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DANIELLE STEEL



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Chapter 1

The house at 2129 Wyoming Avenue, NW, stood in all its substantial splendour, its grey stone façade handsomely carved and richly ornate, embellished with a large gold crest and adorned with the French flag, billowing softly in a breeze that had come up just that afternoon. It was perhaps the last breeze Washington, DC, would feel for several months as the summer got under way. It was already June. June of 1939. And the last five years had gone all too quickly for Armand de Villiers, Ambassador of France.

He sat in his office, overlooking the elegant garden, absentmindedly staring at the fountain for a moment, and then dragged his attention back to the mountain of papers on his desk. Despite the rich scent of lilac in the air, there was work to do, too much of it. Especially now. He already knew that he would sit in his office until late that night, as he had for two months now, preparing to return to France. He had known the request to return was coming, and the when he had been told in April, something inside him had ached for a moment. Even now, there were mixed emotions each time he thought of going home. He had felt the same way when he had left Vienna, London, and San Francisco before that, and other posts previously. But the bond was even stronger here. Armand had a way of establishing roots, of making friends, of falling in love with the places he was assigned to. That made it difficult to move on. And yet, this time, he wasn't moving on, he was going home.

Home. It had been so long since he had lived there, and they needed him so badly now. There was tension all over Europe, things were changing everywhere. He often felt that he lived for the daily reports from Paris, which gave

him some sense of what was going on. Washington seemed lightyears removed from the problems that besieged Europe, from the fears that trembled in the heart of France. They had nothing to fear in this sacred country. But in Europe now, no one felt quite as sure.

Only a year before, everyone in France had been certain war was imminent, although now from what Armand heard, there were many who had buried their fears. But there was no hiding from the truth forever. He had said as much to Liane. When the civil war ended in Spain four months before, it became clear that the Germans were approaching, and their airfield just below Irún brought them within only miles of France. But even with that realisation, Armand was aware that there were those who didn't want to see what was going on. In the past six months Paris had been infinitely more relaxed than before, on the surface at least. He had been aware of it himself when he had gone home for Easter, for secret meetings with the Home Office, when they told him that his assignment to Washington was at an end.

He had been invited to a constant round of glittering parties, in sharp contrast to the previous summer, before the Munich Accord with Hitler. There had been unbearable tension before that. But then, suddenly it was gone, and in its place was a kind of frenzied animation, and Paris was in her finest form. There were parties, balls, operas, art shows, and galas, as though by keeping busy, and continuing their laughter and their dancing, war would never come for the French. Armand had been annoyed at the frivolous gaiety he had seen among his friends at Easter, and yet he understood that it was their way of hiding from their fears. When he had returned, he and Liane had spoken about it.

'It's as though they're so frightened that they don't want to stop laughing, for fear that if they do, they will cry in terror and run and hide.' But their laughter wouldn't stop the war from coming, wouldn't stop Hitler's slow, steady

march across Europe. Armand sometimes feared that nothing would stop the man now. He saw Hitler as a terrifying demon, and although there were those in high places who agreed with him, there were others who thought that Armand had become too nervous in the long years of service to his country, and was becoming a frightened old man.

'Is that what living in the States has done to you, old boy?' his closest friend in Paris had teased him. He was from Bordeaux, where he and Armand had grown up together, and the director of three of the biggest banks in France. 'Don't be foolish, Armand. Hitler would never touch us.'

'The English don't agree with you, Bernard.'

'They're all frightened old women too, and besides, they love to play at their war games. It excites them to think of getting into a row with Hitler. They have nothing else to do.'

'What nonsense!' Armand had had to control his temper as he listened, but Bernard's wasn't the only voice he heard raised in derision at the English, and he had left Paris almost in a fury at the end of his two-week stay. He expected the Americans to be blind to the threat facing Europe, but he had expected to hear something different in his own country, and he hadn't heard enough. He had his own views on the subject, views of just how serious the threat was becoming, of how dangerous Hitler was, and how rapidly disaster could befall them. Or perhaps, he thought on the way home, perhaps Bernard and the others were right. Perhaps he was too frightened, too worried about his country. In a way, going home again might be a good thing. It would bring him closer to the pulse of France.

