

SHATTERED HEARTS  INTERWOVEN GRACE

TAPESTRY
of TRUST

MARY
ANNSLEE
URBAN

Tapestry of Trust

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to:

My husband, Gary and children; Gina, Ryan, Andrea, Olivia, and Scott who inspire my stories and bless my life; my grandchildren: Cameron and Isaac who make getting older fun; and Barbara Cohn, a wonderful encourager and friend.

Praise for Mary Annslee Urban

Mary Annslee Urban is a great new voice in the genre of romance.

~Award winning author, Linda Wood Rondeau

Mary Annslee Urban has crafted an uplifting story, sparkling with faith and trust. I can't wait to read more books by this debut author!

~Award winning, author, Dora Hiers

1

Isabelle Crafton's breath stilled at the sight of the man standing on the other side of the doorway. *No. It couldn't be.*

Charlie Hamilton. His name clattered in her head as his gaze held hers. The traitor she'd spent the last six years trying to forget.

Unable to move, unable to wrench her gaze away, she bit her lip to keep from gaping. No longer the gangly soccer star who'd scored the winning goals in high school, broad shoulders now filled his tailored suit, his face square and chiseled, and those eyes... Would she ever forget those eyes? Dark and warm. Once as soothing as sipping hot chocolate on a blistering winter's day.

"Isabelle, I can't believe it's you."

She blinked and looked away, her heart pounding. *Get a grip.* After all, his visit presented one redeeming quality. He was holding her cat.

She lifted the feline from Charlie's arms. "There you are Humphrey, you had me so worried. Bad kitty!" She scolded him the way she'd love to scold Charlie, but held back. Her roommate Kate, was in the apartment and well within earshot. "Charlie, thank you." She forced her voice to remain calm.

"You look great." He smiled, brushing cat hair from his jacket.

Likewise. She scrunched Humphrey closer. "You

found my cat. I've been so worried. I'm not sure if you remember Humphrey, but he's deaf."

Charlie nodded. "He was hanging out in the drainage ditch near the parking lot. The woman in the office told me who lost a cat. She offered to return him, but I had to see if it was really you. And here you are." He opened his arms and stepped closer.

Unexpected emotion clogged Isabelle's throat. Swallowing hard, she grabbed the knob and pushed the front door halfway shut, blocking his entrance into the apartment. How dare he act like nothing had happened between them? "I must say, you're the last person I expected to see." The last person she wanted to see.

For a moment, their eyes clashed. The corners of his lips curved up. "Yes, a nice surprise. It's been a long time, Isabelle. Too long." His gaze drifted from her face to the furry bundle in her arms. "I should have recognized Humphrey."

Surprise? Yes.

Too long? A lifetime wouldn't be long enough. And why would he recognize her cat? He hadn't been around since Humphrey was a kitten.

Isabelle eased the door within a couple inches of closing. "See you around, Charlie." Except for a discreet glance through lowered lashes, she kept her gaze averted, cuddling the cat closer to her face.

"Isabelle, wait." Charlie pushed against the door. "Tell me how you've been. What are you doing here in Austin?"

Isabelle froze and peered at him through the space he'd created. She wanted to tell him she'd graduated from college and was doing fine without him. Raking her fingers through Humphrey's knotted fur, she tried

to transform bitter thoughts into a civil response. A beat passed, then another. "Not much to tell. Just working," she blurted finally after what seemed like eons.

"She teaches second grade at McGee Elementary," Kate bellowed from behind her. "We came here last year after graduating from East Texas."

Thanks, Kate. Isabelle sucked in air to hold back a sigh.

A dimple flashed in Charlie's cheek. "Isabelle, congratulations."

Her heart gave a little leap despite her efforts to control it.

"The man is trying to make conversation." Kate breezed up beside her and squeezed her arm.

"I'm sorry. I just don't have time to chat right..." Isabelle's words faded in defeat, as Kate swung the door wide open.

"It would be nice to catch up, Isabelle." Charlie shifted even closer. He sunk his hands into his trouser pockets.

She caught a scent of his cologne, tickling her nose. Something, clean and fresh like...*Stop it.* Isabelle blinked. What was she doing? She tightened her arms around Humphrey and backed away, doubling the distance between them.

How could she ever forget?

