



DANIELLE  
STEEL

Finding  
Ashley

A NOVEL

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## Finding Ashley

*A Novel*



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## *Chapter 1*

The sun beamed down on Melissa Henderson's shining dark hair, pinned up on her head in a loose knot, as sweat ran down her face, and the muscles in her long, lithe arms were taut with effort as she worked. She was lost in concentration, sanding a door of the house in the Berkshire mountains in Massachusetts that had been her salvation. She had bought it four years before. It had been weather-beaten, shabby, and in serious need of repair when she found it. No one had lived there for over forty years, and the house creaked so badly when she walked through it, she thought the floorboards might give way. She'd only been in the house for twenty minutes when she turned to the realtor and the rep from the bank who were showing it to her, and said in a low, sure voice, "I'll take it." She knew she was home the minute she walked into the once beautiful, hundred-year-old Victorian home. It had ten acres around it, with orchards, enormous old trees, and a stream running through the property in the foothills of the Berkshires. The deal closed in sixty days, and she'd been hard at work ever since. It had almost become an obsession as she brought the house back to life, and came alive herself. It was her great love and the focus of every day.

She'd learned carpentry, and made plenty of mistakes in the beginning, taken a basic plumbing class, hired a local contractor to replace the roof, and used workmen and artisans when she had to. But whenever possible, Melissa did the work herself. Manual labor had saved her after the worst four years of her life.

As soon as the house was officially hers, she'd put her New York apartment on the market, which her ex-husband, Carson Henderson, said was foolish until she knew if she liked living in Massachusetts. But Melissa

was hardheaded and determined. She never backed down on her decisions, and rarely admitted her mistakes. She knew this hadn't been one. She had wanted to buy a house and give up New York for good, which was exactly what she did, and had never regretted it for a minute. Everything about her life there suited her, and was what she needed now. She loved this house with a passion, and since moving there, her whole life had changed dramatically.

The four years before she'd bought it were the darkest days of her life. Melissa sat on the porch and thought about it sometimes. It was hard to imagine now what she and Carson had been through when their eight-year-old son, Robbie, had been diagnosed with an inoperable malignant brain tumor, a glioblastoma. They had tried everything, and taken him to see specialists all over the country and one in England. The prognosis was always the same, one to two years. He lived for two years after the diagnosis, and they made them the best years they could for him. He died at ten in his mother's arms. Melissa had been relentless trying to find a cure for him, and someone who would operate, but they were battling the inevitable from the beginning. Melissa had refused to accept Robbie's death sentence until it happened. And then her whole world caved in. He was her only child, and suddenly she was no longer a mother.

The two years after his death were still a blur, she was half numb and half crazy. She had stopped writing a year after he got sick, and she never went back to work as a writer after that. Once a bestselling author, with five smash hits to her credit, she hadn't written a word in seven years, and swore she never would again. Previously a driving force in her life, she had no desire to write now. All she cared about was her house and she wanted to make it the most beautiful Victorian home in the world. It had replaced everything else in her life, even people. It was the outlet for her to soothe all her sorrows, and vent the unbearable rage and grief she had felt. The agony was a little gentler now. Working on the house was the only way she could ease the pain she was in, using her hands, shifting heavy beams, rebuilding the fireplaces, helping the men to carry the equipment, and doing most of the carpentry herself.

The house gleamed now, and was exquisite. The grounds were lush and perfectly maintained, the historic home restored until it shone. It was something to be proud of, and a symbol of her survival. Everything about it was a tribute to Robbie, who would have been sixteen now, and had died six years before.

Her marriage to Carson died with her son. For two years they had fought to keep him alive, and lost. After Robbie died, she no longer cared about anyone except the little boy who was gone. It still took her breath away at times, but less often now. She had learned to live with it, like chronic pain or a weak heart. Carson had been paralyzed with grief as well. They were both drowning, too lost in their own miseries to help each other. The second year after Robbie died was worse than the first. As the numbness wore off, they were even more acutely aware of their pain. And then she discovered that Carson was involved with another woman, a client of the literary agency where he worked. She didn't blame him for the affair. She wouldn't have had the energy to spend on another man, but she readily acknowledged that she had shut Carson out for two years by then, and it was too late to reverse it. She made no attempt to win him back, or save the marriage. It was already dead, and she felt dead inside herself.

