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DELL PUBLISHING

DANIELLE STEEL

ACCIDENT

A DELL BOOK

*To Popeye,  
who is always there  
when it matters,  
for the big things,  
and little ones.  
Every hour,  
every moment  
of every day,  
I will always love you.  
With all my heart  
and love,*

*d.s.*

## CHAPTER 1

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It was one of those perfect, deliciously warm Saturday afternoons in April, when the air on your cheek feels like silk, and you want to stay outdoors forever. It had been a long, sunny day, and driving across the Golden Gate Bridge at five o'clock, into Marin, it took Page's breath away as she looked across the water.

She glanced over at her son, looking like a small blond replica of her, beside her, except that his hair was sticking up straight where his baseball cap had been, and there was dirt all over his face. Andrew Patterson Clarke had turned seven the previous Tuesday. And just sitting there, relaxing after the game, one could feel the strength of the bond between them. Page Clarke was a good mother, a good wife, the kind of friend anyone would be grateful for. She cared, she loved, she worked hard at whatever she did, she was there for the people who meant something to her, she was artistic in ways that always amazed her friends, she was unconsciously beautiful, and fun to be with.

"You were great this afternoon." She smiled over at him, one hand briefly leaving the wheel to ruffle the already tousled hair. Andy had the same thick, wheat-colored blond hair that she did, the same big blue eyes, and creamy skin, only his was well dusted with freckles. "I couldn't believe that ball you caught in the outfield. Looked like a home run to me." She always went to his games with him, and his school plays, and on field trips with his class and his friends. She did it because she loved it, and she loved him. It was obvious when he looked at her that he knew it.

"It looked like a homer to me too." He grinned, showing gums where both of his front teeth had been until recently. "I thought Benjie would get to home base for sure." He chortled mischievously as they reached the Marin County side of the bridge. "... but he didn't!"

Page laughed along with him. It had been a nice afternoon. She wished that Brad could have been there, but he played golf with his business associates every Saturday afternoon. It was a chance to relax and catch up with what they were all doing. It was rare for him to spend Saturday afternoons alone with her anymore. And when he did, there was always something else they had to do. Like Andy's games, or one of Allyson's swim meets, which always seemed to be held in the most godforsaken places. Either that, or their dog cut her paw, the roof leaked, the plumbing fell apart, or some other minor emergency had to be taken care of. There were no lazy Saturdays anymore, there hadn't been in years. She was used to it, and she and Brad stole whatever moments they could, at night when the kids were asleep, between his business trips, or on their rare weekends away together. Finding time for romance in busy lives was quite a feat, but somehow they managed to do it. She was still crazy about him, after sixteen years of marriage and two kids. She had everything she

wanted, a husband she adored, and who loved her, a secure life, and two wonderful children. Their house in Ross wasn't elaborate, but it was pretty and comfortable, it was in a nice area, and with her constant puttering and knack for improving things, Page had made it really lovely. Her years as an art student and an apprentice set designer in New York hadn't served her much, but she had used her talents in recent years to paint beautiful murals for herself and friends. She had done a spectacular one at Ross Grammar School. She had turned their home into a place of real beauty. Her paintings and murals and artistic touch had turned an ordinary little ranch house into a home that everyone admired and envied. It was all Page's doing, and all who saw it knew that.

She had painted a baseball game in full swing on one wall of Andy's room as his Christmas present the previous year, and he really loved it. For Allyson, she had done a Paris street scene the year she'd been in love with all things French, and later a string of ballerinas inspired by Degas, and more recently she had turned Allyson's room into a swimming pool with her magic touch. She had even painted the furniture in trompe l'oeil to match it. The reward was that Allyson and her friends thought the room was "really cool," and Page was "wow ...really rad ...she's okay," which were high marks from the fifteen-year-old set.

Allyson was a sophomore in high school. Looking at them, Page was always sorry she hadn't had more children. She had always wanted more, but Brad had been adamant about "one or two," with the emphasis on one. He had been crazy about his little girl, and didn't see why they needed any more children. It had taken seven years to convince him to have another. That was when they moved out of the city, and into the house in Ross, when Andy was born, their little miracle baby, she called him. He was born two and a half months premature, after Page fell off a ladder doing a Winnie-the-Pooh mural in his bedroom. She had been rushed to the hospital with a broken leg, and she was already in labor. He had been in an incubator for two months, but in the end, he was absolutely perfect. She smiled, remembering it sometimes, how tiny he had been, how terrified they had been that they might lose him. She couldn't imagine surviving it, although she knew she would have ... for Allyson, and Brad, but her life would never have been the same without him.

