

DANIELLE STEEL

Happiness

A Novel



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Dedication

By Danielle Steel

About the Author

Happiness is a choice, and a gift.

Chapter 1

Sabrina Brooks lay in bed with her eyes closed for a few minutes after she woke up, savoring the delicious limbo of being half asleep. She always woke up before the alarm went off at seven, and reached a hand out of the covers to turn it off before it rang. She rolled back slightly before getting up and she could feel the heavy form behind her, and hear gentle snoring as she opened her eyes, and saw the brilliantly sunny May morning. There was a mop of white hair in the bed next to her, and as she turned over fully, she could see the round black eyes open and look at her, and the wet black nose of her man-sized Old English Sheepdog, Winnie. It made her smile every morning when she saw him sleeping next to her, and tucked in beside her the tiny white, long-haired Chihuahua, Piglet, who opened her eyes, yawned and stretched. They were her constant companions in the converted barn in the Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts where she had lived for nine years.

Buying the barn and transforming it into her home had been her greatest reward and satisfaction nine years earlier, at thirty-nine. It was the result of the astonishing success of her second book. She had written her first book at thirty-seven, after a nomadic life and checkered career. She had resisted writing before that, because it seemed so mundane to follow in her father's footsteps.

Her father, Alastair Brooks, was English, and had written serious, respected biographies of famous British and American writers. She thought they were incredibly tedious and dreary, although painstakingly accurate. Alastair Brooks had a master's in history and a doctorate in literature. He'd been educated at Oxford, the University of Edinburgh, and the Sorbonne, where he had taught for a few years before coming to the States to accept a position as an English literature professor at Boston University. He had taught there for eighteen years, and died young, at fifty-one. Alastair had spent the last three years of his life in seclusion in a cabin in Vermont, where he moved after Sabrina had left for college at UCLA. He had dedicated himself entirely to his biographies then, with nothing else to distract him.

At her father's suggestion, Sabrina only visited him once a year at Christmas, which he seemed to experience as more of an intrusion than a pleasure, but tolerated for the two weeks she stayed. Once she left for college, her father informed her that she was an adult and shouldn't need much parental contact. She spent school vacations in LA and took a job in the summer for extra money. And as lonely as she was at times at school, she was never as lonely as she was at home with her father. She always suspected that he had contact with no other humans between her visits, except for bare necessities like the grocery store or the bookstore. He had no need for companionship and avoided it assiduously. Human contact always seemed painful for him, even with his daughter. She had never been able to bridge the gap between them, except when they spoke about one of his books, when he came alive momentarily, and then shut down again when the conversation ended. He seemed to exist only in relation to the historical literary figures he wrote about. The real people in his life were agony for him. He had been sent away to boarding school at Eton as early as they were willing to take him, as his older brother Rupert had been as well. Alastair had grown up without affection, and seldom saw his parents. Shortly after he'd arrived at Eton, when he was twelve, he had been brought home briefly for his mother's funeral and sent back to school immediately. His brother, five years older, graduated shortly after their mother's death

and Alastair was alone at Eton after that. Having grown up without affection, he had no ability to receive it or express it later on in his life.

His childhood, his family, and his reason for leaving England were taboo subjects. Sabrina knew nothing about his family or early life, and he refused to discuss it with her. All she knew was that he had left England at twenty-six and completed his doctorate in Edinburgh, before moving to France and the Sorbonne. He had lived in Paris for three years, and met her mother there. She could only guess that his reason for leaving England was due to some sort of disagreement over his inheritance as a second son. His older brother had inherited everything, and Sabrina knew that once Alistair left England, he never returned, and had never seen or spoken to his brother again. She knew only that her father's brother was named Rupert, and that he had inherited whatever money and property there was. Her father never went into detail about it, and never spoke of his own childhood.

She knew only a little more about his marriage to her mother, although that was a taboo subject too. He had met Simone Vernier in Paris when he was twenty-nine and she was twenty-one. She had been a model, and Sabrina remembered vaguely that she had been beautiful. They married a few months after they met, around the time he was offered the teaching position at Boston University. After they married, they left for the States. Sabrina had been born in Boston a year later when Alastair was thirty, and Simone was twenty-two.

The marriage had lasted for seven years, and when Sabrina was six, Simone left. Alastair had offered Sabrina no explanation as to why her mother went away, and made it clear that he wouldn't discuss it with her. She was never sure if it was her fault her mother went, since they never heard from her. When she was thirteen, Alistair explained to Sabrina that her mother had gone off with another man, and he had no idea where she was after that, or even if she was still alive, but he assumed she was, since she was very young.