Carson had been her literary agent for her five successful books. She'd found him after she'd written the first one, and took the manuscript to him at the recommendation of a friend. She was thirty-one then. He was bowled over by her talent, and the purity and strength of her writing, and signed her on immediately as a client. She had worked for a magazine after college, and had been writing freelance articles for several years before she wrote her first book. She attributed her success to the brilliant first book deal Carson made for her. After several glasses of champagne, they wound up in bed to celebrate, and a year later they were married. Robbie was born ten months after their wedding, and life had been blissful until Robbie got sick. It was a respectable run, they'd had eleven happy years since they met.

Carson was a respected and powerful agent, but he modestly claimed no credit for Melissa's dazzling success. He said she was the most talented writer he'd ever worked with. When she stopped writing to take care of



Robbie, neither of them thought it would be the end of her career. Afterward, she said simply that she had no words left, and no desire to write. The profound visceral need to write that she'd had for all of her youth and adult life had simply left her. "Robbie took it with him," was all she said. No amount of urging by Carson, or her publishers, convinced her to start again. She abandoned her marriage, her career, New York, and everyone she knew there. She wanted a clean slate. She spent her energy and passion on the house after that. There was no man in her life, and she didn't want one. She was forty-three when Robbie died, forty-five when she and Carson finally separated, and forty-nine as she stood in the summer sunshine, sanding the door with all her strength, using old-fashioned fine-grained sandpaper.

The quiet affair that Carson had engaged in with a mystery writer in the final months of their marriage turned into a solid relationship after Melissa left. Jane was a few years older than Melissa and had two daughters whom Carson had become close to. They fulfilled some of his need for fatherhood after Robbie died. He and Jane married after his divorce. Melissa wanted no contact with him, but she wished him well and sent him an email every year on the anniversary of Robbie's death. With their son gone, suddenly they had nothing in common anymore, and had too many heartbreaking memories of the hard battle they had fought for his life, and lost. It was a failure that tainted everything between them. To escape it, Melissa had isolated herself and preferred it that way. She had run away.

She had done the same with her younger sister, Harriet, Hattie, and hadn't seen her in six years since Robbie's funeral. She had nothing to say to her either, and no energy left for their battles. As far as Melissa was concerned, her sister had suddenly gone off the deep end eighteen years before, for no apparent reason. Despite a budding and promising career as an actress, Hattie had joined a religious order at twenty-five. Melissa insisted it was some kind of psychotic break. But if so, she had never recovered, and seemed content in the life she'd chosen, which Melissa could never accept. Melissa had a profound aversion to nuns, and

considered Hattie's decision not only an abandonment, but a personal betrayal, after everything they'd been through together growing up.

Their mother had died when Hattie was eleven and Melissa was seventeen. She had been a cold, rigid, deeply religious woman from a Spartan, austere background, and had always been hard on her oldest daughter. Melissa had fallen short of her expectations and disappointed her, and once her mother died, there was nowhere for Melissa to go with her past resentments of how her mother treated her and no way to resolve them. She began writing seriously to vent her feelings in the only way she knew how. It made for brilliant books, which her readers devoured. But the memories of her mother remained painful. It was too late to forgive her, so she never had. In her own way, without realizing it, Melissa was like her mother at times now, with her harsh opinions, criticism of others, and black-and-white view of life after Robbie's death. Hattie was gentler and more like their father, who hid from life with the bottle. He had been a kind man, but not a strong one, and had let his domineering wife run the show, and ride roughshod over him. She made the decisions about their daughters, which Melissa had been furious about. She wanted her father to temper her mother's verdicts, but he never had. He'd abdicated his role and relinquished all power to his wife. Melissa resented him for it, while Hattie easily forgave him everything. But she had never suffered at their mother's hands as Melissa had. She had taken the brunt of her mother's harsh decisions, while Hattie was treated as the baby.