"Feel like an ice cream?" she asked as they took the Sir Francis Drake turn-off.

"Sure." Andy grinned again, and then laughed as she looked at him. It was impossible not to laugh at that big gummy grin.

"When are you going to get some teeth, Andrew Clarke? Maybe we ought to buy you some false ones."

"Naww ..." He smiled, and then chuckled.

It was fun being alone with him, usually she had a earful of kids driving home from the game, but today one of the other mothers had done the honors, and she had gone to the game anyway, because she'd promised. Allyson was spending the afternoon with her friends, Brad was playing golf, and Page was caught up with all her projects. She was planning another mural for the school, and she had promised to take a look at a friend's living room and see what she'd recommend, but there had been nothing really pressing.

Andy had a double scoop of Rocky Road in a sugar cone, with chocolate jimmies, and she had a single scoop of coffee-flavored frozen yogurt, the nonfat kind that fooled you into thinking you were doing something really sinful. They sat outside together for a while, as Andy's ice cream got all over his face and dripped on his uniform, which Page said didn't matter. Everything had to be washed anyway, so what harm was there in a little ice cream. They watched people come and go, and enjoyed the warmth of the late afternoon sun. It was a gorgeous day, and Page talked about going on a picnic on Sunday.

"That would be neat." Andy looked pleased as the Rocky Road finally engulfed the tip of his nose, extending all the way to his chin, as Page felt overwhelmed with love for him as she watched him.

"You're cute ...you know that? I know I'm not supposed to say stuff like that, but I think you're terrific, Andrew Clarke ...and a great baseball player to boot ...how did I ever get so lucky?"

He grinned again, even more broadly, and the ice cream was absolutely everywhere, even on her nose, as she kissed him.

"You're a great guy."

"You're okay, too ..." He disappeared into his ice cream again, and then looked up at her with a question. "Mom ...?"

"Yeah?" Her yogurt was almost gone, but his Rocky Road looked as though it was going to go on melting and dribbling and oozing forever. Ice cream had a way of growing in the hands of small children.

"Do you think we'll ever have another baby?"

Page looked surprised by the question. It wasn't the kind of thing boys usually asked. Allyson had asked her that several times. But now, at thirty-nine, she didn't think so. It wasn't that she felt too old, or was, given the ages people had babies these days, but she knew she'd never talk Brad into another child. He always insisted that all of that was behind him.

"I don't think so, sweetheart. Why?" Was he worried or just curious? She couldn't help but wonder.

"Tommy Silverberg's mom had twins last week. I saw them when I went to his house. They're pretty cute. They're identical," he explained, looking impressed. "They weighed seven pounds each, that's more than I weighed."

"It sure is." He had weighed barely three, thanks to his early appearance. "I'll bet they are cute. But I don't think we'll be having twins ...or even one ..." Oddly enough, she felt sad as she said it. She had always agreed with Brad, out of loyalty to him, that two children was a perfect family for them, but there were still times when, out of the blue, she found herself longing for another baby. "Maybe you should talk to Dad about it." She teased.

"About twins?" He looked intrigued.

"About another baby."

"It would be fun ...kind of ...they look like a lot of trouble though. Everything at

Tommy's was a mess, they had all this stuff everywhere ...you know, like beds and baskets ...and swings, and there were two of everything ... his grandmother was there helping, she cooked dinner, and she burned it. His dad did a lot of yelling.”

“Doesn't sound like much fun to me.” Page smiled, imagining the scene of total chaos surrounding the arrival of twins in a home where they were already poorly organized and had two other children. “But the beginning can be like that, till you get the hang of it.”

“Was everything a mess like that when I was born?” He finally finished the ice cream and wiped his mouth on his sleeve and his hands on the pants of his baseball uniform as Page laughed while she watched him.

“No, but you sure are a mess now, kiddo. Maybe we'd better get you home and get all that stuff off you.”