Liane had taken well the news that they were leaving. She was used to packing up and moving on. And she had listened to his descriptions of the mood in Paris with concern. She was a wise, intelligent woman and had

learned much from Armand over the years about the workings of international politics. Indeed, she had learned much from him as he had been anxious to teach her his views from the very beginning of their marriage. She had been so young and so hungry to learn everything about his career, the countries he was assigned to, the political implications of his many dealings. He smiled to himself as he thought back over the past ten years. She had been a hungry little sponge, soaking up every drop of information, gobbling every morsel, and she had learned well.

She had her own ideas now, and often she did not agree with him, or she was more adamant than he along the same vein. Their most furious battle had been only a few weeks before in late May, over the SS *St Louis*, a ship carrying 937 Jews out of Hamburg, with Joseph Goebbels's blessing, and bound for Havana, where the refugees were refused entry, and where it would seem that they would perish as the boat languished outside the port. Others engaged in frantic efforts to find a home for the refugees, lest they be doomed to return to Hamburg and whatever fate might await them there. Liane herself had spoken to the President, drawing on her acquaintance with him, but to no avail. The Americans had refused to take them, and Armand had watched Liane collapse in tears as she realised all of her efforts, and those of countless others, had been in vain. There were messages from the ship, promising mass suicide rather than agreeing to return to the port from whence they had come. And at last, mercifully, France, England, Holland, and Belgium had agreed to take them, but still the battle between Armand and Liane had raged on. For the first time in her life she had been disappointed in her own country. Her fury knew no bounds. And although Armand sympathised with her, he insisted that there were reasons why Roosevelt had refused to take the refugees. It made her even angrier that Armand was willing to accept Roosevelt's decision. She felt betrayed by her own people. America was the land of rich and plenty, the home

of the brave, land of the free. How could Armand excuse their failure to accept those people? It wasn't a matter of judgement, he attempted to explain to her, but of accepting that at times governments made harsh decisions. The important thing to acknowledge was that the refugees were safe. It had taken Liane days to calm down after that, and even then she had engaged in a lengthy and almost hostile discussion with the First Lady at a ladies' lunch. Mrs Roosevelt had been sympathetic to Liane's anger. She too had been anguished over the fate of the passengers of the *St Louis*, but she had been helpless to convince her husband to change his mind. The United States had to respect its quotas, and the 937 German-Jewish refugees exceeded the quota for the year. Mrs Roosevelt reminded Liane again that all had ended well for the refugees. But nonetheless it was an event that had impressed Liane with the gravity of these people's plight in Europe, and suddenly she had gained a new understanding of what was happening far from the peaceful life of Washington diplomatic dinners. It made her anxious to return with Armand to France.

'You're not sorry to be leaving your country again, my love?' He had eyed her gently over a quiet dinner at home, after the incident of the *St Louis* had finally died down.

She had shaken her head. 'I want to know what's happening in Europe, Armand. Here, I feel so far away from everything.' She had smiled at him then, loving him more than ever. They had shared an extraordinarily happy ten years. 'Do you really think war will come soon?'

'Not for your country, my darling.' He always reminded her that she was an American. He had always thought it important that she retain a sense of her own allegiance, so that she would not become totally swallowed up by his views and his ties to France. She was a separate entity, after all, and she had a right to her own allegiances and opinions, and thus far they had never interfered with his own. Now and then there was a raging battle, an outburst of disagreement between them, but it seemed to keep the

relationship healthy and he didn't mind. He respected her views as much as his own, and he admired the zeal with which she stood up for what she believed in. She was a strong woman with an admirable mind. He had respected her from the moment he first knew her, in San Francisco, as a girl of just fifteen. She had been a magical child, with an almost ethereal golden beauty, and yet after years of living alone with her father, Harrison Crockett, she had gained a range of knowledge and wisdom unusual in such a young girl.

Armand could still remember the first time he had seen her, in a white linen summer dress and a big straw hat, wandering through the Consulate garden in San Francisco, saying nothing as she listened to the 'grown-ups', and then turning to him, with a shy smile, to say something in flawless French about the roses. Her father had been so proud of her.

Armand smiled at the distant memory of her father. Harrison Crockett had been a most unusual man. Stern, and at the same time gentle, aristocratic, difficult, handsome, obsessed with his privacy and protecting his only child, and a brilliant success in shipping. He was a man who had done much with his life.

