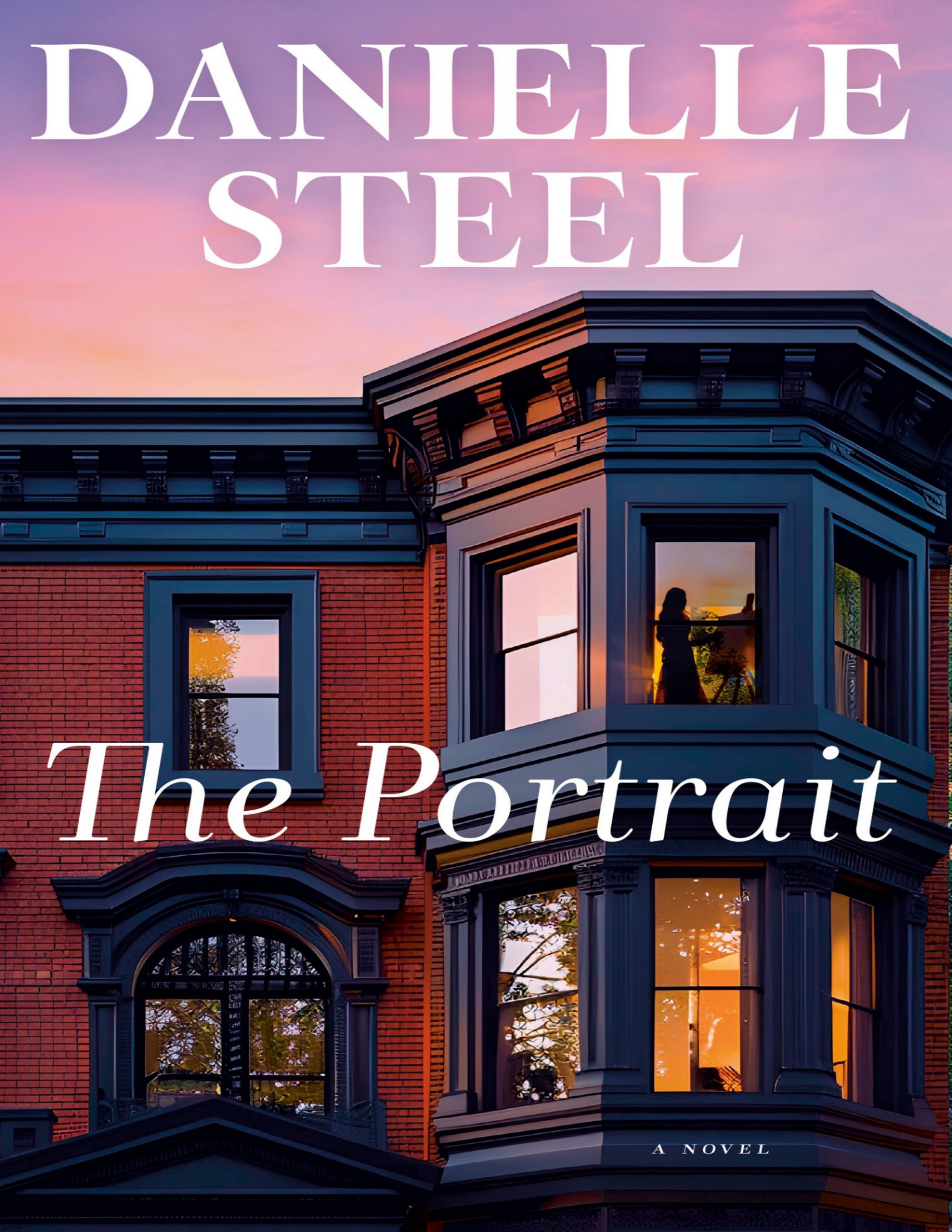


A photograph of a red brick building with a prominent bay window. The scene is set at sunset, with a warm orange and pink sky. The bay window is illuminated from within, showing a silhouette of a person looking out. The building's architecture features dark blue or black window frames and decorative moldings. The overall mood is nostalgic and artistic.