They climbed back into her station wagon, and headed home, chatting about other things, but his questions about the baby seemed to stay with her. For a moment, there was an old familiar pang of longing. Maybe it was just the warm, sunny day, or the fact that it was spring, but she suddenly wished that there would be other babies ... romantic trips ...more time with Brad ...lazy afternoons in bed, with nowhere to go, and nothing to do except make love to him. As much as she loved her life, there were times when she wished she could turn the clock back. Nowadays, her life was so full of car pools, and helping with homework, and PTA, she and Brad only seemed to catch each other on the fly, or at the end of an exhausting day. And in spite of all that, there was still love and desire ...but never enough time to indulge it. It was time that they never had enough of.

They pulled into their driveway a few minutes later, and Page noticed Brad's car as Andy gathered up his things. She looked over at him proudly. “I had a good time today,” she said, still warm in the afternoon sun, and her heart full of all she felt for him. It had been one of those special days when you realize just how lucky you are, and are grateful for every precious moment.

“So did I ...thanks for coming, Mom.” He knew she didn't have to, and he was glad she came anyway. She was good to him, and he knew it. But he was a good boy, and he deserved it.

“Anytime, Mr. Clarke. Now go tell Dad about that famous catch. You made history out there today!” He laughed and ran into the house, as she picked up Allyson's bicycle sprawled across the walkway. Her roller blades were leaning up against the garage, and her tennis racket lay on a chair just outside the kitchen door with a can of balls she had “borrowed” from her father. She had obviously had a busy day, and as soon as Page walked into the house, she saw her on the kitchen phone, still wearing her tennis clothes, her long blond hair in a French braid, her back turned to her mother. She was concluding some plan, and then hung up and turned to face her. She was a beautiful girl, and it still startled Page sometimes when she saw her. She was so striking looking, and she seemed so mature. She had a woman's body, and a young girl's mind, and she was always in motion, in action, in mid-plan. She always had something to say, tell, ask, do, somewhere she had to be, right now, two hours ago, this minute ...she really *had* to! She had that look on her face now, as Page rapidly shifted

gears from the easy roll of being with Andy. Allyson was more intense, more like Brad, always on the move, on the go, thinking ahead to what she wanted to do next, where she had to be, and what was important to her. She was more intense than Page, more focused, not as kind, or as gentle as Andy would be one day. But she was a bright girl with a fine mind and lots of good ideas and good intentions. Every now and then her common sense went astray, and occasionally she and Page would get into a roaring fight over some typically teenage mistake she'd made, but eventually Allyson usually made sense, and calmed down enough to listen to her parents.

At fifteen, none of her antics were very surprising. She was trying her wings, testing her limits, trying to figure out who she was going to be, not Page, or Brad, but herself, someone entirely different. In spite of her similarities to them, she wanted to be her own woman. Unlike Andy, who wanted to be just like his dad, and was actually so much like Page. In Allyson's eyes, he was just a baby. She had been eight when he was born, and she thought he was the cutest thing she'd ever seen. She had never seen anything as tiny. Like her parents, she was scared that he would die just after he was born, but there was no one prouder than Allyson when he finally came home. She carried him all around the house, from room to room, and whenever Page couldn't find him, she knew she'd find him in Allyson's bed, snuggled up to her, like a live doll. Allyson had been head over heels in love with him for years. And even now, she secretly indulged her little brother, buying him little treats and baseball cards, and occasionally she even went to his baseball games, although she hated baseball. But most of the time she was even willing to admit that she loved him.

"How'd you do today, runt?" She always teased him about how little he had been when he was born, but he was actually tall for his age now, and bigger than many of his classmates.

"Okay," he said modestly.

"He was the star of the game," Page explained. Andy blushed and walked away, to find his father, as Page called out a vague hello in the direction of their bedroom. She wanted to get dinner started before she went in to see her husband. "How was your day?" she asked her oldest child as she opened the refrigerator. They had no plans to go out that night, and it was so warm, she was thinking about making a picnic dinner or having Brad do a barbecue for them in the garden. "Who'd you play tennis with?"

"Chloe, and some other kids. There were some kids from Branson and Marin Academy at the club today. We played doubles for a while, and then I played Chloe. After that, we went swimming." She sounded unimpressed. She led a golden California life. To her it was no miracle, she always had, she'd been born there. For Brad from the Midwest, and Page from New York, the weather and the opportunities still seemed magical, but not to these children. To them it was a way of life, and sometimes Page envied them their easy beginnings. But she was also glad for them, this was exactly the life she wanted for her children. Easy, safe, healthy, comfortable, secure, protected from anything that could sadden or harm them. She had done everything she could to guarantee all of that for them, and she enjoyed watching them thrive and flourish.