They had met shortly after arriving in San Francisco, at a deadly little dinner arranged by the previous consul before he left San Francisco for Beirut. Armand recalled that he knew Crockett had been invited, but was almost certain he wouldn't come. Most of the time Harrison Crockett hid behind the walls of his elegant brick fortress on Broadway, looking out over the bay. His brother, George, was far more inclined to go to parties, and was one of the most popular bachelors in San Francisco, not so much for his charm, as for his connections and his brother's enormous success. But much to everyone's amazement Harrison had come to the dinner. He had spoken little and left early, but before he did, he had been very pleasant to Odile, Armand's wife. So much so that she had insisted on

inviting him and his daughter for tea. Harrison had spoken of the girl to Odile, and had been particularly proud of his daughter's mastery of the French language, and with a proud smile, he had said that she was 'a very remarkable girl', a comment they had both smiled at as Odile relayed it to Armand.

'At least he has one soft spot. He looks every bit as ruthless as they say he is.'

But Odile had disagreed. 'I think you're wrong, Armand. I think he's very lonely. And he's absolutely mad about the girl.' Odile hadn't been far off the mark. Shortly after, they heard the story of how he had lost his wife, a beautiful girl of nineteen, whom he had worshipped. He had been too busy with his shipping empire before that, but apparently once he turned his mind to marriage, he had chosen well.

Arabella Dillingham Crockett had been brilliant as well as beautiful, and together she and Harrison had given some of the city's most devastating balls. She had floated through the mansion he'd built for her, looking like a fairy princess, wearing the rubies he brought her from the Orient, diamonds almost as large as eggs, and tiaras, made especially for her at Cartier, on her golden curls. Their first child was heralded with the same excitement as the Second Coming, but despite the accoucheur Harrison brought from England, and two midwives from the East, Arabella died in childbirth, leaving him widowed with an infant, a girl child in her image, whom he worshipped as he once had his wife. For the first ten years after his wife's death, he only left his house to go to his office. Crockett Shipping was one of the largest shipping lines in the States, with ships spread out all over the Orient, carrying cargo, as well as two extraordinarily handsome liners that carried passengers to Hawaii and Japan. In addition, Crockett had passenger ships in South America, and some that travelled profitably up and down the West Coast of the United States.

He saw a great deal of his brother, as they ran the empire

together, but for a decade Harrison saw few of his old friends. Then at last he took Liane to Europe for a vacation, showing her all the wonders of Paris and Berlin and Rome and Venice, and when they returned at the end of the summer, he began to include his friends in his life again. Gone was the era of the grand parties in the mansion on Broadway, but he had come to realise how lonely his child was and how badly she needed the company of other children, other people, and so Harrison slowly opened his doors again. What ensued were activities that centred only around his daughter: puppet shows, visits to the theatre, and trips to Lake Tahoe, where he bought a handsome summer home. Harrison Crockett lived only to please and protect and cherish Liane Alexandra Arabella.

She was named after two dead grandmothers and her mother, three lost beauties, and somehow she managed to combine the charm and loveliness of all three. People marvelled when they met her. Despite the sumptuous existence she led, there was no sign of it having affected her. She was simple, straightforward, quiet and wise beyond her years, from spending so many years dining alone with her father, and sometimes her uncle, listening to them talk business and explain to her the business of shipping, and the politics of the countries into whose ports their ships sailed. In truth, she was happier with her father than she was with other children, and as she grew older she went everywhere with him; eventually to the Consulate of France, on a spring day in 1922, to have tea.

The De Villiers fell in love with her at once, and what followed as a result was a bond between the De Villiers and Crocketts that flourished over the next three years. The four of them often took trips together. Armand and Odile went to stay at the handsome estate in Lake Tahoe, they travelled on one of his ships to Hawaii with Liane for a holiday, and eventually Odile even took Liane to France. Odile became for her almost a second mother, and it was a comfort to Harrison to see Liane so happy and so well

guided by a woman he respected and liked. By then Liane was almost eighteen.