If he had other women in his life, Sabrina wasn't aware of it. When he wasn't teaching, he was writing, and communication between them was limited. He maintained the taboo on subjects about his past until his dying

day. He never explained why he had left England, or what had happened with the brother he hadn't seen since and had never communicated with again, and he steadfastly refused to talk about Sabrina's mother. Communication with other humans was painful for him. As she matured, Sabrina thought of him as emotionally paralyzed, and didn't expect anything more from him. To the succession of psychiatrists she'd had since college, and once she was successful, she referred to her childhood as The Ice Age. There was no way to scale the walls around her father, or chip through the ice he was frozen into, like some prehistoric man from ancient times they had found frozen in a cave. The distance her father imposed on her, and his icy personality, made Sabrina silent and shy as a child, always feeling unwelcome and out of place. It had taken her years to feel comfortable in her own skin after feeling so unwanted as a child.

Alastair had wanted Sabrina to attend college in the Boston area, at one of the excellent universities around them, but she had been hungry for warmer weather and people. She had only applied to schools in California and been accepted at all of them. Alistair had had a rigorous study plan for her when she was growing up. He brought stacks of books home for her every week, and she dutifully read them all. Although he was unable to express affection toward her, he had fed, housed, and educated her adequately. He had cooked for her every night, and she ate in the kitchen alone. They lived in an apartment in Cambridge, and he had assigned her additional study projects. She had excellent grades, gave her father no trouble, and kept to herself, and as soon as she was accepted at UCLA, she left as quickly as she could, and their contact was reduced to her Christmas holiday. He had moved to Vermont by then, and in her junior year, when she came home for Christmas, he told her simply and directly that he had pancreatic cancer, and he was dying. He was surprised when she took the semester off and stayed with him. She was shocked by his illness, and she realized later that she was hoping to build some kind of emotional bridge to him before it was too late, but he continued to maintain his distance until the end. He spent his two final months frantically trying to finish his last book, which he did, and died two weeks later, without ever drawing closer

to Sabrina. She waited for some final words of affection from him, but there were none. In his last days, he never spoke and slept most of the time, eventually heavily dosed on morphine for the pain. There were no words for her when he died, as she sat quietly by his bed. She was twenty-one years old and alone. It was the loneliest feeling in the world. He had remained an inaccessible stranger all her life.

He had left her a little money, enough to provide a cushion to live on, and to complete her education. He was dutiful about his responsibilities but never warm. She sold the cabin in Vermont, gave away his old, threadbare furniture and most of his books. She went through several boxes of papers in the garage, and found only a few photographs of him as a boy, with an older boy she assumed was his brother, but there was nothing written on the photographs. Whatever secrets he'd had he took with him to the grave. She found a box of her mother's modeling photographs, and she was as beautiful as Sabrina remembered her. Simone had raven-dark hair, was tall and slim with delicate features and big green eyes. Sabrina was blond and blue-eyed like her father, with a small frame and delicate features, and looked younger than she was. Coupled with her shyness, she appeared almost childlike, even as an adult.

What Sabrina remembered most about her mother was her bright red lipstick. She couldn't remember any particular affection from her mother, who clearly hadn't been deeply attached to her, since she had left and never contacted Sabrina or Alastair again. She vanished into thin air after she disappeared. Alistair had received divorce papers in the mail afterwards, but nothing else from Simone. There had never been a letter or a postcard or a birthday card to her daughter, and Sabrina believed her father when he said he had no idea where she was. Sabrina had some illusions about her mother in her early teens and wanted to meet her one day, hoping she'd be warmer than her father, but had given the idea up as she got older. A woman who had evidenced so little interest in her daughter couldn't have been much of a mother, and clearly wasn't interested in meeting her as an adult.

Sabrina had learned to live without parental affection, or any at all, but unlike her father, she hungered for it. She envied classmates she saw with

loving parents, and always felt like the odd one out. As she got older, she reached out to friends, who became the family to her that she had never had. She was a serious student in college, and her friends were almost like the siblings she didn't have. As a child she had led a very solitary life. Later, her shrinks agreed that she'd been love-starved. Her father had no ability to connect with other humans, which had been as much a tragedy for him as for her. Even when he was on his deathbed, she expected some sign of emotion, some indication that he loved her, and there was none. He lay in silence with his eyes closed until his final breath, while she prayed he wouldn't die so soon and leave her alone. He had remained an enigma and her mother a dim memory, a shadow figure in her life, who had abandoned her at six. It was heavy baggage to carry into her future when she went back to UCLA after he died, to make up the time she missed. She managed to do it over the summer and graduated on time with her class. She had no home to go back to, no relatives anywhere, except those in England she'd never met and knew nothing about.