DANIELLE STEEL

The Portrait

A NOVEL

By Danielle Steel

THE PORTRAIT • FOR RICHER FOR POORER • A MOTHER'S LOVE • A MIND OF HER OWN • FAR FROM HOME • NEVER SAY NEVER • TRIAL BY FIRE • TRIANGLE • JOY • RESURRECTION • ONLY THE BRAVE • NEVER TOO LATE • UPSIDE DOWN • THE BALL AT VERSAILLES • SECOND ACT • HAPPINESS • PALAZZO • THE WEDDING PLANNER • WORTHY OPPONENTS • WITHOUT A TRACE • THE WHITTIER • THE HIGH NOTES • THE CHALLENGE • SUSPECTS • BEAUTIFUL • HIGH STAKES • INVISIBLE • FLYING ANGELS • THE BUTLER • COMPLICATIONS • NINE LIVES • FINDING ASHLEY • THE AFFAIR • NEIGHBORS • ALL THAT GLITTERS • ROYAL • DADDY'S GIRLS • THE WEDDING DRESS • THE NUMBERS GAME • MORAL COMPASS • SPY • CHILD'S PLAY • THE DARK SIDE • LOST AND FOUND • BLESSING IN DISGUISE • SILENT NIGHT • TURNING POINT • BEAUCHAMP HALL • IN HIS FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS • THE GOOD FIGHT • THE CAST • ACCIDENTAL HEROES • FALL FROM GRACE • PAST PERFECT • FAIRYTALE • THE RIGHT TIME • THE DUCHESS • AGAINST ALL ODDS • DANGEROUS GAMES • THE MISTRESS • THE AWARD • RUSHING WATERS • MAGIC • THE APARTMENT • PROPERTY OF A NOBLEWOMAN • BLUE • PRECIOUS GIFTS • UNDERCOVER • COUNTRY • PRODIGAL SON • PEGASUS • A PERFECT LIFE • POWER PLAY • WINNERS • FIRST SIGHT • UNTIL THE END OF TIME • THE SINS OF THE MOTHER • FRIENDS FOREVER • BETRAYAL • HOTEL VENDÔME • HAPPY BIRTHDAY • 44 CHARLES STREET • LEGACY • FAMILY TIES • BIG GIRL • SOUTHERN LIGHTS • MATTERS OF THE HEART • ONE DAY AT A TIME • A GOOD WOMAN • ROGUE • HONOR THYSELF • AMAZING GRACE • BUNGALOW 2 • SISTERS • H.R.H. • COMING OUT • THE HOUSE • TOXIC BACHELORS • MIRACLE • IMPOSSIBLE • ECHOES • SECOND CHANCE • RANSOM • SAFE HARBOUR • JOHNNY ANGEL • DATING GAME • ANSWERED PRAYERS • SUNSET IN ST. TROPEZ • THE COTTAGE • THE KISS • LEAP OF FAITH • LONE EAGLE • JOURNEY • THE HOUSE ON HOPE STREET • THE WEDDING • IRRESISTIBLE FORCES • GRANNY DAN • BITTERSWEET • MIRROR IMAGE • THE KLONE AND I • THE LONG ROAD HOME • THE GHOST • SPECIAL DELIVERY • THE RANCH • SILENT HONOR • MALICE • FIVE DAYS IN PARIS • LIGHTNING • WINGS • THE GIFT • ACCIDENT • VANISHED • MIXED BLESSINGS • JEWELS • NO GREATER LOVE • HEARTBEAT • MESSAGE FROM NAM • DADDY • STAR • ZOYA • KALEIDOSCOPE • FINE THINGS • WANDERLUST • SECRETS • FAMILY ALBUM • FULL CIRCLE • CHANGES • THURSTON HOUSE • CROSSINGS • ONCE IN A LIFETIME • A PERFECT STRANGER • REMEMBRANCE • PALOMINO • LOVE: *POEMS* • THE RING • LOVING • TO LOVE AGAIN • SUMMER'S END •

SEASON OF PASSION • THE PROMISE • NOW AND FOREVER • PASSION'S PROMISE
• GOING HOME

Nonfiction

EXPECT A MIRACLE: *Quotations to Live and Love By*

PURE JOY: *The Dogs We Love*

A GIFT OF HOPE: *Helping the Homeless*

HIS BRIGHT LIGHT: *The Story of Nick Traina*

For Children

PRETTY MINNIE IN PARIS

PRETTY MINNIE IN HOLLYWOOD

DANIELLE
STEEL

The Portrait

A Novel



Delacorte Press
New York

Delacorte Press
An imprint of Random House
A division of Penguin Random House LLC
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019
randomhousebooks.com
penguinrandomhouse.com

Copyright © 2025 by Danielle Steel

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader. Please note that no part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

DELACORTE PRESS is a registered trademark and the DP colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Hardcover ISBN 9780593498767
Ebook ISBN 9780593498774

Cover design: Laura Klynstra
Cover images: Adobe Stock and Getty Images

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland. <https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>

ep_prh_7.3a_153157671_c0_r0

Contents

Dedication

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

About the Author

To my darling children
Beatie, Trevor, Todd,
Nick, Samantha, Victoria,
Vanessa, Maxx, and Zara,

May you be brave and happy
and well-loved and cherished.