Once their mother died, when Hattie was eleven, Melissa became her stand-in mother. For fourteen years they couldn't have been closer. Their father died a year after their mother, and Melissa was all Hattie had to parent her and it had been enough. Melissa was always there for her, to protect and encourage her. And then suddenly at twenty-five, Hattie had thrown it all away, and on what seemed like a mad impulse, had decided to become a nun, which Melissa told her was her way of avoiding life, like their father, and was the coward's way out. All Hattie wanted was to hide in the convent, protected and removed from the world. She said acting was too hard.

She had had dreams of becoming an actress, and studied drama at the Tisch School at NYU, and gave it all up after her first trip to Hollywood and a single screen test. Melissa saw it as pure cowardice, but Hattie didn't listen to what her sister had to say. She claimed that the religious vocation she had discovered was stronger than her previous desire to be an actress.

Once their parents died, there were no other adult influences in their lives, other than Melissa and a trustee at the bank who barely knew them. Both their parents were only children, and history had repeated itself. Their respective parents had died young too. Melissa and Hattie's mother had been left nearly penniless, and had to drop out of Vassar College and get a job as a secretary. She'd been bitter ever since.

Their father had been left with a sizable inheritance, which dwindled over the years, after long bouts of unemployment, working at various banks, and mismanaging his money. It was the cause of endless fights between Melissa and Hattie's parents, and their mother was terrified of being poor again. Their father was ill equipped to take care of himself once he was orphaned as a young man and began drinking heavily, which cost him many jobs. They often lived on what was left of his inheritance, with no other income. Despite that, there was enough of his money left when both their parents died for Hattie and Melissa to pay for their education and live in a small apartment, after they sold their parents' Park Avenue co-op. Their father had had the foresight to pay for a large life insurance policy which would carry both girls for a long time securely, not in luxury, but in comfortable circumstances, as long as they worked at solid jobs after they'd graduated from college.

At eighteen, when their father died, Melissa shouldered their responsibilities and handled them well, better than their parents had. She was bright, determined, and capable. She saw to it that they both attended good colleges, and made sure Hattie kept her grades up. She was serious beyond her years, less stern than their mother would have been, and far more responsible than their alcoholic father. She moved them to a decent, less expensive neighborhood in New York on the West Side, and stuck to a rigorous budget so what they had inherited would last as long as possible.

And she took good care of Hattie. Everything seemed to be going well, and then Hattie had run away to the convent. It shattered Melissa's world yet again. After caring for her sister for fourteen years, she suddenly found herself alone, and began writing more seriously then to fill the void and try to process why Hattie had abandoned her dreams.

Melissa vented her anger at their mother in her first, very dark book, which was an instant success. She could better understand her mother's bitterness at finding herself a pauper when her parents died than she could fathom Hattie's flight from life. It made no sense to her. She'd had such a bright future ahead.

Losing Hattie to the convent came as a severe blow. Melissa wrote incessantly after that to exorcise her demons, with excellent results, once she met Carson, he became her agent, and sold her books for real money. But, she had never forgiven Hattie for retreating to the convent, nor could Melissa understand what Hattie had done, or why. Hattie had real talent, and Melissa had encouraged her. Hattie had had a few small parts on daytime TV, and a walk-on in a Broadway show. She got a chance to audition for a movie then, and went to L.A. for a screen test. Faced with a real opportunity, she had panicked, come back from L.A. in less than a week, and told Melissa about her impulsive plan to join a religious order. She said it had been a lifelong desire she had hidden from her sister, knowing how Melissa hated nuns. Eighteen years later she had never forgiven Hattie and the two sisters were still estranged. Melissa had barely spoken to Hattie at Robbie's funeral. She didn't want to hear what her sister had to say, the platitudes that Robbie was in a better place and his suffering was over. They hadn't seen each other since.