After she graduated, she took a job at the Disney Studios as a production assistant, and eventually became a screenwriter, which was exciting for her. It was her first writing job, and she enjoyed it. She moved to Venice Beach, which was young and lively. She learned to surf, and was good at it, despite her small size. She was a strong swimmer, and met a young surfer from New Zealand on the beach. Jason Taylor was fun and good-looking. It was her first serious relationship. He had a job at a surf shop. Within six months he was at risk of being deported, and he asked her to marry him, for as long as necessary to get a green card. She was in love with him and didn't want him to leave, so it seemed a reasonable suggestion, and she married him. She had no parent to object. He had dropped out of school at seventeen and other than surfing, they had no common interests. But it was exciting knowing that he cared for her, after years of her father's indifference.

The marriage lasted as long as it took to get his green card, almost two years, and by then, their feelings for each other had waned and there was little point to the relationship. He wanted to move to Hawaii to surf, which was of no interest to her. They filed for divorce, and Sabrina took a job in

San Francisco, at Lucas Studios, which was a step up from her job at Disney. It was a great opportunity and challenged her writing skills, and she learned a lot. She started a new chapter of her life there. She had a few postcards from Jason after the divorce, and then lost track of him. He was living in Maui and loved it when last heard from. People had a way of slipping out of her life, without a trace, like her mother. She was twenty-four when she moved to San Francisco. It was a fun city with lots of activity and young people. She loved her job working on scripts, dated a few men without any great interest, and at twenty-eight, she met a doctor, Tom Wilkins, who was ten years older than she was. He was handsome, brilliant, charming, and interested in all the same things she was. Fascinating and intelligent, he loved to read, loved films, had surfed in college, and went out on the waves with her a few times. He was almost too good to be true, and ER doctor, with a specialty in trauma.

Their life together was full and exciting. Because of his erratic schedule, Tom had few friends, but their relationship was intense, and he and Sabrina were constantly together when they weren't working.

They moved in together after a year, and he was desperate to marry her, which she did at twenty-nine, at City Hall. Tom had no family and neither did she, and he never spoke about his past. All she knew was that he'd grown up in Chicago, was an only child like her, and his parents were dead. They had much in common. From the moment she married him, he turned from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde, and controlled her every move, accused her of things she didn't do. Their marriage resembled the movie *Gaslight*. It was a nightmarish web. It took her five years to get free of Tom's control, which she finally did with the help of a group for abused women, and ultimately a safe house where she hid from him. It took her another year to recover and feel free and whole again. She had to leave San Francisco to escape him. Tom hunted her down wherever she was, and at thirty-five, divorced again, and feeling liberated, she moved to New York, to start her life over.

She had saved money from her job at Lucas, and with the money she had left from her father, she had enough to make the transition and move cross-country. Just as she had fled her father and the loneliness of her life with

him, she headed east again, to New York, to flee the terrifying psychological abuse of her ex-husband. She felt as though she was always running away from something, but this time she had no choice. She had realized how dangerous and twisted Tom was, and she knew that if she stayed with him, it would destroy her. He might even kill her. He had manipulated her until she lost all faith in herself, and as part of her recovery from her marriage, once she got to New York she started writing. This time she was no longer writing what she had to for her job. She discovered her own voice and wrote a terrifying psychological thriller, which was really about Tom.

She found a tiny apartment she loved in Soho, and a job as an assistant editor at *The New Yorker*, which was prestigious and interesting, and at night she wrote her thriller. She wrote it in three months, and spent another month refining it. It was a mesmerizing and frighteningly accurate portrait of a sociopath. She let her imagination run wild and the result was brilliant.

She contacted an agent, Agnes Ackley, through one of her colleagues at *The New Yorker*. Agnes was tough and smart, recognized Sabrina's talent immediately, and accepted her as a client. The two women got on well. Agnes was in her mid-fifties. She sold the book in four months. It was a very respectable success, although not a bestseller, and for the first time, at thirty-seven, Sabrina felt solid on her feet and headed in the right direction. She didn't feel lost anymore. She had survived the worst and come through it whole. And with her writing, she was never lonely.

With two marriages behind her, one of them to a sociopath, she had no interest in dating when she first moved to New York. Friends at the magazine eventually convinced her to try the dating sites on the internet, which felt dangerous to her. She was terrified of meeting a man who would turn out to be like the doctor she had divorced.