Eighteen...and pregnant. She ground her teeth. *Life before Jesus.* Shaking her head, she pushed out a weary breath. "Who knows when Humphrey ate last? I better feed him."

As if on cue, Humphrey let loose a scraggly meow.

"Isabelle, so good to see you."

Charlie's gaze narrowed, and she was struck by

the unexpected intensity. Perhaps he had regrets. Well...so did she.

"Let's talk soon."

She started to answer, to tell him to forget about her, but why bother. Her response would only fuel more conversation. "Again, thanks for finding Humphrey."

"No problem. I look forward to catching up with you soon."

She ignored the comment and stalked out the entry and into the kitchen. Maybe, Charlie would pick up on her hint and take a hike himself.

Isabelle set Humphrey on the floor, stretched on tiptoes, and yanked open the cabinet over the stove. She grabbed the plastic container of cat food and poured fish-shaped morsels into a bowl. With whiskers twitching, the cat licked his forepaws and stared up at her. She crouched and set the bowl in front of him. "I'm glad you're safe." She pulled a twig from his fur.

Even at this distance, Isabelle could hear the conversation in the entry. She glanced at her watch and sighed when Kate burst into a hearty laugh. Didn't Charlie have somewhere to be?

"I can't believe you're in graduate school with Mark." Kate's voice lifted.

Isabelle rolled her eyes. *Perfect.*

"Yeah, he's in my study group this semester. Nice guy."

"I think so, too." Kate giggled. "This is such a busy semester for him, with our wedding and all. I can't wait until he's finished."

"I'm right there with you. School can't end soon enough for me either." A pleasant chuckle trailed Charlie's words.

"So, you graduate in May, also?"

"Yep."

Grad school. Lucky Charlie. No hiccups in his life. No change of course. Unlike hers, whose life made a U-turn when she got pregnant and spun further out of control when she'd lost the baby. *Their baby.* Isabelle shook her head. Why Charlie? Why couldn't you have— She flinched. *History,* she reminded herself. One she wanted to forget.

The kitchen started to feel stuffy. She pushed to her feet and slid open the window above the sink. Fresh air blew against her face. *Who cares when Charlie graduates anyway?* Their life together ended years ago. She pinched dead leaves off the potted ivy meandering across the windowsill.

A moment passed, then another. She inched toward the doorway. She cocked her head and gnawed on an already too short fingernail, reassuring herself Charlie no longer meant anything to her.

"I've been working at my gir—, uh, friend's father's marketing company in San Marcos. After graduation, I'll be a director there."

Isabelle slapped her hands over her ears. She braced herself against the counter before her wobbly knees gave out. Of course, he had a girlfriend. After six years, people moved on.

Well, most people.

Even as the thought crossed her mind, she shook her head. The last thing she wanted was Charlie to be privy to how boring her life had become. Not that her boredom had anything to do with missing him. Straightening, she lifted her chin. She'd just been busy, that's all.

Still, why, out of the hundreds of people in their

apartment complex, did *he* have to be the one to find her cat? She picked up the cat food container and shoved it back into the cabinet. Humphrey crunched his meal on the floor next to her. Snagging a deep breath, she grabbed a dishcloth and ran circles across the already spotless counter. Then she jerked open the refrigerator door and yanked old take-out containers from the shelves. If she had to be stuck in the kitchen, she might as well get something done.

Charlie's tone rose above the trilling grind of the garbage disposal. "Tell Isabelle good-bye for me. I'll catch up with her soon. Oh...and make sure she lets Sadie in the office know to take the sign down now that Humphrey's home safe."

That did it. Isabelle thumped her hands on the counter and opened her mouth to shout a retort, but no words came—only tears. Charlie hadn't changed. Still trying to take care of things. Why wouldn't she tell Sadie? Who did he think put the sign up in the first place? She clenched her left fist, nails digging into her palm. Six years ago she'd asked for his advice, and he had nothing of value for her. In fact, he had nothing to say about the matter at all.

Squaring her shoulders, she wiped hot tears and resisted the rush of illogical nostalgia parading through her. No, she wouldn't look back. Instead, she slammed her eyes shut and prayed—for God's grace.

Charlie climbed the stairs to his second floor apartment, trying to sort through the whirlwind of emotion warring inside him. Facing Isabelle and her lukewarm reaction after all these years served only to

remind him—he'd messed up. Big time!