With all my love and heart,
I wish you happy endings
and that all your dreams come true.

Mom / D.S.

Silence

Along the jagged edges
of your silences,
my heart snags,
soars and stumbles,
while trying to back away
and give you space
and let you breathe,
I trip
and sail headlong
into your arms
and see you
so close to me,
I can hear you
breathe,
I can hear
your heart,
next to mine,
sounding like one,
a single beat
like a drum,
wondering if
you will return,
if you will come
close to me again,
or run,
never sure
which way you'll turn,
you hide

in the silences,
the sound
of your heartbeat
in my ears,
your face
in my eyes,
my own heart
in your hands,
to toss away,
dismiss,
forget the reality
of me,
a pebble in your path,
a memory,
am I to become
someone
you once knew,
as I wait silently
in the shadows,
hand outstretched
to you
to love,
to comfort,
to walk the path
with you,
share your pain
and help you find
your way
back into the sunlight
where you will find
your voice again
and bring me back
into the present

where the music
and voices
await us.

D.S.

Chapter 1

The Grace Cathedral choir in San Francisco was singing “Amazing Grace” as Charles Mackenzie Taylor stood at his father’s funeral, letting his thoughts drift to the familiar music. It was a beautiful warm June day. His father, Patrick Taylor, had been a fierce and bold leader, greatly respected in the community, head of Golden State Bank, which his own grandfather had founded, and which three generations of Taylor men had owned and run. It had been one of the largest commercial banks in California since the Gold Rush days. Patrick had died at eighty-five after a year-long bout with cancer. He was a force to be reckoned with and a hard man to please. He had continued to go to the office until his last few months, and the bank was officially run by a highly experienced CEO and a competent staff, overseen by a board of directors, of which Patrick had been chairman.

Charles was Patrick’s only child, brilliant in his own right, with no interest whatsoever in the family bank or the world of finance, unlike all his male ancestors before him. He would be the first Taylor heir who would never run the bank, although out of a sense of duty and a recent promise to his father, he had agreed to step into his father’s shoes as chairman of the board, which he dreaded. Several members of the board were close to his father’s age, had conservative, antiquated ideas, and took rigid positions on most things, and Charles found them as difficult to get along with as his

father had been. The rest of the board were CEOs of large companies, leaders of the financial community, and included two women, one of whom was the widow of one of their largest investment clients, and the other of whom ran a hedge fund. They all had the right credentials, very little imagination, if any, and no desire to do anything innovative. Charles felt as though he couldn't breathe whenever he walked into his father's office. They had never gotten along. It was no secret that Patrick had never approved of him, and now Charles had to run the board.

At forty-nine, Charles had been a renegade all his life, with a passion for new ideas and an unfailing instinct for the needs and trends of the future. Despite the trust he had been left by his grandparents and his father, he had made his own fortune doing what he loved, starting new businesses. His education had been almost identical to his father's, but Charlie had done entirely different things with his. He had attended Princeton as an undergraduate, then Harvard Business School in the entrepreneurial program, which Patrick said was unnecessary, with a bank to run. Charlie had started to build his future as a junior at Princeton, when he created a delivery service for fellow students, bringing them everything from food to medicine and pharmaceutical needs, including industrial quantities of condoms, and eventually branching out to deliver everything from mattresses to office equipment. He expanded his business model through friends at other universities, and eventually had nearly a hundred branches throughout the United States. He sold the business for what even his father considered an astounding amount of money. It was one of the earliest and most successful startups, and set the bar high for others who followed in his footsteps with their own startups. The concept was simple and it worked. During the years he was growing the business, Charlie's father referred to him as The Delivery Boy, and was furious when the business kept Charlie from taking his place at the bank, and gave him an excuse not to. It took his father years to admit to himself that Charlie was never going to be a part of the family business, and that there had never been any hope of it. Charlie was destined to fly in his own skies, on wings broader than his father's.