"Sounds like a pretty good day. Do you have any plans for tonight?" If she didn't, or

if Chloe came over to hang out with her, maybe she and Brad would go to a movie and Allyson could babysit. If not, it was no big thing if they had to stay home. She and Brad had made no special plans for that evening. It would have been nice to sit outdoors in the warm night air, talk and relax, and have an early evening. "What are you up to?"

Allyson turned to her nervously, with that look that said, you're about to ruin my whole life if you don't let me do what I've been planning to do all day. "Chloe's dad said he'd take us to dinner and a movie."

"Okay. It's no big deal. I was just asking." Allyson's face immediately relaxed, and Page smiled as she watched her. They were so predictable sometimes, and growing up still looked as though it was so painful. Even in a normal, happy home, every moment, every plan was fraught with anguish. It clearly wasn't easy.

"What movie?" Page put some meat in the microwave to defrost it. She was going to make something simple.

"She didn't say. There are about three movies I want to see, and I still haven't seen *Woodstock*, they're playing it at the Festival. Her dad's taking us to dinner at Luigi's."

"Sounds like fun. It's nice of him to do that." Page pulled out some potato chips, and started to make the salad, as she glanced over her shoulder at her daughter. She was so beautiful, sitting perched on a stool at the kitchen counter. She looked like a model. She had huge brown eyes, like Brad's, her mother's golden hair, and a complexion that turned the color of honey the moment she saw the sun. She had long, shapely legs and a tiny waist. It was no wonder people stopped to stare at her, especially men lately. Page said to Brad sometimes that she wished she could put a sign on her that said she was only fifteen. Even thirty-year-old men turned to look at her in the street. She looked easily eighteen or twenty. "It's awfully nice of Mr. Thorensen to spend his Saturday night taking you girls out."

"He has nothing else to do," Allyson said, sounding fifteen, and Page laughed. Teenagers certainly brought one back to earth and reminded one of one's failures and misfortunes.

"How do you know?" His wife had left him the year before and right after the divorce, she had taken a job with a theatrical agent in England. She'd offered to take their three children with her, and put them in English boarding schools. She was American herself, but she thought the English school system was a lot better than anything here, but Trygve Thorensen had no intention of giving them up, and kept them with him. Sadly, after twenty years of suburban life, she was so sick and tired of being chauffeur, maid, and tutor to her children that she'd been willing to give it all up. Everything. Trygve, the kids, her whole life in Ross. She hated all of it. As far as Dana Thorensen was concerned, now it was her turn. She'd tried to tell him all along, but Trygve just didn't hear her. He wanted it to work so badly that he refused to see her anger and desperation.

They'd all been pretty badly shaken up when she left, and Page was shocked at her leaving her kids, but apparently it had all been too much for her for a long time. And everyone in Ross had always been impressed by how well Trygve managed his children, and how much he did with them. He was a free-lance political writer, and

worked out of his home. It was a perfect setup for him, and unlike his wife, he never seemed to tire of his parental responsibilities and obligations. He had taken them on with the good humor and warmth he was so well known for. It wasn't easy, he admitted from time to time, but he was managing fine, and his kids seemed happier than they had in years. He seemed to find time for his work while the kids were in school, and late at night after they went to bed. And in the hours that they were around, he seemed to do everything with them. He was a familiar figure to all their friends, and well liked by most of them. It didn't surprise Page at all that he had offered to take a bunch of them to the movies and dinner at Luigi's.

His two boys were college age now, and Chloe and Allyson were the same age. Chloe had just turned fifteen at Christmas, and she was as pretty as Allyson, although very different. She was small, with her mother's dark hair, and her father's big blue Nordic eyes and fair skin. Both of Trygve's parents were Norwegian, and he had lived in Norway until he was twelve. But he was as American as apple pie now, although his friends teased him and called him the Viking.

He was an attractive man, and the divorcees of Ross had been greatly encouraged by his divorce, and somewhat disappointed since then. Between his work and his kids, he seemed to have no time at all in his life for women. Page suspected that it wasn't so much a lack of time, as a lack of confidence or interest.