Melissa wrote to her once a year, as she did to Carson, mostly out of a sense of duty in her sister's case. And Hattie dropped her a note from time to time, determined to stay in touch with the sister she still loved and always had. She was convinced that one day Melissa would come around and accept the decision she'd made, but there was no sign of it yet. Melissa preferred to be alone now. She didn't want anyone's sympathy, which rubbed salt in the wounds left by her losses. All she wanted was her house

and the satisfaction it provided her. She didn't need people around, and certainly not her cowardly sister who had run away from the world, or her ex-husband who had cheated on her and was married to someone else. And she didn't need an agent anymore, since she had stopped writing. She didn't "need" or want anyone.

The convent had sent Hattie to nursing school when she joined the order. She was a registered nurse now at a hospital in the Bronx. Melissa went to her graduation when she got her R.N., but had refused to attend the ceremony when Hattie became a novice, and later took her final vows. Melissa didn't want to be there. It was too painful to see Hattie in the habit she wore.

After her vows, Hattie had spent two years working at an orphanage in Kenya, and had loved it. Her life had taken a completely different turn from Melissa's, and she was content. Melissa said she was happy too, married, with a child and a successful writing career, but her sharp edges hadn't softened with time. They had gotten harsher. And once Robbie died, the walls around her were insurmountable.

After she bought the house in the Berkshires, the men who worked for her considered her an honest and fair employer. She paid them well and worked as hard as they did on the projects at hand. But she wasn't friendly or talkative. Melissa said very little when they worked side by side, and they were impressed by how strong and capable she was. She didn't balk at any task, no matter how difficult, and accepted every challenge. She was a courageous woman, but not a warm one.

The men she hired often commented to one another about how taciturn she was. She was a woman of few words. Norm Swenson, the contractor she used, always defended her. He liked her, and sensed that there was a reason for how hard she was on herself and others. Now and then he saw a spark in her eye and guessed that there was more to her than she let anyone see now.

"There's usually a reason for people like her," he said to her critics, in his quiet New England way. He liked her, and enjoyed his occasional conversations with her, when she allowed that to happen. They talked about

the house, or the history of the area, nothing personal. He felt certain there was a good person in there somewhere, despite her cold demeanor and sharp tongue. He always wondered what had caused it. One of his workmen called her a porcupine. It was an apt description. Her quills were sharp. The locals left her alone, which was what she wanted. None of them knew about Robbie. They had no reason to, and it was a part of her life, and a time, she didn't wish to share with anyone. No one in the Berkshires knew anything about her history or personal life.

The fact that Melissa had written under her maiden name of Stevens made her anonymous life in the Berkshires possible. She had kept Carson's last name when they divorced, in part because it had been Robbie's name too and was a link to him, and in part because the name Melissa Henderson rang no familiar bells for anyone. But "Melissa Stevens" would have woken everyone up to the fact that there was a famous author in the neighborhood. This way, as "Henderson," no one knew.

To their old friends in New York, who hadn't seen Melissa in years, Carson always said that some people just never recovered from the death of a child, and Melissa was apparently one of them. It seemed a shame to everyone and many people said they missed her. Carson had his own struggles after Robbie's death, but he had strengthened close personal ties, which had supported him. Melissa had severed hers and set herself adrift. Carson's marriage to Jane suited his quiet nature better than his marriage to Melissa. There was a dark, angry side of her that ran deep, from the scars left by her parents. She had been happy with him but didn't have her sister's innocent, sunny nature. And Jane, Carson's current wife, was a solid, stable woman. She didn't have Melissa's brilliant mind, enormous talent, or tortured soul, which was easier for him.

Carson had talked to Hattie about it a few times in the early days after Robbie's death. Hattie had thought it would soften her sister, but it had the opposite effect, and hardened her.

Carson had always liked his sister-in-law, but lost touch with her when she went to Africa. He still had warm feelings for her. He had also sensed that Hattie didn't want Melissa to think that she was disloyal, staying in

touch with him once he had remarried, so Hattie no longer contacted him. She had written once to congratulate him when he remarried, and said that she was happy for him, and would keep him and his new family in her prayers. He never heard from Hattie again after that. All ties with Melissa were severed except for her yearly emails.

