



DANIELLE
STEEL

Without a Trace

A NOVEL

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Dedication

By Danielle Steel

About the Author

Chapter 1

Charles Vincent had been sitting in his office in Paris waiting to talk to his boss for more than two hours. It was Friday afternoon and he had promised his wife Isabelle that he'd leave the city early. He had a three-hour drive ahead of him, the last half on narrow, rough country roads along the coast of Normandy. They had houseguests at their château that weekend, friends of Isabelle's, although he knew them too. He worked late so often, and traveled so much for work, that she had a fully developed social life without him. He didn't mind. They had a wide circle of friends. She had her own, as well as a group of devoted women friends whose husbands worked as hard as Charlie, or were divorced, so Isabelle never lacked for company when Charlie was busy. She didn't mind going to events or entertaining without him, but he had promised to be there that night. It was someone's birthday, the husband of one of her friends. Isabelle had organized a weekend around them at the château. She was proud of their country home on a hill overlooking the rugged coastline and the sea. The château was beautiful. They had owned it for ten years.

Charles was the CEO of the biggest plastics manufacturer in France, Jansen Plastics. It was his second career, a reincarnation after an earlier life. The job at Jansen had saved him eleven years ago.

He was waiting to meet with the owner and founder, Jerome Jansen, eighty-two years old and still going strong. Jansen's only son had moved to

the States years before to seek his fortune, had married an American, and had no interest in the business, nor in coming back to France, or stepping into his father's shoes. He was a U.S. citizen now, as were his wife and kids. France was ancient history to him. When his son had finally made that clear to him, after he made his own fortune in the fast food business in Los Angeles and Southern California, Jerome Jansen had set out to find a CEO who could help him run his business with intelligence and an iron hand.

Jerome Jansen owned the largest toy company in France, along with factories that made plastic products for other uses. It was a huge operation, and Charlie's path had crossed with Jansen's at the right time. Charlie's father had been a writer of considerable literary acclaim in France but only modest commercial success, which had indirectly led Charlie into the publishing business right after college. He loved books and everything related to them except writing. His meteoric rise had been astonishing and impressive, and he found he loved the business. He had no talent for writing himself, and had struggled all his life for his father's approval as an only son, which had been hard-earned and of short duration. Although proud of him, and stern, Charlie's father had died two years after Charlie started working in publishing. His father's wishes had been hard to live up to. His mother had been kinder and died when he was very young, and his father was a hard taskmaster. Driven and hardworking, Charlie had been educated in the best French schools. He loved his job and everything about it, except for Gilles Vermier, the tyrant who owned the business. He made Charlie's life a living hell for all sixteen years he worked there. His consistent victories in spite of his boss won him the reputation of the golden boy of the publishing world. Although the publishing house had an impressive stable of authors before he arrived, Charlie had successfully lured both French and foreign writers of major reputation, and enhanced the house he worked for immeasurably. His forward-thinking instincts led them into digital books before anyone else. He used the American market as his model to try to add audiobooks to their list before any other publisher in France. He had a gift for marketing, and understood writers and their quirks, thanks to his own difficult father.

Within five years after he was hired, Charlie had a glowing reputation in publishing, and within ten he was a star. The owner of the house knew it, resented him personally, and fought Charlie on every improvement he wanted to make. Instead of giving up, Charlie fought harder for what he knew would sell. The owner's only son had died in an accident, and Charlie became the golden boy of his business, bringing it into the future, and making it the greatest publishing house in France. His boss grudgingly acknowledged it, but disliked Charlie personally. Charlie often felt that Vermier bitterly held it against him because he was vital and alive, and his own son had died so young.

In the end, a point of honor unraveled Charlie's career, as fast as his meteoric rise had catapulted him into publishing stardom before that. A small argument became a big one. It was about adding soft porn to their list for purely commercial reasons. The owner was for it, and Charlie opposed. The owner's massive ego was challenged, and he hired an outsider over Charlie to control him, and force Charlie to endorse their position. What ensued were two years of battles, followed by a massive showdown, and a situation Charlie could no longer tolerate. They slowly squeezed him into a corner, and he had to either swallow his pride and give into them, or leave. He opted for the latter, after a bloody war. He quit in a blaze of pride and fury, and with the absolute certainty that he'd have no trouble finding a job he liked better, with a more reasonable owner at the helm, with values similar to his own.