As soon as the book was published, the doctor tried to contact her again, but Sabrina's publisher shielded her, and Tom couldn't find out where she lived, and eventually stopped calling and texting her. She had kept the same phone number and finally blocked him.

Whenever she did read Tom's texts, he sounded as dangerous and seductive as ever, and just as sick. During their marriage he had tried to taunt her into suicide, and had nearly driven her to it. She couldn't imagine another human as dangerous as he was. It had taken her five years to get brave enough to leave him, and find the escape route, and she didn't want to lose her way in those woods again, or any like them, with anyone like him.

Another junior editor at the magazine told her that the best way to get over a man was to meet another one, which sounded to Sabrina like curing the effects of one poison with another. Romance and dating seemed fraught with danger, but at thirty-eight, it seemed odd and a little sad to stay alone forever. She finally made a cautious attempt at internet dating but saw danger signs in every email she read. She met a few candidates for coffee in public places, and they seemed to her either odd, tedious, or not too bright, with lackluster lives, and some were even boring. Only one or two seemed crazy to her, but most of all they were of no interest. Some of them had lied and were taller, shorter, or older than they had claimed. She suspected that one or two were married. Lying seemed to be a constant with several of them. She couldn't imagine meeting anyone she could care about, and she had met no appealing men at work. She wasn't desperate to meet a man, but it seemed like what she was "supposed" to do. After her isolated childhood, and her bad marriages, she was comfortable alone.

After discussing it with her latest shrink, and two friends at work, Sabrina decided to make more of an effort and went to see a matchmaker who came highly recommended. Dating appeared to be far more complicated than she expected it to be. Gone were the days when you met someone at school or work or through a friend, found them attractive, went to dinner and fell in love. It was more like landing on the moon now, or attempting to refuel a rocket ship mid-flight in outer space. Highly technical and computerized, with algorithms, statistics, geography, and categories of desirability that had to match up. Chemistry was no longer relevant, and no one seemed to know people to introduce Sabrina to, and when they did, she wished they hadn't.

Sabrina paid the matchmaker an exorbitant amount for ten dates. She was a woman who had gone to Yale Law School and given up law for matchmaking because it was so lucrative. The men Sabrina met for a drink or coffee were stunningly inappropriate, with decent jobs which most of them were bored with. The age range she had opted for was forty to fifty, all of them were divorced, while many of them had children they complained about and ex-wives they hated, all of whom they claimed were crazy. Some of the dates were only trying to increase their existing stable of bed partners, while claiming to want a “relationship,” which in fact was the farthest thing from their minds. She paid ten thousand dollars for the privilege of meeting them, a thousand dollars a date, which made it an expensive cup of coffee. She thought it was a worthwhile investment to pay homage to a biological clock she didn’t actually hear ticking, since she had never wanted children, and didn’t want to inflict a childhood as unhappy as her own on an unsuspecting child. She wasn’t convinced that she’d be any better than her own parents at parenting. She had no experience with children and had never longed for one. Sabrina suspected a dog might suit her better and seem less frightening. You couldn’t give a child away if it didn’t work out, or stop seeing them, or divorce them. And her track record with her two marriages didn’t encourage her, in terms of her own judgment.

After the tenth date arranged by the matchmaker, Sabrina made a decision to stop trying to meet the perfect mate. She thought that there was a good chance that a third attempt at marriage might be no more charmed than the first two, one of which had been foolish and harmless and a waste of time, a youthful mistake, and the second of which had nearly killed her. It seemed so much easier to be alone, and she had none of the frantic desperation other women had to meet a man. Her job and her writing seemed like enough, although she was embarrassed to admit it. It made her sound odd.

By the time Sabrina was nearly thirty-nine, she was sure she didn’t want children. There was no appealing man of her dreams on the horizon, and she didn’t want to go through the hormonal agony of freezing her eggs to save for a baby later, nor go to a sperm bank, which she thought served a

useful purpose for women who were desperate for a baby before their time ran out. She couldn't imagine having a baby with a man she knew, let alone a stranger selected by a computer. She found the whole concept frightening, and remaining childless didn't frighten her at all. In fact, it sounded peaceful and comfortable to her, which set her apart from other women she knew, who were beginning to panic as they approached forty. She wasn't. She realized that she was a woman who didn't want or need children, and embraced it. She was busy writing her second book. It became an overnight bestseller. It was even more terrifying than the first one, and her readers loved it. She was making a career out of writing about twisted, disturbing people who did horrifying things, and she loved doing it. Her second book changed her life in ways she could never have imagined.

