oh Christopher, I love you. I'm so sorry for—"

He placed his fingertips over her lips. "Shh. No more apologies. From this moment, let's move forward. Okay?"

She nodded. "Okay."

Chris reached for her hands and tugged her to a stand. With the sun shining down on them and the sound of the nearby fountain gurgling in their ears, he pulled her close.

"Today, tomorrow or ten years from now, whenever you're ready, you, me, and Gabriel will be a family." He placed a soft

kiss on her lips. "Agreed?"

Joy, the one emotion she'd been missing, flooded Ashley's entire being.

"Agreed," she said as tears of happiness gathered in her eyes.

"Good. Will you marry me, Ashley Rene Harcourt? Will you be my partner, my best friend, the mother to our kids, and the forever love of my life?"

She laughed through the tears, the fears and shame of the past washing away in the radiance of Christopher's God-ordained love.

"Yes. Yes, I will."

And as they sealed their commitment with another kiss, hearts beating as one, Ashley gave thanks to her heavenly Father for sending her this one, special man, and for wiping away the ugliness of her past.

She was, she thought, the most blessed woman in the world.