He quit two weeks before his fortieth birthday, and he rapidly discovered that he was no longer viewed as the golden boy of publishing. His constant battles with the owner and the owner's new hire had tarnished Charlie's reputation. He knocked on every door in publishing, and found that he was considered "difficult," and no one wanted to hire him. He had risen too high, had been paid too well, had used his own ego and principles to achieve autonomy, and had followed his own lead. It was a humbling and very hard lesson for him. He had assumed too much, and couldn't land a new job.

The publishing house where he had worked promoted someone from the internal ranks to take his place, make fewer waves, and do exactly what the owner wanted with no resistance. They opened a whole category of soft porn, which didn't do as well as they'd hoped and had been sure it would. The business suffered as a result, and several of the big authors he had brought to them left when Charlie did, but for two years Charlie was out of a job. His world crumbled around him, and his personal life went with it.

Isabelle, his wife, was fun and lively and spirited when they were young and just out of college. She had studied art history and was bright and well educated. She was from a respected family, attended the best French schools, worked briefly at the Louvre, chose not to work once they were married, and stayed home to raise their children. She had no real career ambitions. She took care of their son Olivier, and six years later Judith. Isabelle's father owned several of the biggest luxury brands in France, a champagne label, high-end leather goods, and jewelry lines, all extremely profitable businesses. She had been brought up not for a career, but instead groomed to be the wife of a very successful man, someone like her father. She was used to the perks that went with first a father's and then a husband's success. She entertained lavishly, was fashionably elegant, intelligent, and the perfect wife for a head of industry, not for a failure, which was what Charlie became overnight. She made it clear to him every single day after he quit his job in publishing that she expected him to get back on top again, immediately.

Charlie had been brought up to respect and achieve intellectual excellence, and his writer father was puzzled by his interest in "commerce." Charlie's mother had died when he was in college. She had been a gentle woman, a college professor at the Sorbonne and a poet laureate. None of that meant anything to Isabelle. She was familiar with her father's relatively ruthless success. Her three sisters had married prominent men, but none as successful as Charlie had been for sixteen years, and she was proud to be his wife then, and infinitely less so once he was unemployed.

Her father had seen the makings of greatness in Charlie in his youth, but after sixteen years in publishing, and two after that without a job, he told his

daughter that the fire in Charlie's belly had gone out. Charlie knew it too. He didn't want to do battle anymore. He wanted a simpler job and a better life. He didn't want to have to put himself on the line every day, like a commando, fighting wars he couldn't win against unreasonable men with massive egos, who held all the cards. He was never going to be as successful as Isabelle's father. Fighting for what he believed was right, on principle, he had burned his bridges in the publishing world. With his reputation for being stubborn, too independent, and difficult, he couldn't find a single job in publishing for two long years, even in a lesser position. He was overqualified for every job he applied for, and unable to get hired.

Charlie had gotten desperate. He had dipped heavily into his savings, and Isabelle had borrowed money from her father, which she considered the ultimate humiliation. So did Charlie, although he had paid back every penny when he was employed again. But he was tainted in Isabelle's mind by then, and she could never feel the same way about him afterwards. He was a marked man for her from then on. She couldn't respect him, or even share a bed with him. Their marriage was as dead as his career.