By the time Charlie got to business school, he was already a very rich man from the sale of his startup, not even considering his trusts. But he wanted the same credentials as his ancestors. He set up another startup, this time in healthier fast food, at first in the United States and eventually worldwide. It wasn't an elegant, distinguished way to make a fortune, but it was extremely efficient. He hadn't sold the company yet, had hung onto it for a long time and refused several offers, but it was ultimately his plan to sell. He would launch another startup afterward. He was thinking about that now and wasn't sure which new direction he would take. He liked shiny new ideas that others hadn't thought of yet. Simple ideas that worked. He had a passion for business. He had put his heart and soul into it. Business was his first love. He loved everything about it.

Being at his father's funeral brought back memories of his mother. She had died when he was thirteen. His memories of her had faded now, but he remembered her as a beautiful, lovely, gentle, kind, loving woman, everything his father wasn't. His father was cold and austere, unbending and unforgiving. He had never remarried. Three months after Charlie's mother died, his father had sent him to St. Paul's, a boarding school in the East and another family tradition. It was a long way from San Francisco, and no one ever visited him there. Charlie felt his mother's absence acutely that first year. Time had helped heal the wound, but he had never really gone home again, except for short visits. After St. Paul's, he had gone to Princeton, where he had stayed for an extra year to run his fledgling delivery business, and then gone on to Harvard Business School. His father had a large, handsome house in San Francisco, where Charlie had lived before he left for school and stayed during his visits, but after business school, Charlie had bought a very beautiful home in Atherton and set up offices in Palo Alto in Silicon Valley, home to venture capital and many startups.

He had married young, on an impulse at twenty-six, when he was finishing business school for his MBA. He'd been dating Faye, a girl five years older than he was, from a family of bankers in New York. Her family was similar to his, though slightly less austere. She was an only child like

him, and she was in the throes of a wildly rebellious stage. Once at Harvard, she dyed her hair purple, and they had fun together. She was smart, an outstanding law student, and wanted to save the world. They'd only been dating for a few months at school, on a boring holiday weekend, when Charlie convinced her to fly to Las Vegas with him. It sounded like a great idea. They got outrageously drunk, wound up at the Elvis Chapel, which they thought was hysterically funny, and woke up married. Predictably, neither family was pleased, and called them irresponsible. Both sets of parents wanted them to have the marriage annulled, but both families were respectable. Faye was incredibly smart and graduated from Harvard Law School at the top of her class, and she and Charlie decided to give the marriage a try. It worked for a while, but not for long. Her rebelliousness faded when they moved to California and she got a job at one of the most important venture capital firms in Silicon Valley. Charlie had convinced her to come west and look for a job in tech when he went back to San Francisco. She turned into her parents almost immediately, with conservative views. Her purple hair disappeared, along with almost everything else he had liked about her. She thought fast food was beneath him, although it was earning him millions. She turned out to be critical and cold, instead of fun and sexy as she had been at Harvard. They were both considering divorce by the end of the first year, and regretting their rash leap into marriage, when Faye discovered she was pregnant, and they decided to stick with it.

Neither of them was thrilled at the prospect of the pregnancy, and a child, but they both fell in love with baby Liam. Faye went back to work immediately. The baby had arrived three weeks early when she was on a road tour for an IPO, to take a company public, and he had to stay in the hospital for a month. Charlie and Faye made a schedule to take turns visiting him daily, but their work schedules were ferocious, and Charlie traveled all the time. He discovered then that he had more parental instincts than Faye, who appeared to have none. She was more interested in her job and career than a baby, and Charlie had little time to devote to him.

The child was entirely cared for by a series of nannies. Liam was a bright boy and an undemanding child, who learned early on to be self-sufficient. He expected little of his parents. Faye insisted on sending him east to boarding school at Andover, where her father had gone. When Liam left at fourteen, Charlie missed him, but he knew from his own experience that it was already too late. They had missed the boat, and like both his parents, Liam was an only child. Charlie knew when Liam left that he would never be home again for long. The years had flown by. Liam had just graduated from Yale, was going back to Yale for graduate school to study architecture, and was leaving for Europe in a few days with friends to visit châteaux in France and castles in England, as a prelude to his graduate studies. Amazingly, Liam was good-natured, forgiving, and independent, and never seemed to hold Charlie and Faye's neglectful parenting against them. He wasn't close to them, but he didn't resent them either. He was mature and philosophical about their failings and accepted them as they were.