It was no secret that he had been deeply in love with his wife, and everyone also knew that in her desperation, she had been cheating on him for the last couple of years before she left him. She'd been something of a lost soul, and married life and monogamy were more than she could cope with. Trygve had done all he could, counseling, and even two trial separations. But he wanted so much more than she had to give. He wanted a real wife, half a dozen kids, a simple life, he wanted to spend their vacations going camping. She wanted New York, Paris, Hollywood, or London.

Dana Thorensen had been everything Trygve wasn't. They had met in Hollywood while they were scarcely more than kids. He had been trying his hand briefly at writing scripts, fresh out of school, and she had been a budding actress. She loved what she did, and hated it when he asked her to move to San Francisco. But she also loved him enough to try it. She tried to commute for a while, tried some repertory work with ACT in San Francisco. But none of it worked out for her, and she missed her friends, and the excitement of L.A. and Hollywood, and even working as an extra. She got pregnant unexpectedly, and Trygve surprised her by insisting on marrying her, and after that everything went downhill pretty quickly. She wound up playing a part she had never wanted. And when Bjorn, their second child, was born with Down syndrome, it was too much for her, and somehow she seemed to blame Trygve. She knew she didn't want more kids, she wasn't even sure she wanted to be married. And then Chloe came, and blew everything, as far as Dana was concerned. From then on, in her eyes, her life became a nightmare. Trygve tried to do all he could, and his political articles in *The New York Times*, and assorted magazines and foreign journals, were doing well by then. He managed to support all of them. But all Dana wanted was out. For more than half their marriage, she could barely be civil to him. All she really wanted was her freedom. And all Trygve wanted was to make it work. And he irritated Dana even more by being the perfect father. The impossible dream, married to the

wrong woman.

He was patient, kind, always happy to include other children in their plans. He took groups of children camping and fishing with him, and was a major force in organizing the Special Olympics, at which Bjorn excelled, much to everyone's delight, except Dana's. She couldn't relate to any of them, even when she tried. And Bjorn was, in her eyes, the ultimate shame and disappointment. In the end, she was a woman whom no one liked, an angry soul, raging at a fate that others thought wasn't so bad. Her children were wonderful, even Bjorn with his special sweetness. And Trygve was a husband most women envied. But it came as no surprise when Dana began having frequent affairs. She seemed not to care who knew what she did, especially Trygve. In truth, she really wanted him to end it.

When she left him finally, everyone was relieved, except Trygve, who had allowed himself to drift slowly downstream for years, trying to pretend that it wasn't really as bad as it seemed. He told himself lies that only he believed, "...she'll get used to it ... it was difficult for her to give up her career ...leaving Hollywood had been so hard on her ...marriage was harder for her than most, because she was so creative ...and of course, Bjorn had been a terrible shock to her...." He had made every possible excuse for her for twenty years, and couldn't believe it when she finally left him. Much to his surprise it was like the end of a constant pain. And even more surprising to him, he had absolutely no desire to try again and risk the same pain with someone else. He realized now just how bad it had been. He couldn't imagine marrying anyone again, or even a serious relationship. At first, he wouldn't even consider dating. All the women he knew in town seemed like vultures, waiting for fresh prey, and he had no intention of becoming their next victim. He was actually very happy alone, with his children, for the moment.

"He hasn't had a girlfriend, not a real one, since Chloe's mom left, and that was over a year ago. He just spends all his time with the kids, or writing about politics, but he does that at night. Chloe says he's writing a book now. But he likes going out with us, Mom. He says so."

"Lucky for all of you. But one of these days he might find someone a little more ... ah ...shall we say, mature, to spend his time with?" She smiled, as Allyson shrugged. She couldn't imagine him wanting to do anything else. For most of her life, Trygve Thorensen had made himself totally available to his children. It never occurred to her that he did it, not only because he liked them, and wanted to be with them, but also because he was avoiding the emptiness of a bad marriage.

"Besides, he likes to be with Bjorn. Mr. Thorensen is teaching him to drive."

"He's a decent guy." Page finished washing the lettuce and found a bowl to put it in, as Allyson helped herself to the potato chips. "How is Bjorn, by the way?" She hadn't seen him in a long time. He was less severely afflicted with the disease than some, but still he had marked limitations.