Materially, Jerome Jansen had turned everything around for him. He was looking for an exceptional CEO for his business, since his son was successful in LA. He had heard about Charlie from a mutual friend, who had used Charlie as an example of what can happen when you reach the top, make a bold move out of pride and ego, and can't find another high-level job in your field. Charlie had been out of work for just over two years by then, and although the friend didn't know it, Isabelle had just given him an ultimatum: find a job immediately or she wanted a divorce. The two years of humiliation being married to him was more than she could bear. Borrowing from her father had been the last straw. They couldn't even afford to pay for Judith's private school, or for Olivier to attend the private university where he had been accepted and was about to enter. Isabelle's father paid for that as well, yet another humiliation for Charlie. Isabelle had pointed out that he couldn't even pay for his children's education, and she was too ashamed to see her friends. Charlie had been living in a haze of increasing despair for two years when Jerome Jansen called him. The

mutual friend had vouched for him, said that Charlie was brilliant. Jansen was hesitant, since Charlie had never been in industry, but the friend had convinced Jerome that it was the man at the top that made a difference, not the product he was selling. He felt sure that Charlie could make the transition from his experience in publishing. Jansen's business was in a slump at the time, and he wanted to do something drastic to take the lead over his competitors. He met with Charlie twice, and saw exactly what their mutual friend saw in him. Even in a somewhat subdued state, Charlie had something special about him. He was smart, creative, and resourceful. He knew nothing whatsoever about plastics then, and he was sure that Isabelle would think it was beneath her, but when she heard the salary Jerome Jansen was offering, she reconsidered. She was impressed by the bonuses Charlie could make if he could improve their profits significantly, and beat out their competitors. And Charlie was intrigued by the challenge of learning something new, and eager to try. The prospect brought him back to life.

Charlie studied the plastics business intensely, and learned everything there was to know about the toy industry. He came back to Jansen with a wealth of exciting, innovative ideas. Jansen increased his offer, and Charlie took the job. Within a few years he had made good on his promises, and so had his employer. They were the leaders in the toy industry, a highly lucrative business, and every home in France with a child in it had a mountain of Jansen toys. Within five years, their entire plastics business had grown to astronomical proportions. They were the leaders in the plastics industry across the board. Eleven years after he was hired, Charlie was one of the most influential businessmen in France. What he had made in publishing seemed paltry by comparison. He was a rich man now, in a respected position. He didn't love it as he had publishing, but it was no longer a question for him of having a job in a field he loved, it was about being able to support his family, and leave them something significant one day, and about keeping his marriage together.

Although he was still handsome, with dark hair and brown eyes, the feelings between him and Isabelle weren't warm, and hadn't been in years.

He had worked for Jerome Jansen for eleven years, and he had earned every penny he'd made there. Jansen was more agreeable to work for than Gilles Vermier, his previous boss and the owner of the publishing company, had been. Jansen was just as resistant to change and new ideas, but he was smart enough to listen to Charlie in most cases, and knew that Charlie had his finger on the pulse of their industry and had infallible instincts. Jansen was just as given to cheap, sometimes sleazy solutions and ideas as the owner had been in publishing. He had wanted to introduce a line of sex toys under another brand name that Charlie had fought him on relentlessly. No one would buy their children's toys if they found out the company was also making sex toys. Children's toys were their biggest moneymaker. Jerome Jansen had listened to Charlie about that, but not about other things.

Jerome hated putting safety warnings on toys, which he was convinced would reduce sales. They were obliged by law to include certain warnings, but Jerome put no more on them than he had to. He thought the warnings were unsightly and put a negative spin on the appeal of the toy. Charlie insisted on adding them even when not imposed by law. He wanted every child who used their toys to be safe. Jansen rarely saw his grandchildren in LA and wasn't fond of children in general. He really didn't care about the well-being and safety of their customers' children. He just wanted their parents' money. Jerome was a businessman, not a family man. Charlie was more interested in averting tragedy, even if there was an ugly sticker on a doll or a toy, or if every pool toy came with a warning. Charlie had a heart and a conscience. Jerome Jansen didn't. Isabelle wasn't much better. She loved the lifestyle Jansen Plastics had given her. She really didn't care what they produced. Her motives were entirely transparent as to why she was still married to Charlie. He had delivered on his promises to her, and had risen to the top again. It was all she cared about, being the envy of her friends, and having unlimited money to spend on whatever she wanted.