—

Charlie was a strikingly handsome man with a full head of dark hair, tall, with a well-toned athletic body, and electric blue eyes. Faye was a very fair blonde with skin that hadn't aged well, and she paid little attention to her looks. She was fifty-four now, and looked slightly older. She had spent a lifetime working among men, and had played down her feminine side to compete with them. Liam looked like his father, with his mother's blond hair and his father's blue eyes.

Both Charlie and Faye dove into their careers with a vengeance as soon as they left grad school. It left them little time to spend with each other, and once Liam was born they seemed to drift even further apart. Charlie was aware of it, but did nothing about it. Faye seemed not to notice, or mind. She'd become a partner of the firm very early, and all her energies were spent there.

For a moment, when Liam left for boarding school after fifteen years of marriage, they thought that their relationship might have a renaissance, and they might recapture a warmer time long ago. Instead their lives seemed to get busier than ever, and without Liam's presence as the prime reason for their staying married, they found that they had drifted too far apart and there was nothing left. Their marriage was dead. It was a turning point for both of them. They discussed it one night over dinner in their kitchen. They rarely had time for dinner together and hadn't had dinner as a family in years. The housekeeper cooked for Liam. Faye was out most nights with clients, and Charlie was either out working late, or in another city acquiring another company to add more restaurants. He had built an empire which he ran himself.

Their decision, after several glasses of wine, was to stay together and continue as they were. Faye pointed out that divorce would be costly, inconvenient, time-consuming to work out the finances, and maybe even embarrassing. They stayed together, but once they made the decision for practical reasons, there was no pretense of it being anything more than that. Charlie was never sure if he had ever loved her, and Faye had long since concluded that she didn't love him. Even Liam understood by the time he was in his teens that his parents had a loveless marriage, and there was little in it for him. He loved spending time with his friends' families rather than his own. Other mothers who observed the Taylors with a keen eye saw that they had everything but love. They felt sorry for Liam, but he did well anyway, like a flower growing between rocks, and got what he needed to survive, wherever he could. He was astonishingly self-sufficient for a boy his age, and mature. He had grown up among adults, and he was as bright as his parents.

Charlie and Faye told themselves that they stayed together "for Liam's sake," without the pretense of being close. Their lives were on separate paths, with the occasional social appearance, usually for Charlie's business or hers. Liam wasn't close to either of them. When he wanted advice, he went to teachers or his friends or their parents, not his own. They didn't have time. They were responsible parents—they fed and housed him and

paid for his education and holidays, and gave him nothing more. Charlie felt guilty about it sometimes, but Faye never mentioned it. They were three strangers living under the same roof who barely knew each other, each pursuing their own life, and the thread which bound them to each other was very thin.

Charlie had sought amusement and distraction from a wide variety of women over the years, without getting close to them. Something always stopped him, possibly the fact that he was married, although that never discouraged him from dating. Being married relieved him of making any other commitments, which suited him. He made no promises he couldn't keep and didn't wish to. He wanted no complications in his life, nor did he want to mislead anyone. He didn't want or need more than he had. He had never been faithful to Faye, but he respected her as a good friend, even if he didn't love her, and probably never had.

He conducted most of his affairs in other cities, to avoid complications, rather than in San Francisco, where he spent the least amount of time. The affairs lasted a while, and he didn't try to prolong them. He was careful to pick women who didn't expect more of him than he was willing to give. Now and then, he made a mistake, but not often. When he did, and spent time with a woman who had big expectations of him, or was needy, he ended it quickly. He was an expert at ending his affairs smoothly. All of his passion went into his business. The rest was entertainment, or a distraction.

Faye was equally discreet, and neither of them asked the questions they didn't want answers to. Their marriage was a choice, and suited them both. Faye liked the status and comforts it afforded her, regardless of the man. Charlie was a decent person and she admired him enough to stay married to him, no matter what he did on his own. They were a habit neither of them enjoyed or wanted to break.

—

Charles stood at his father's funeral, looking heartbreakingly handsome, thinking of the practical aspects of his father's death, the things he had to do

now.

There were two houses his father owned that he had to sell, and art and objects to send to auction or put in storage for Liam later. Faye didn't like the house in Tahoe and neither did he, or he would have kept it. Once fashionable among the rich, Lake Tahoe was full of tourists now, and people in the camping grounds. And the traffic to get there was terrible. It was overcrowded and overrun.