"He's great. He plays baseball every Saturday, and now he's gone nuts over bowling." It was amazing to think about it. How did one even begin to cope with a situation like that? In a way, she could understand Dana Thorensen being overwhelmed by it, but not her subsequent behavior. Although they weren't close

friends, she had known Trygve Thorensen for years, and she liked him. He didn't deserve all the troubles he'd had. No one did. And from what she could see, he was a terrific father.

“Are you spending the night at the Thorensens'?” Page asked, as she put the last of the lettuce leaves in a bowl, and wiped her hands. She hadn't seen Brad since she got home, and she wanted to go in and say hello, and check on Andy.

“No.” Allyson shook her head as she stood up, left the potato chips on the counter, and grabbed an apple. Her body had long, lean lines, and she tossed her long blond braid over her shoulder. “They said they'd drop me off after the movies. Chloe has a track meet early tomorrow morning.”

“On Sunday?” Page looked surprised as they left the kitchen.

“Yeah ... I don't know ...maybe it's practice ...something.”

“What time are you going out?”

“I said I'd meet her at seven.” There was a long pause while the huge brown eyes locked into her mother's. There was something there that Page couldn't quite figure out, and then it was gone again, just as quickly. Some secret, some thought, some private moment she didn't want to share with her mother. “Can I borrow your black sweater, Mom?”

“The cashmere one with the beads?” Brad had given it to her for Christmas. It was too hot, too dressy, and much too expensive for a fifteen-year-old girl. Page was not even amused at the suggestion, as Allyson nodded at the description.

“Hardly. That's not exactly appropriate for Lu-igi's, and the Festival, wouldn't you say?”

“Yeah ...okay ...how about the pink one?”

“Better.”

“Can I?”

“Okay ...okay ...” She sighed and shook her head with a rueful grin, as they went their separate ways. Allyson to her room, and Page to find her husband. Sometimes she felt as though there were obstacles and hurdles standing between them. It was as though she and Brad had to finish a marathon every day before they could finally share a private moment ...take me ...drop me ...pick me ...give me ...can I ...would you ...where is my ...where ...how ...when ...and then, as she turned the corner to their bedroom, she saw him. She still found him breathtaking at times. Brad Clarke was the definition of tall, dark, and handsome. He stood six feet four inches tall, had short dark hair, big brown eyes, and powerful shoulders. He had narrow hips, long legs, and a smile that still made her legs turn to water. He had been leaning over a suitcase on the bed, and he stood up with a long slow smile, just for her, as she came through the doorway.

“How was the game?” He smiled ruefully. He never got to Andy's games anymore, he was always too busy. Sometimes, with their busy schedules, and his, he felt as though he never saw them.

“It was great. Your son was a hero.” She grinned as she stood on tiptoe to kiss him.

“So he says.” His hand went easily to the small of her back, as he pulled her closer. “I missed you.”

“Me too ...” She nestled close to him for a minute before walking across the room to collapse in a comfortable chair, while he went back to his packing. Usually he packed on Sunday afternoons, and left on business trips on Sunday nights, when he had to, which was often. But sometimes, when he had enough time, he packed on Saturdays, so they'd have more time together on Sundays. “You feel like doing a barbecue tonight? It's so pretty out, and I just defrosted some steaks. It's just the two of us, and Andy. Allyson's going out with Chloe.”

“I'd love to,” he looked chagrined as he walked toward her, “but I couldn't get a seat on the flight to Cleveland tomorrow night. I have to catch a nine o'clock tonight. I should probably leave around seven.” She looked crestfallen as he told her his plans. She'd been looking forward to seeing him all afternoon, and spending a quiet evening, maybe sitting in the moonlight in the garden. “Baby, I'm really sorry.”

“Yeah ... me too ...” She looked genuinely depressed at the news. “I've been thinking about you all day.” She smiled at him as he sat on the arm of her chair. She was trying to be a good sport, and she should have been used to his trips by then, but in some ways she wasn't. She always missed him.

“I guess Cleveland on a Sunday won't exactly be a treat for you.” She felt sorry for him. The ad agency where he worked expected so much from him. But he was their star attraction, the man who roped them in like dazed steer. There were legends about him in the business, about being able to bring in new clients like little lambs, and even more remarkable, keep them.

“As long as I'm stuck there, I thought I'd play golf with the president of the company I'm seeing. I called him this afternoon, and we're meeting at his club tomorrow morning. At least it won't be a total waste of time.” He kissed her on the lips then, and she felt the old familiar thrill race through her. “I'd rather be here with you and the kids,” he whispered as her arms went around his neck.