A year after Charlie had gone to work for Jerome, and they had repaid Isabelle's father, Charlie had bought Isabelle a château on the Normandy coast, three hours outside Paris. It was in poor condition, and they had remodeled it for a year, to all of Isabelle's specifications. The project

became her obsession. The location was superb, on a small cliff, looking far out to sea, on a rugged shoreline. They turned it into Isabelle's dream of luxury and comfort. He had bought it to thank her for staying married to him through the hard times. She often thought that if she had divorced him a few months sooner, when she wanted to, she would have missed out on the château he'd given her. It had been worth staying married for, but it didn't warm or revive her feelings for him. She had lost respect for and interest in him during his two years of unemployment. She had hated being married to a failure. In her mind her own prestige depended on his success. She had lost all hope of his recovering from it, and making something of himself again. He had proven her wrong, and justified Jerome Jansen's faith in him. She also knew that Charlie didn't love his job, and that dealing with his boss was an agony for him most of the time. He stayed in the job because he didn't dare risk another two years lost in the desert, with a dry spell like the one he'd been through before. He had no choice but to stay in his current job if he wanted Isabelle to remain his wife. He knew she would have left him the instant he quit. The thought never even crossed his mind. At fifty-three, he knew that this was his fate for the rest of his career.

At twenty-nine, his son Olivier was independent now and had a good job in London. Judith, at twenty-three, had only recently finished her studies and had her first job in New York. She often sought his advice. She was a graduate of the prestigious Ecole Hôtelière in Switzerland. And Isabelle had a standard to maintain, to show the world that she was married to a winner, not a loser. She would never have tolerated a humiliation like that again. She was fifty-two, a year younger than Charlie, but their two years of poverty had marked her in deeper ways and instilled a fear in her of losing what she cherished most: her lifestyle, more than the person who provided it. She had something to show for her thirty years of marriage, a splendid fully remodeled château, in glorious condition, full of art, antiques, and objects of great value, and an apartment in Paris, on the ultrafashionable Champ de Mars in the 7th Arrondissement, with a perfect view of the Eiffel Tower which everyone envied. She had all the status symbols she wanted. She liked being the object of envy, not of pity. She had found that soul-

crushing when it happened to her. Her job was being married to Charlie, even if she didn't enjoy his company. They no longer had anything in common, and all semblance of love or desire had left them years before. Their relationship and love for each other had died and vanished along the way. It no longer mattered when, it just had. She spent most of her time with her friends, shopping, and enjoying fancy lunches with them, and spa weeks, all at his expense. Providing that for her was what was expected of him. He fully understood that now, that what he gave her materially was all that mattered to her, not the human being he was. And he was willing to do whatever he had to, to preserve his marriage. He believed that marriage was forever and commitments were to be honored. He found solace in books, as he always had, and in his passion for vintage cars.

He also knew that whatever disagreements he had with Jerome, about his policies or his lack of concern about the safety of the children who used their toys, which was essential to Charlie and not to Jerome, he was as married to Jerome as he was to Isabelle. The two went hand in hand. They owned him. He was trapped, by the salary he made, and the astounding bonuses Jansen paid him every year, as the success of the company continued to skyrocket, thanks to Charlie's vision and gift for business.

Isabelle was like a human calculator. She knew exactly how much he made at all times. She spent it lavishly, and told Charlie that she did it all for him, the exquisite décor, the beauty of their homes, even the chic clothes she wore. She said she did it all to improve Charlie's image, just as Jerome acted as though what he paid Charlie was a philanthropic gesture, when in fact, it was blood money he paid to Charlie to stay in his job. So far it had always worked. Charlie had never refused to do what Jerome expected of him, nor what his wife did. He was a man of his word. The echo of Isabelle threatening to divorce him eleven years before still rang in his ears. He would do what he had to for the rest of his life, and stay in the job at Jansen Plastics. He got one pass in his lifetime, to be a failure and out of work for two years. He wouldn't have dared to risk that again. Isabelle wouldn't have tolerated it.