Procrastination. Ten days he'd pondered. Ten days too long.

He couldn't blame Isabelle for her coolness. Their years apart had taken care of that. Then again, wouldn't she think he might harbor some resentment? After all, she'd never answered his calls or letters.

Melancholy swept through him in the wave of a memory, tugging at his already tight chest. He thought about the message from his mother, via Isabelle's aunt. A miscarriage and Isabelle wouldn't be coming back. His breath grew shallow. He would have been there for her if only he'd known her whereabouts.

Charlie opened his apartment door and trudged inside. Despite the angst tumbling in his gut, he couldn't help but think how unbelievable it was that Isabelle lived in the same complex, and he'd found her cat. Coincidence? He flung his keys on the table and shrugged off his jacket. He knew better than that.

No longer concerned with his hunger, he leaned against the counter and rolled the quandary around in his head. He could have said something more to Isabelle, reminded her of the good times. Reminded her they were young, but with her roommate there, that might have only made things worse.

Isabelle. He worked his finger over the stubble on his chin. The woman he'd loved for the better part of his youth. He had to admit those feelings still gripped his core. It only took a few shallow relationships, especially his last, to remind him what he'd lost when he lost Isabelle.

As he stood alone in his kitchen, he couldn't help but replay the *what if's* and *if only's*, wondering what life would be like if he and Isabelle hadn't

compromised and if fear hadn't gotten the best of him. *No!* He slammed the brakes on that train of thought.

Despite lingering regrets, a grin tugged at his lips. He hadn't seen a ring on her finger. Maybe it was time to put history behind them and get reacquainted.

He scratched his head. An intriguing thought, but from her cool reception he doubted she wanted the same.

2

Isabelle tossed a workbook onto her desk, the pile beneath it growing like a stack of pancakes. Her red correction pen clinked against the scarred, wooden top as she dropped it and rocked back in her chair. Flexing her fingers, she glanced at the classroom clock on the wall. *Four-fifty*. She sighed. All week she'd tried to get to the barn to ride Admiral. Her first real splurge, leasing a horse, but life kept getting in the way. Rain for nearly a week. Now, third quarter report cards.

Maybe this weekend...

Probably not. The dress fitting for Kate's wedding was scheduled for Saturday, and she'd promised to help address invitations. Then there was church on Sunday, more worksheets needed correcting and report card grades needed to be entered into the grading program. Already exhausted, she blew a wisp of hair from her brow and slumped in her chair. Riding Admiral would have to wait.

Straightening in her seat, Isabelle picked up the pen and started to scribble a note on a tablet. Maybe one of the classroom parents would volunteer as a teacher's aide until the school hired another one for her class. That would at least give her a break to get her social life on track.

She laid down the pen and drew in a deep breath, feeling better. She should have thought of this idea weeks ago.

A hard rap on the doorframe and she startled, her desk chair squeaking against her jerky movement. She looked up as Kate strolled into the classroom, a package wrapped in multicolored paper in her arms.

"Look at what Mrs. Peterson brought me." Pure joy veiled her face. A look Kate hung onto since getting engaged. "She said all Brianna talks about is my wedding." Kate placed the parcel on the only clean corner of the desk and peeled back the wrapping.

Isabelle shook her head. "And who's Mrs. Peterson?"

For a moment Kate said nothing and opened the box. She pulled out a richly colored tapestry and held it up for Isabelle to see. A bride and groom walking down the steps of an old English Church, delicately woven in muted hues of tan, red, and gold.

Mesmerized, Isabelle rose from her seat. "Gorgeous." She ran her finger along the piped edging.

Sunlight spilled in through the window enhancing the gleam in Kate's eyes. "Brianna Peterson is one of my students. Her mother and father just returned from Europe." Her fingers traced the bride's dainty bouquet. "They bought this in Belgium. It's called, *Forever Love* and based on the artwork of—"

"Phillipe Blain Creighton." The words slipped out, bringing with them a host of unwanted memories. Of torturous Sunday afternoons around the Hamilton's dining table. Charlie's standing invitation to the required family meal. From her assigned seat next to his, Isabelle often let her gaze drift, filling her mind with unimportant things to escape the idle chatter. On the wall beside the main window hung a woven tapestry depicting a fair maiden running to her knight as he returned from battle. *Returning home*, by

Creighton. "Timelessly romantic and intrinsically artistic," is how Charlie's mother described the piece. Made exclusively in Brussels, with a price tag to match the beauty.