The strength of Charlie's career had been to think outside the box, solidified by the skills he had learned at Harvard, with his own unfailing instincts and magic added. His work life had all the passion and excitement that his personal life didn't. He loved his work, and his companies were his children and mistresses, the recipients of all the emotions he had never shared with another person. Because of the absence of his mother since the age of thirteen, and his cold father, Charlie had never been shown how to love another human. It was the one instinct he didn't have and what he feared. He preferred to give his heart to what he could control.

His father's death wasn't painful for him, except for the duties he would have to undertake and didn't want, like being chairman of the board. He thought Faye would have done it better. She was more traditional and a better team player, but it was his responsibility, not hers.

Patrick had been an austere, severe, often harsh critic of his son. The two men had never understood each other, nor tried to. Charlie had early on taken pleasure in being a maverick in business—he was good at it and it had served him well.

After the service at Grace Cathedral, which ended with Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," Charlie greeted as many of the seven hundred people who attended as he could on the way out. His striking good looks made him stand out in the crowd. He was wearing a perfectly tailored black suit made by his tailor in New York, where he kept a Fifth Avenue apartment he used when he did business there. He still traveled most of the time, checking on his offices around the country and the world. He was forty-nine and looked years younger.

At fifty-four, Faye did nothing to hide her age. She dressed in conservative business style. She had sacrificed the frills of femininity in order to let the men she worked with know that she was one of them, and as powerful as any of them. She exuded an aura of strength, intelligence, and seriousness. She wore her blond hair short, used very little makeup, and seemed timeless, not of any particular era. She had worn a plain black suit to the funeral, by no particular designer. She had no interest in fashion. She had more important things to do. She had gotten on well with her father-in-law, better than Charles ever had. Her own parents had died years before, so Liam had just lost the only grandparent he had. Patrick had liked him better than his own son. Patrick had had a hard time warming up to anyone, even his own flesh and blood. It went against the grain.

Charlie, Faye, and Liam left for the cemetery as quickly as they could. The hearse had just pulled away as they came down the steps of the church. The pallbearers had been the men on the board. With Patrick's secretary, Faye had organized a reception for several hundred guests at his home in San Francisco. Charlie was dreading it. It would be stifling, with the rooms full of all the social and banking people that he didn't care about. He had carved out a niche for himself in a very different world of modern, unorthodox, high-tech thinkers, people who had come up from nothing and made incredible fortunes with innovative ideas, not by following in their predecessors' footsteps. They were all the people Patrick disapproved of and didn't understand, like his son.

In time, Charlie intended to step down from the board quietly, but he couldn't do it yet. He had to go through the motions for a year or so. He was going to his father's office the next day, to tie up some loose ends, and then flying to New York that night for meetings. His company was opening twenty more healthy fast-food restaurants in the suburbs of New York, and in the days following, he had meetings planned in Boston, Atlanta, Miami, and Chicago. He had a busy few weeks ahead. Liam was leaving for his trip to Europe to celebrate his recent graduation from Yale. Faye had a new fund she was opening to her firm's investors. They each had their own plans and

Liam, who was now twenty-two, would be starting his architectural studies back at Yale in the fall, building his future.

As Charlie left the church, a boyhood friend, Adam Stein, stopped him briefly with a smile. They still saw each other for lunch from time to time. He was the managing partner of the biggest law firm in the city, and Charlie's lawyer.

"I'm sorry, Charlie," he said respectfully, although he knew that Charlie was less so and his father's death was a relief, a release from a relationship that had been painful all his life. "You're up, Mr. Chairman," he said in an undertone, with a teasing glance, and Charlie winced. "I'll call you for a loan next week. Maggie wants me to build a new house in Belvedere. I'm counting on you." Charlie knew Adam wasn't serious about the loan. He was one of the most successful attorneys in the city.

"I can't wait to turn you down," Charlie quipped back. "And I'm not 'up.'" He and Adam used to play baseball together on their school team. "I'll be out as fast as I can get away with it. I'll be on the road for the next few weeks. They'll do fine without me."

"You'll have to play ball with them at least for a while," Adam reminded him, and Charlie looked pained. Board meetings bored him intensely and never moved fast enough for him, which Adam knew. Charlie thought fast, moved fast, acted decisively. The bank moved with the speed of an iceberg and the members deliberated at length before making any significant decisions, and they were never exciting ones. Acting as chairman, even for a year, was his father's final punishment for him, after a lifetime of them. Charlie had never won his father's approval.