It was twenty after seven at night when Jerome finally appeared in Charlie's office. He was waiting patiently at his desk, answering emails and texts. There was no hope now of getting to the château in time for the dinner party that night, or even the birthday cake afterwards. Isabelle was used to his having to stay late at work, at Jerome's whim, and didn't care.

They dined formally at dinner at the château during their weekend parties, and there was no way now that he'd even make it there for dessert. They would have to manage without him, which Isabelle did extremely well. Charlie wondered what excuse she'd give, probably just that he was busy and had stayed late for a meeting, which was usually true. He was never in a rush to get home. Sometimes he actually dawdled on purpose on Friday afternoons, so he could arrive at the château late enough to miss the dinner and festivities she organized nearly every weekend for her friends.

There was no joy for him in those evenings, only duty. His life was ruled by Isabelle's ever-increasing expectations of him, and Jerome Jansen's arguments to bring him into line. Jerome enjoyed it. He always had to "win." Isabelle and Jerome both owned Charlie, in different ways, for different reasons, although the financial result was much the same, and benefited both of them, more than it did Charlie. The money Charlie earned just passed through his hands briefly, on its way to pay for Isabelle's follies. In effect, although he never expressed it that way, he was their hostage. Jerome's because he had given Charlie the second career that had saved him, a far more lucrative one than he'd had before, though in a field he hated and didn't care about. And he was Isabelle's hostage because if he didn't maintain the high standard she felt was her due, he knew that she would leave the marriage this time, and their children, even though adults now, would be devastated, or so she claimed. And Charlie loved his children more than anything. He knew they were comfortable with the illusion that their parents had a solid marriage, and he never told them the truth, that it was only as solid as the funds he brought home to support it. One slip, and it would be all over. He and Isabelle stayed together now out

of duty, habit, and tradition, and he believed in all three. He couldn't even remember when he had stopped loving her, or she him, even long before he had left publishing. They had lost the spirit and life of their union somewhere along the way, it probably didn't even matter when. It was what it was now, and Charlie had no illusions about it. He felt like a robot at times, and had lost his zest for life. His life was all about duty. He was always working, ever more successful, and rarely saw his old friends anymore, or pursued the pastimes he used to enjoy. He had had more fun when he was younger. He was rich now, but not happy.

He liked the château, but it didn't mean to him what it did to Isabelle. She needed it for her status. He liked it on winter days when the weather was bad and the sky gray, and he could go on long solitary walks. He felt at home there then. On the weekends of her house parties, it felt to him like someone else's house and he had landed there by mistake. He felt like an unwelcome stranger. The château belonged to Isabelle, since he gave it to her, to thank her after two frightening years, for staying married to him. What she did there, and who she entertained, was entirely up to her. She never consulted him about it, nor about anything. She was an independent woman who had found her voice and her legs in middle age, particularly once her children had grown up and left home. At fifty-two, she was in full control of everything that mattered to her. He was never quite sure he mattered to her, but he knew enough not to ask difficult questions. She never seemed to miss her children, although Charlie had missed them acutely once they moved away, and he still did.

Charlie and Isabelle rolled along like two parallel lines. They intersected occasionally, but never at a deep level. It was the road map of his life now, and what he knew his future would look like, weekends at the château, weekdays in their city apartment. She took trips with her women friends, and he traveled for business. It was his only opportunity for occasional infidelities. They didn't happen often, and had never been meaningful. He had never fallen in love with anyone else. He had become accustomed to a loveless existence. He couldn't even remember what love felt like, or having a job that truly mattered to him. He did what was expected, what he

had committed to do. He was an honorable man who did what he promised, and had for his entire life, except for his one daring moment when he had walked out on his publishing job and had been punished severely for it. He knew better now, although working for Jerome Jansen was never a pleasure, no matter how much money he made. He had sold his soul to keep Isabelle happy, and he, Jerome, and Isabelle all knew it. Even his father-in-law had been pleased and approved when he took the job in plastics. He had said it was what good men did to honor their marriage. Charlie no longer had young children to protect, but he had an institution to uphold, and appearances he respected.