“Forget the kids ...” she said hoarsely, and he laughed.

“I like that idea ...save it till Tuesday night ...I'll be back by bedtime.”

“I'll remind you of that on Tuesday,” Page whispered as they kissed again, and Andy exploded into their bedroom.

“Allie left the potato chips out and Lizzie's eating them! She's gonna be sick all over the kitchen!” Lizzie was their golden Lab, and she had a notoriously indiscriminating appetite and equally famous delicate stomach. “Come on, Mom! She's gonna get sick if you let her eat them!”

“Okay ...I'm coming ...” Page smiled ruefully at Brad, and he gently patted her behind as she followed Andy back to the kitchen. As advertised, there was a carpet of potato chip crumbs all over the kitchen, and Lizzie was happily devouring the last of them when they got there. “You're a pig, Lizzie,” Page said tiredly, as she cleaned up the last of the mess, and wished Brad weren't going to Cleveland. She had really wanted to spend some time with him. Their life seemed to belong to everyone but them, and just today she had really longed for some quiet time with her husband. She

turned to look at Andrew then, as Lizzie tried to lick the last of the potato chips she was holding. “Want a hot date with your old Mom? Dad has to go to Cleveland tonight. We could go out for pizza.” They could also eat pizza at home, or the steaks she had defrosted for all of them, but suddenly she didn't feel like being at home without Brad. And it might be more fun to just go out with Andy. “What do you say?”

“I'd love to!” He looked delighted as he and Lizzie left the kitchen again, and Page put the salad and the steaks back in the fridge. Then she went back to the bedroom to see her husband. It was six-thirty by then, he had finished packing, and he was almost dressed to leave for the airport. He was traveling in a dark blue double-breasted blazer and beige slacks, the collar of his blue shirt was open, and he looked young and handsome. It made her feel suddenly tired and old to look at him. He was out in the world, making things happen, meeting clients, doing business, spending time with grown-ups, and she was at home, ironing his shirts and chasing children. She tried to put it into words as she washed her face and combed her hair, and he laughed at what she was saying.

“Yeah ...sure ...you don't do a thing ...you just run a house better than anyone in the world ...take great care of our kids and everyone else's ...and in your 'spare' time you do murals for the school and all your friends, advise my clients on how to redecorate their offices, and our friends on how to redo their homes, and then here and there you do a little painting. Damn shame you never do anything, Page.” He was teasing her, but all that he said was true and she knew it. It just seemed so insignificant sometimes, as though she didn't *really* do anything. Maybe it was because she just did whatever she did for friends, or as favors. She hadn't been paid for her artwork in years, not since her days right after art school when she worked as an apprentice on Broadway. She had loved that. It seemed light years ago now, painting scenery, designing sets, and on one production off off-Broadway, they had even consulted her about the costumes. And now all she did was dress her children for Halloween, or at least that was what it felt like.

“Believe me,” Brad went on, as he put his suitcase in the hall, and turned to hold her again, “I'd rather do what you do than be spending my Saturday night on a plane to Cleveland.”

“I'm sorry.” Her life was a lot easier than his, and she knew it. Thanks to him. He worked hard to support them, and he did well. Her parents had a little bit of money, but his had had nothing till the day they died. And everything Brad had done, he had done himself, the hard way. He had crawled his way up, worked hard, and become successful. And one day, he would probably run the ad agency where he worked. If not, he'd run another one. He was much in demand, greatly admired, and the agency was anxious to keep him happy. Like tonight, he'd be flying first class, and staying at the Tower City Plaza in Cleveland. They didn't want to take any chances on his getting fed up, or burnt out, or a better offer.

“I'll be back Tuesday night ...I'll call you later.” He walked toward the children's rooms, kissed Allyson, who was looking particularly grown up in her mother's pink cashmere sweater and a little bit of makeup. The sweater had a round neck and short sleeves, and she was wearing it with a short white skirt, and her long blond hair loose

around her shoulders. Her hair almost reached her waist and cascaded seductively around her face and seemed to float around her like a halo, “Wow! Who's the lucky guy?” It was impossible not to notice her, or the way she looked. She was a real beauty.

“Chloe's father.” She grinned.

“I hope he's not into young girls, or I may not let you go out with her anymore. You look hot, Princess!”