"See you at the house later," Adam said, and patted his friend's arm, as Charlie nodded and moved through the crowd to find Faye and Liam. They were waiting at the car that would take them to the cemetery for the private burial, where it would all finally end, with a handful of earth thrown into the grave, after the minister's last words.

Faye looked at him questioningly, to see if he was okay. Charlie looked as calm and in control as he always was. He had waited forty-nine years for this day, and it had finally come.

They drove to the cemetery without a word, each of them lost in their own thoughts, with nothing they wanted to say to each other. Charlie remembered hazy moments of his mother's funeral and felt a rush of sadness. Faye remembered her own parents, and Liam thought of the grandfather who had always scared him a little but had been kind to him. He would miss him, or miss just knowing he was there.

The silence was familiar to all three of them, and was easier than sharing what they felt—or admitting what they didn't feel, in Charlie's case. The silence was where they each felt safe. After a lifetime of distance between them, they knew there was nothing to say.

—

Devon Darcy woke up as she did every morning, with daylight streaming into the room, sometimes bright sunshine, and the light from the lamp she left on at night near her bed. She liked knowing where she was immediately on waking. In the darkness, she was haunted by ghosts of the past. She had learned to live with them. There was a tree outside her window that she could see from her bed, and hear the birds perching on it. They started chirping even before daylight.

She lived on the top two floors of a well-kept once-elegant townhouse in the West Village in downtown New York, on the West Side near the Hudson River. It stood in a row of houses like it, and down the street there were shops and restaurants and people. The street was quiet, and the neighborhood alive with old people, mothers and children, runners, dog walkers, and people laughing and talking to each other. She liked that. They were there if she wanted to see them when she took a break from work and went for a walk.

Her cozy bedroom was on the top floor, and on the floor below, she had a large living room with a marble fireplace she never used, tall French windows with beautiful antique satin curtains with tassels, and a dining room she had turned into her studio, filled with blank canvases in a corner, others leaning against the wall, her brushes and paints spread out on a work

table, a large comfortable chair for her subjects, her easel, and a number of small portraits hanging on the walls. She was a portrait artist. The canvas she was currently working on was on her easel, with layers of paint on it. She had only just begun to work on the underlayer, and sketched the shapes that would emerge as the subject came to life in her head and on the canvas. When her subjects lived in New York, she met with them once a week for several months, sometimes less if she had a strong connection with them. Those who lived far away spent a morning or afternoon in her studio with her, and she took videos and photographs of them making normal movements and expressions while they talked to her, and she would refer to the photographs later while she painted. They came to life on the canvas.

Between commissions, she painted people she didn't know from drawings she sketched randomly from memory, or as she watched them in restaurants, or parks. She had drawn people since she was a child. It was a gift. She had dreamed of being a ballerina as a little girl, and had painted dancers in every position, like Degas. Now she painted important people, and only accepted the commissions she wanted to, through a highly reputable gallery uptown. She did portraits mostly of men, occasionally of women. She saw into their souls and listened to them during sittings. Though she'd been a shy child, she had painted the world she observed with startling maturity and insight, which had deepened over the years.

Destiny had dealt Devon a hard hand. Her parents had died in a fire when she was five. She barely remembered them. They lived in New York in a small walk-up apartment in a poor unkempt neighborhood and were both teachers. The building was run-down and caught fire. Devon was saved by the firefighters right before the roof caved in, but they couldn't get to her parents. She still remembered them screaming as the firefighters rushed her away. Her mother was French and her father American. He had no living family. She was sent to Paris to live with her maternal grandmother, who had been a ballet teacher, became a seamstress, and made gowns for society ladies who came to the apartment for fittings. Devon would sketch them while they weren't watching. She loved the way they

looked and what they wore, the way they did their hair, and the gowns her grandmother made them.