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When Jerome walked into Charlie's office on Friday night, he looked disgruntled. Charlie was fairly certain it was about a new set of stickers Charlie had ordered to have printed and applied to an entire line of toys, with safety warnings for the parents.

"They look like shit. What's the point of telling them their kids can break their necks, or an arm or a leg? Why not just put a sticker on the box, telling them 'Don't Buy This Toy.'" He was angry at Charlie, who looked unfazed by the comment. He'd heard it all before. It was a recurring argument between them.

"That's always an option. You don't want someone getting hurt, Jerome. Think of the lawsuits that would result." Charlie knew a lawsuit would concern him, not the safety of a child. They were different-sized trampolines, which kids of all ages loved, but they had considerable risks if not properly supervised.

"They'll sue us anyway, even with your damn stickers. I want you to cancel the stickers."

"That wouldn't be wise, Jerry. And you know it." Charlie remained outwardly calm, respectful, and polite, as always.

"Then make them smaller and put them underneath the product where parents won't see them."

“That defeats the purpose. I don’t want to wait to do it until after someone gets hurt, and if you think about it, neither do you. Imagine some little girl paralyzed because her older brother let her use his trampoline.” The thought horrified Charlie but not Jerome.

“We’re not babysitters, we’re toy manufacturers. It’s the parents’ job to watch out for their kids, not ours,” he said cavalierly.

“It’s our job to wake the parents up and remind them of that, and that some toys could be dangerous,” Charlie insisted.

“I’m giving you till Monday to recall the product and get your damn sticker off before we put it on the market.” Threats usually worked for Jerry, with everyone but Charlie, who knew how to reason with him. Charlie usually won the argument, but Jerry needed to drag him in the dirt first. And, when he absolutely had to, Charlie gave in. Not this time. The issue was too important. They were within government guidelines, but Charlie wanted to go farther than that with this particular product. It was too potentially dangerous not to. The stakes were just too high for them not to go the extra mile with a more explicit warning.

“I’m not recalling the stickers, Jerry,” Charlie said firmly.

“You’ll do what I goddamn tell you to. Don’t forget who owns this place. My name is on the front of the building, not yours. I call the shots here!” Jerry shouted at him, which made younger employees cringe. Charlie knew him better than that and how to handle him.

“You pay me to give you sound marketing and merchandising advice. Don’t make it a waste of money. You need to listen to good sense here,” Charlie said seriously.

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Jerry shouted at him, stormed out, and slammed the door to Charlie’s office. Charlie closed his eyes for a minute, trying to keep his composure. For the first time in eleven years, he was tempted to do what he’d done before, and march straight into the owner’s office, quit, and walk out. But then what would he do? He knew what that looked like now. At fifty-three, there would be no jobs comparable to this one at the very top of the heap, even more so now than when he was forty. Thirteen years later, if he quit in a rage, it might be his last job forever, and

he wasn't ready to face that. He knew what Isabelle's reaction would be. She would call her father's attorney about a divorce the next morning. Charlie had money saved, but there was never enough to support her lifestyle for long. He needed to keep working for many years to come. How much was enough? He had never been able to determine that number. It was always more than he thought, because of some new luxury she couldn't live without.

He got up to leave then. It was eight o'clock. He had a three-hour drive ahead of him, or longer in weekend traffic. He thought about stopping to get something to eat on the road, but after Jerry's shouting at him at the top of his lungs, he wasn't hungry. He could eat the leftovers from the dinner party when he got to the château. And he had had a big business lunch. He could have used a drink too, but not before driving on the long, winding last half of the road to the château. He would have liked to storm into Jerry's office and quit before he left, but he knew better. He was fully an adult. He didn't have the right to quit just because it would feel good to do it in the moment. The severity of the consequences just wasn't worth it, no matter how it ate at his soul to deal with Jerry.