Melissa's literary career had taken off around the time that Hattie entered the convent, so Hattie hadn't been present much during their marriage, but she had come to the hospital regularly when Robbie was sick, and had offered to stay with him so Melissa could get some rest. No matter how angry Melissa was at her for becoming a nun, Hattie's feelings for her older sister had never wavered, and she was there until the end of Robbie's life.

Melissa had never invited her to Massachusetts once she left New York, and Hattie had never seen the house that Melissa loved so much. It had replaced people in her life, and the writing she had loved and been so good at. To Melissa, the house was enough, it was all she needed and wanted now. She didn't want anyone in her life, and no contact with the people who knew her when she was married, and were aware of the fact that she had a son who died. She didn't want to be the object of anyone's pity.

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When Melissa finished sanding the door, she lifted it and carried it back into the house. She had grown stronger from all the work she'd done. She examined it closely when she set it back on its hinges, and studied the intricate molding she'd been sanding. She was satisfied with her work. She had removed all the old coats of paint, and had decided to varnish it instead. The original carvings and moldings were delicate and beautiful. You could see them better now. All she cared about was improving the house. It was a living being to her, her only friend.

After her morning's labors, she made herself a cup of coffee and stood drinking it, looking out past the lawn and the trees, and the gardens she had created, to the orchards in the distance. They harvested the apples and sold them at a local farmer's market. She had the time and the money to do what

she wanted and what she enjoyed. After five astoundingly successful bestselling books, she had enough money saved to live as she chose. She led a simple, uncomplicated life, and had more than enough in the bank. Two of her books had been sold as movies.

For a while, she'd been one of the country's most successful writers, and then she disappeared from public life, to the dismay of her publishers. Carson hated to see her waste her talent. But now, working on her house and property interested her more.

She hadn't been back to New York since she bought the house, and said she had no reason to. She had let friends fall by the wayside after Robbie's death, and purposely avoided them. She didn't want to hear about their children, or see them, most of whom were teenagers now, as Robbie would have been. At forty-nine, she knew there would be no more children in her life. Robbie had been the center of her universe, just as Carson had been, but that was all over now.

Once in a while, she contemplated how odd it was never to experience human touch anymore. There were none of the adoring hugs as Robbie wrapped his arms around her neck and nearly choked her in his exuberance, or the gentle, sensual passion she and Carson had shared. She wasn't close enough to anyone now to have them hug her, or embrace them in return. Now and then someone working for her would touch her shoulder or her arm, or her contractor, Norm, who was a friendly guy, put a hand on her back. It always startled her. It wasn't a familiar sensation anymore, nor a welcome one. She didn't want to remember what that felt like. Physical contact with other humans was no longer part of her life, even though it had been important to her before. In their early years, Carson considered her a warm person. And Robbie would respond to her saying "I want to give you a hug" by leaping into her arms, and nearly knocking her down to hug her. He had been a sturdy, happy boy, until he became too weak to walk or even raise his head, and she would sit beside him holding his hand until he fell asleep. In the end, he slept most of the time, as she watched him, making sure he was still breathing, and savoring every instant he was alive.



“You can’t cut yourself off from everyone!” Carson had warned her after Robbie died, but she had. She had survived the worst that life could dole out to her, losing her only child. She wasn’t the same person anymore, but she was still standing and functioning. She used to love to laugh. Hattie had been livelier and more mischievous as a child, but Melissa had a good sense of humor. There had been no sign of it since Robbie got sick. The immensity of the loss had changed her.

She rose early every morning and watched the sun come up, and then got busy with her day, doing whatever work was at hand, and she often went to bed soon after dark. She read at times, and liked to sit by the fire relaxing and lost in thought, but the memories snuck up on her then. She didn’t like giving herself time to think and drift back to the past, and avoided it. She was living in the present, and her present was the house she had restored, mostly by the work of her own hands. She was proud of the results and what she had achieved. The house was living proof of how far she had come since she had bought it, and a symbol of her survival. No one in the area knew how hard she had fought to cling to life and not give up when she’d lost the person she loved most. Working on the house had brought part of her back to life, and kept her busy, happy, and fulfilled for four years. It was her therapy and had become one of the handsomest homes in the Berkshire mountains, with exquisite handcrafted workmanship. In its own way, it was a work of art. To Melissa, the house was alive, a living being to be cherished and embellished, and had become her reason for staying alive.