Her grandmother was strict but kind, and she had recognized Devon's talent. She died when Devon was sixteen. She left enough money for Devon to attend the École des Beaux-Arts, the famous art school, where she was classically trained and learned to master her gift. She married a fellow art student, a sculptor, when she was twenty-two and he was two years older. They had a son, Axel, a year later. Jean-Louis, her husband, was an orphan as she was. He worked as a waiter in a bistro to pay for school, and gave up the Beaux-Arts to support the family when Axel was born. Devon continued her studies and Jean-Louis took care of the baby in the daytime before he went to work at night at the restaurant. He never complained about the sacrifices he made for them. They managed to pay for food and the rented room they lived in. They had no living relatives, only each other and their son. She barely remembered her parents now, but she remembered Jean-Louis and their son vividly. They lived on in memory, and in her heart.

Jean-Louis was struck by a bus while riding his bike to work on a rainy night when Axel was three. Devon was a widow at twenty-six. She taught drawing at a school to support herself and Axel after Jean-Louis died, and managed to eke out a meager living. She sold drawings at street fairs, quick portraits people liked. Two years after Jean-Louis died, Axel caught meningitis and was gone in twelve hours. At twenty-eight, Devon was alone in the world. It had been fourteen years since then. Axel would have been nineteen now, which was too painful to think of, and she didn't try. It took her a year to get back on her feet and be able to function again. She had made constant sketches of Axel during that year, in order to keep him near her. She didn't want to forget his angelic face with all its expressions. The year was a blur. Now she couldn't make a decent living in France, couldn't bear the memories, and being there without Jean-Louis and Axel. Every park and street was filled with the memories of Axel. She moved to New York, with the little money she had, found the gallery which still represented her now, and when they saw what she was capable of, they

began giving her gallery shows. She was forty-two years old now, and had been back in New York for fourteen years.

She had finally reached the pinnacle of success, and now could do only the commissions she wanted and refuse the rest. She researched her subjects carefully, and did those she respected. The results were extraordinary. She didn't paint people she didn't like, because it showed in the work. She saw into their souls, which was part of her gift. She did magnificent paintings that represented her subjects inside and out. They were alive on the canvas and looked as though they would speak at any moment. Her subjects were thrilled with their portraits.

Devon could have done three times as many commissions if she wanted to. She did eight or ten a year, and wanted to be proud of them. The sittings were intense and lengthy, some faster than others. Her years of training, her losses, and years of suffering deepened her skill and mastery of her art. She painted important men and women at the height of their success, people whom she respected for valid reasons, and that were meaningful to her.

She had painted socialites and important commercial, industrial, political, or artistic figures. She had painted a president, and declined another. She had been respected and well known herself for the past seven of the fourteen years in New York. She channeled her subjects' inner being with depth and a highly trained eye. She was never pompous or pretentious, but she was very definite about whom she would paint and whom she wouldn't, and never changed her mind.

She didn't dwell on the past or on her losses, but they were part of her now, and colored how she viewed the world. She wanted to do meaningful work and didn't want to waste time or paint people she didn't admire. She shied away from any real-life involvement with her subjects. Their connection was brief, ephemeral, and existed only on the canvas. They invited her to parties, dinners, weekends, and holidays at their homes but she never went. She lived in her own world. She was no longer a wife or mother, and identified herself only as an artist. She knew the scars she bore intimately, and didn't hide from them, and she was a purist about her work, and the techniques she had learned. She was the harshest critic of her work.

Devon was a beautiful woman with red hair and green eyes the color of Imperial jade. She had delicate fine features, and was lithe and graceful. Her grandmother had paid for ballet lessons for her, from her earnings.

Devon spoke very little to her subjects, but listened to everything they said and translated it into her art.

She ran lightly down the stairs to the kitchen to make herself a strong cup of coffee, and then sat in her nightgown, thinking about the portrait she was about to start. Her subject was a giant of industry who had become an important political figure. He was a powerful man, but seemed like a person of integrity to her. She made no apologies for her work or her boundaries and respected them.

She was having a show at the gallery in two days, and had to prepare for it. She had a lot to do. She had included a series of portraits of children she had done in her spare time. They were beautiful and touching. She knew none of them. They were just random subjects that had appealed to her. There was a portrait of Axel in her bedroom. She talked to it sometimes. He looked so alive and was smiling in the portrait. It made her happy, not sad. There was one of Jean-Louis in the living room, which showed his serious, pensive side. He had been twenty-eight when she painted the portrait shortly before he died. He looked like a boy to her now, at forty-two.

She showered and put on jeans and a soft pale blue sweater and stood at her easel. She added another coat of the underlayer, and made some notes. The subject was coming to a sitting that afternoon. She could hardly wait to get started, as she smiled and got to work.