For three years the tapestry, which added elegance to the room amid Sharon Hamilton's snide remarks, served as Isabelle's focal point. Opinionated and class-conscious, Sharon had big dreams for her children. Isabelle lacked the right social connections and offered nothing to the Hamilton name. A point Sharon never let her forget.

Images of the luscious tapestry swirled in Isabelle's mind. The rich coloring. The intricate detail. The look of expectancy in the fair maiden's eyes and the look of love on her knight's face.

Prickly heat rose up Isabelle's neck. A reminder her knight had never returned.

"Isabelle." Kate's soft tone drew her back.

Huh? Isabelle looked up, letting her fingers slip from the tapestry. And the eyes that met hers flashed with suspicion. "I'm sorry. Your gift reminded me of something." Her words faded along with Kate's smile.

Her friend refolded the masterpiece, tucked it back into the box, and closed the top. "You know, you've been acting odd all week. In fact, ever since that guy Charlie showed up."

At the mention of his name, Isabelle looked away. *Stay cool.* As if that was easy when Charlie was involved. She fingered the gold locket dangling about her neck, sliding it back and forth on the chain, as she thought how to answer. Or better yet, how not to. Working up a smile, she swung her gaze back to Kate. "Define odd."

The corner of Kate's lips tipped into a smirk. "All

right." Yanking a chair beside the desk, she plopped down and crossed her arms. "Let's see. How about, quiet, sulky, distracted."

"Gee, thanks for sparing my feelings." Isabelle forced a chuckle.

Kate's eyebrows lifted. "No problem. Now, tell me about this mystery man."

Isabelle shrugged. "Like I already told you, I knew him in high school." How would Kate take the truth? Not that she cared to find out.

"Oh, there's more to this story." Kate shook her head.

More than Isabelle cared to tell. "OK. We dated."

"So, a boyfriend?" Kate's eyes widened. She scooted the chair closer and perched an elbow on the desk.

"Yes. A boyfriend." Even now, the words tasted bitter. So long ago, yet so painfully fresh. Emotion wedged in Isabelle's throat. She swiveled in her chair and faced the window. She took in the tattered clouds floating in the distance. Pure white against a blue sky. A perfect contradiction to the turmoil inside her. *History and forgiven*, she reminded herself. A perspective she needed to remember, the only defense against her burden of guilt. She said a quick prayer, thanking God for His grace, and for leading her forward, out of the past. A past she didn't want to remember, let alone discuss.

"Isabelle, talk to me." From behind her, Kate's voice urged her toward a place she didn't want to revisit.

No words came. Isabelle lowered her gaze taking in the empty swings, the lonely playground where, just an hour earlier, sing-song chatter had filled the air as

her twenty-two second graders spent the last of their school day clambering in and around the jungle gym. Happy-go-lucky, carefree.

That's what she needed. A moment's reprieve from the chaos. Isabelle whirled the chair back to find Kate staring. "I haven't been to the barn to ride in over a week. If I don't figure out some way to get the help I need, I'll go crazy."

Kate slapped her hand against her leg, her face flushing as strawberry red as her hair. "Isabelle, every time I ask you about Charlie, you change the subject. What's going on with you?"

If only Kate would stop talking about him, Isabelle could purge him from her thoughts. "I'm serious, Kate, Emma quit eight weeks ago. If the school isn't going to provide a replacement soon I'll have to solve this problem myself."

A squeal of protest fumed from Kate's lips. "You changed the subject again."

Isabelle ground her teeth.

"Isabelle."

"OK, OK." She lifted her chin, determined to nip Kate's curiosity in the bud. "Prepare to be bored, because there's not much to tell. We dated a while. High school sweethearts. No big deal." Enough said. She hoped.

"How long?" Kate pushed.

Best friend and confidante through college, Kate had been told much of Isabelle's past. Including being abandoned by her mother at eight years old and never knowing her father. But how could she bring herself to expose her most painful secret? The one she kept burrowed deep in her heart. One too sad to remember, yet too valuable to forget.