She let herself think of her sister, Hattie, sometimes, with her fiery red hair and huge green eyes, like a pixie when she was a child. Her copper hair was hidden under her nun’s veil now. She had been a tomboy, and then blossomed into a beautiful young woman with a natural, striking beauty men were drawn to. Boys pursued her even when she was a teenager. Melissa, with dark hair and blue eyes, had a cooler beauty and seemed less approachable. When Melissa went to Columbia, she was more concerned with taking care of her sister than meeting men. She never dated until her junior year.

When Melissa graduated from college and got a job, Hattie was sixteen and a beautiful, voluptuous young woman by then. All the boys at the school she went to in New York were crazy about her, which made it all seem even more absurd when Hattie decided to become a nun. She had always been the boy-magnet of the two of them and loved to flirt. Melissa was more reserved. Hattie was fun-loving, gregarious, and at ease with everyone. The idea of her being sequestered from the world seemed a criminal waste to Melissa. She was sure her sister would fly back out of the convent in six months, it was all a whim, but she hadn't. She had stayed for eighteen years, faithful to a vocation Melissa couldn't understand, and had never accepted, although she knew their mother would have loved it.

They had shared an apartment until Hattie joined the order. Melissa met Carson around that time, before she published her first book, right after she wrote it. He sold it, and a year later they were married and she gave up their old apartment. She hated being there once Hattie was gone. It was silent and lonely, but she didn't feel that way about her house in Massachusetts now. She was never lonely there, and had made peace with the solitude she'd chosen. It was a relief to be alone when she and Carson had separated in New York. They'd lived in Tribeca, and their marriage felt so dead to her by then that it was painful being with him, and she was grateful for her freedom when he left.

She'd started looking for a house immediately, and had found the right one quickly. It was a merciful release when she left New York and started fresh. She didn't have to look at Robbie's empty room anymore. It was the end of the happiest time in her life, when Robbie was alive, which was nothing but a memory by the time she moved to Massachusetts.

When Melissa went upstairs that night, after sanding the door all morning, she glanced at a photograph of Hattie in a frame on the desk in the small den off her bedroom. The photo was of Hattie dressed for her senior prom at her high school in New York. She was wearing a pale blue dress, with her bright red hair pulled back and swept up in a mass of curls. She looked sexy and gorgeous and was beaming in the picture. Melissa perfectly remembered the moment when she took the snapshot. She had helped her

sister pick the dress. There were no photographs anywhere in the house of her dressed as a nun, only a few from their childhood and youth, which was how Melissa still thought of her. Her sister's habit was a costume that made no sense to her.

Melissa smiled briefly at the photograph of Hattie as she sat down at her desk and signed some checks, and then she went to bed to read for a while, before falling asleep. She always slept with the light on, to keep the memories at bay. She had gotten good at it over the years, and had learned to live with the loss. It was part of her now, like everything else that had happened to her, her marriage to Carson and the divorce, the career that was an unexpected, startling success that she walked away from, the people she no longer saw, the sister who betrayed her by becoming a nun and was a stranger now, the father who had died of alcoholism, and the mother who changed Melissa's life forever and then died with none of their issues resolved, especially the most serious ones. As Melissa slipped into her comfortable bed, she had so much to forget. The ghosts of the past would haunt her if she let them, but she had become an expert at avoiding them. She looked around the bedroom and smiled. All that mattered to her was in the present. The past was buried and almost forgotten, a dim memory now. She was at peace in the silent house. She reminded herself that the past was gone, and she was happy now. She almost believed it, as she got under the covers and fell asleep, exhausted from the hard work she'd done all day. She had learned that pushing herself to her limits physically was the only way to escape the ghosts that still waited for her in the silent room at night.