Charlie was tired when he got in his car in the parking garage, underneath the Jansen Plastics offices, in an industrial part of Paris, in the 11th Arrondissement. His parking space was marked CEO. He drove a small compact car, instead of something fancier. It was better suited to getting around crowded Paris streets than bigger cars were. Isabelle drove a Mercedes. He didn't like showy, expensive cars, although he dreamed of having an Aston Martin one day, maybe when he retired, whenever that would be. He thought of buying one to restore it but didn't have time.

He followed the traffic out of the city. It was heavy at that hour. People were still leaving work, an hour after most offices closed. He got a text from Isabelle once he was on the road, telling him to come in the morning if he was too tired to drive that night, since he would miss the dinner party anyway. He didn't bother to answer. She'd see him when he arrived. He was lost in his own thoughts, thinking about Jerry and the scene in his office, and Jerry's orders to get the warning stickers off the trampolines. He was

tired of the battles with Jerry, tired of all of it. Maybe he'd feel better on Monday, but for now he felt like a schoolboy who had been scolded by his father or the headmaster. His father had been stern with him when he was a boy, and unfair at times, and as an only child, all his father's hopes and expectations had rested on him, and he had tried to live up to them. Now Isabelle's did, and his children's, and Jerry's. They all expected a lot of him. It was a heavy mantle to wear at times.

Charlie was still a handsome man, even in his fifties. He had dark hair with only a little gray at the temples, and warm brown eyes. There was an air of kindness to him, which enhanced his good looks. He was tall, athletic, and in good shape, although his wife no longer noticed or cared what he looked like.

It was an easy trip until halfway there, and then he had to leave the highway at Étretat and took the smaller local roads, which followed the coast and wound around hairpin turns, taking him dangerously close to the edge of the enormous cliffs along the coast. Some were a hundred feet high, others smaller. There were always spots along the road with heaps of flowers and makeshift crosses where unwary drivers had gone over the edge of the cliff and fallen to their deaths on the rocks below. Seeing the flowers of homemade memorials was always a good reminder.

The ocean shimmered in the moonlight on a warm June night, and he relaxed finally, basking in the beauty of the scene and the drive. The château was grander than he liked, although it suited Isabelle perfectly. What he liked best was the road there, and the peace he felt while driving. He loved driving there alone, and usually did. It calmed him after a long day. Isabelle drove herself earlier, in the afternoon. She left after lunch and was there by the late afternoon. He drove at night and loved it.

He could feel his whole body relax, as he took the familiar hairpin turns. It was one of the few places he could challenge his driving skill as the car hugged the road, and for an instant he felt like a racecar driver. It had been his dream as a child to be one. He had always loved cars and still did, and knew a lot about them. He loved going to car shows.

He was smiling on the deserted road. There were no houses nearby and long distances of nothing but the dark road, the cliffs, which got smaller, and the sea crashing on the rocks below them. With the window open, he could hear it. There were miles between houses on that part of the trip, which made it even more peaceful.

As he took another turn, going a little faster than usual, his eyelids fluttered closed, and he could feel the car start to slide and dreamed that he was on a racetrack. He was still smiling as the car slid over the edge of the road, with nothing to stop it, and plunged thirty feet down the rock face of the cliff. He woke up sharply, and realized what was happening. He had gone right over the edge of the road, down the cliff, and the car was pointing toward the rocks below. There was nothing he could do to stop it. The car banged and scraped along the cliff on the way down, jarring him sharply. It took only seconds, but felt like years, as the car continued its trajectory down, and in the light of the full moon, he could see clearly the rocks and the spray from the ocean below him. He felt his whole body go limp. There was nothing he could fight or stop or change. He hit his head and barely noticed. A jutting rock hit the driver's door hinges hard and the door tore open. His seatbelt kept him from falling out. He knew that he was facing his certain death, and felt an enormous wave of peace wash over him. He didn't even mind dying. There was nothing left to do. He knew his life was over, as the car hit the rocks and flipped into the sea. He had never expected dying would be this easy. He wasn't afraid. He was relieved. It was over.