With the success of her second book, she was able to give up her job at *The New Yorker*, which wasn't a long-term goal, and write full-time. She had enjoyed her job, and the people she worked with, but she wanted to write her books without interruption or distraction, or having to go to an office to work for someone else. She bought a barn in the Berkshires and turned it into her dream home with a local architect, Steve Jones, and he and his wife Olivia became her closest friends. Sabrina was able to move to her new home in the Berkshires before she turned forty, and she was never lonely once she did. The ideas flowed, and she had a home, a booming career, a life she loved, and money in the bank, and she had done it all on her own. No one was running her life or telling her what to do. No one was trying to hurt her. She had felt insignificant and unloved for all of her childhood. No one was rejecting, belittling, or tormenting her. She felt competent and capable. She had failed at the dating game and marriage, but she was finally comfortable with herself, and had found the right path for herself with her books. Her life was full of the characters she invented, and the tortured lives she designed for them. Her own life had never been more peaceful, more fulfilled, or happier.

She met and enjoyed many of the locals, especially Steve and Olivia Jones, and she was a good sport about the odd single men they fixed her up with. They were almost as bad as the ones she had met through the

matchmaker, or those from the internet. She had first (and last) dates with depressed widowers who missed their wives, men who hated their jobs, ex-wives, or children, or who wanted to have a slew of babies, which she didn't. Others couldn't keep a job, or didn't want to grow up, or wanted to control her and tell her everything she was doing wrong. She met commitment phobics, and reassured them that she had no desire to be married either. There were a few nice men in the mix, but she had her life just the way she wanted it, and she didn't want to upset the balance it had taken her years to achieve. She had come a long, hard road to get here, ever since her mother had abandoned her at six. She had tried to fill the void her father left by ignoring her and being unable to love her. And she had questioned her own judgment after escaping her second husband.

Sabrina tried to explain to her friend Olivia that she wasn't a good candidate for dating or a relationship and was afraid to make another mistake. She didn't want to get hurt again, or disappoint someone, or hurt anyone. She was so happy with her life as it was, she had no desire to take a risk. She loved her life as it was now, and the wrong man might ruin everything. Dating just seemed too complicated and risky, and apparently wasn't her strong suit. It was hard to explain that she really was happy. She worried at times that she was following in her father's footsteps, with her writing and winding up alone. But her father had been a deeply unhappy person, and she wasn't. She loved her life, her work, her friends, her home. It seemed greedy to her to want more. She didn't have a partner, but she had herself and the scars of the past had healed at last. What more could she want? And there was something blissfully comfortable about not being in love with anyone. She spent her fortieth birthday with a room full of good friends, less than a year after she'd moved to the Berkshires. On her forty-fifth, she went skiing with friends in Vermont. At forty-eight, she had seven bestselling thrillers to her credit, and had made a name for herself.

She groaned every time Olivia came up with a new man in the area to introduce her to. She gave in occasionally, just to prove to Olivia and her husband Steve that she wasn't a complete hermit, and now and then they came up with someone decent she went out with more than once, and even

slept with. But her heart wasn't engaged. She hadn't been in love since Tom, the monster she had married nearly twenty years before who had almost killed her, and there wasn't a single thing in her life she would have changed if she'd had a magic wand. She was a survivor and had turned her life into one that suited her and made up for the past and her unhappy childhood.

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Sabrina set down Winnie and Piglet's breakfast on the floor, and walked into her garden in the bright May sunshine. She had gotten Winnie the sheepdog eight years before, and Piglet the Chihuahua two years later. They were her constant companions. She was hoping to finish her new book in the next few days and couldn't wait for Agnes, her agent, to read it. Sabrina thought this one was even better than the others, and even scarier. In the end, her bad second marriage had spawned an entire career of terrifying books that people gobbled up like candy, and she loved writing. She just didn't want to live a story like it again, she only wanted to write those stories about sociopaths and serial killers and love gone wrong, with a fantastic twist at the end. Two of her books had been made into movies, and she was hoping for a series one of these days.

She checked her emails when she walked back into the kitchen, and saw that she had one from her publisher, asking her to call. She smiled at the dogs, patted both of them, and went to take a shower. She couldn't wait to get back to the book. Nothing else mattered when she was writing. She would call her publisher later. She knew it wouldn't be important. Probably a request for a book signing, or some detail about the paperback cover. Whatever it was could wait until she finished the book. She was humming as she stepped into the shower and Piglet chased Winnie down the stairs into the garden. As far as Sabrina was concerned, life didn't get better than this. And she was grateful every single day for how her life had turned out. She had worked hard to get here, and she was a happy woman.