“Oh Daddy!” She rolled her eyes in embarrassment, but she liked it when he thought she looked pretty, and he was always lavish with his compliments. For her, her mother, and even Andy. “He's really old!”

“Oh, great! Thanks a lot! I think Trygve Thorensen is two years younger than I am.” Brad was forty-four, although he didn't look it.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah ...unfortunately, I do ...anyway, kiddo, be a good girl for your Mom this week. I'll see you Tuesday night.”

“Bye, Dad. Have fun.”

“Oh yeah. Big time. In Cleveland. Besides, what would I do to have a good time without all of you?”

“You leaving now, Dad?” Andy appeared under his arm, and stood very close to him. He loved being near his father.

“Yup. I'm leaving you in command. Take care of your mother, please. You can report to me on Tuesday night, and tell me if the ladies followed your orders.” Andy grinned toothlessly in response. He loved it when his father put him in charge, it made him feel so important.

“I'm taking Mom out to dinner tonight,” he announced seriously, “for pizza.”

“Make sure she doesn't eat too much ... it might make her sick ...” Brad said conspiratorially to his young aide, “you know, like Lizzie!”

“Yuk!” Andy made a face, and they all laughed. Andy followed his parents to the front door. Brad took his car out of the garage, and then got out to toss his suitcase in the trunk, and then hug Page and Andy.

“I'm going to miss you guys, take care,” he said as he got into the car again.

“We will.” Page smiled. She should have been used to his leaving by then, but she wasn't. It was easier when he left on Sunday night. She expected that, but this way she felt cheated. She had wanted more time with him, and now he'd be gone. Besides, as much as he traveled, it was impossible not to think of the dangers. What if something happened to him one day? What if ...she knew she'd never live through it. “Take care ...” she whispered as she leaned into the window of the front seat and kissed him, thinking that she should have taken him to the airport. But he liked having his car there when he got home. And on Tuesday night it would have been complicated for her to pick him up, so this was simpler. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” he said softly, and then leaned around her to wave at Andy again. She stepped back, and they waved, and he drove off. It was exactly five minutes to

seven.

They went back into the house, hand in hand, and she felt lonely again, but tried not to. It was stupid. She was a grown woman, she didn't have to be that dependent on him. And he would be back in three days. You'd think he'd be gone for a month from the way she was feeling.

Allyson was ready by then, and she looked really lovely. She had on the tiniest bit of mascara, and a pale pink gloss on her lips that barely shimmered. She looked clean and healthy and young. Youth at its most exquisite moment. She was the same age as the models they put on the cover of *Vogue*, and in some ways, Page thought, she looked better than they *did*.

"Have a good time, sweetheart. And I'd like you home by eleven." It was an ordinary curfew, and Page was always firm about it.

"Mom!"

"Never mind that. Eleven is perfectly reasonable, and you know it." She had just turned fifteen, and Page didn't see why she had to stay out any later.

"What if the movie gets out later than that?"

"Eleven-thirty then. Any later than eleven-thirty, forget the movie."

"Thanks a lot!"

"You're welcome. Do you want a ride to Chloe's?"

"No, thanks, I'll walk. See you later." She slipped out of the house, while Page went to get her sweater and her handbag out of their bedroom. The phone rang as she picked up her bag. It was her mother in New York. She explained that she and Andy were on their way out to dinner, and she'd call her back the next day. And by the time Page and Andy got back in the car, with their things, Allyson was long gone, and had probably already reached Chloe's.

"Well, young man, what'll it be? Domino's or Shakey's?"

"Domino's. We went to Shakey's last time."

"Sounds fair to me." Page flipped on the radio in the car, and let Andy pick the music. He picked the rock-and-roll station that he knew Allyson liked. He had very odd musical tastes for a seven-year-old boy, and he got them mostly from his older sister.

They got to the restaurant in five minutes, and Page felt better by then. Her moment of melancholy was gone, and she and Andy had a good time. They always did when they were together. He told her about all his friends, and what they did in school, and he explained to her how when he grew up he had decided to be a teacher. When she asked him why, he said it was because he liked taking care of little kids, and he liked the long summer vacations.

"Or maybe I'll be a baseball star, for the Giants or the Mets."

"That would be nice too." She smiled, he was always fun and easy to be with.

"Mom?"

"Yes?"