It was the following autumn, when Liane entered Mills College, that Odile began to feel poorly, complaining of a constant backache, an inability to eat, frequent fevers, and finally a frightening cough that refused to disappear. At first the doctors insisted that they could find nothing and it was suggested quietly to Armand that Odile was simply homesick for her country, and he might consider sending her back to France. But vapours of that sort were unlike her, and he persisted in having her see doctors all over town. He wanted her to go to New York to see someone Harrison had recommended, but before the scheduled trip, it became obvious that she was far too sick to go. It was then that they finally discovered, in a brief and depressing operation, that Odile de Villiers was riddled with cancer. They closed her up and told Armand the news, which he shared the next day with Harrison Crockett as tears streamed down his face.

'I can't live without her, Harry . . . I can't . . .' Armand had stared at him in bereft horror as Harrison nodded slowly, tears in his own eyes. He remembered his own pain of eighteen years before only too well. And ironically, Armand was exactly the same age Harrison had been when he lost Arabella, he was forty-three years old.

But Armand and Odile had been married for twenty years, and the prospect of living on without her was almost more than he could bear. Unlike Harrison, they had no children. They had wanted two or three from the beginning, but Odile had never succeeded in getting pregnant, and they had resigned themselves long since to the absence of children in their lives. In fact, Armand had admitted to Odile once, he liked things better as they were. He didn't have to compete for her attention, and there had remained a honeymoon atmosphere between them for the past twenty years. And now, suddenly, their entire world was shattering around them.

Although at first Odile didn't know that she had cancer, and Armand fought valiantly to keep it from her, she very soon understood the truth and that the end was near. At last, in March, she died as Armand held her in his arms. Liane had come to see her that afternoon, carrying a bouquet of yellow roses. She sat by her bedside for hours, more for the comfort Odile gave her than any that she was able to give. Odile had exuded an aura of almost saintly resignation, and she was determined to leave Liane with her love and a last tender touch. As Liane had faltered for a moment in the doorway, fighting back the sobs that would come as soon as she left the house, Odile had looked at her with strength in her eyes for just a moment.

'Take care of Armand for me when I am gone, Liane. You've taken good care of your father.' Odile had come to know him well, and knew that Liane had kept him from growing hardened or bitter. She had a gentle touch that softened every heart she came near. 'Armand loves you,' she had said, smiling, 'and he will need you and your father when I am gone.' She spoke of her death as if it were a trip she was taking. Liane had tried to deny to herself the truth about this beloved woman's condition. But there was no denying it to Odile. She wanted them all to face it, especially her husband, and then Liane. She wanted them to be prepared. Armand would try to avoid the truth by talking to her of trips to the seashore, to Biarritz, which they had loved when they were young, a cruise on a yacht along the coast of France perhaps the next summer, and another journey to Hawaii on one of the Crockett ships. But again and again she forced them all to face what was coming, what she knew, and what finally came that night after she had seen Liane for the last time.

Odile had insisted that she wanted to be buried where she was, and not sent back to France. She didn't want Armand making that dismal trip alone. Both of her parents were dead, as well as his. She left with no regrets, except

that she had had no children who would care for Armand. She had put that trust in Liane.

The first months were a nightmare for Armand. He managed to carry on his work, but barely more than that. And despite his loss, he was expected, to some extent, to entertain visiting dignitaries to San Francisco with small diplomatic dinners. It was Liane who did everything for him, as she had for so long for her father. She carried a double responsibility then, despite the excellent staff at the Consulate of France. It was Liane who oversaw everything for Armand. That summer, her father scarcely saw her at Lake Tahoe, and she refused the offer of a trip to France. She had a mission to attend to, a promise she had made, which she fully intended to live up to – an awesome responsibility for a girl of nineteen.

For a time Harrison wondered if there was something more to her work and efforts, and yet after watching Liane more closely for a time, he was certain there was not. In a way, he knew that what she did for Armand helped her cope with her own sense of loss. She had been deeply stricken by the death of Odile. Never having known her own mother, there had always been a hunger in her soul for a woman she could relate to, someone to whom she could talk in a way she couldn't talk to her father, her uncle, or their friends. As a child, there had been governesses and cooks and maids, but few friends, and the women Harrison dallied with occasionally over the years never saw the inside of his home, or met his child. He kept all of that far, far from Liane. So it had been Odile who had filled that void, and then left it, gaping open, a dull ache that never seemed to dim, except when she was doing something for Armand. It was almost a way of being with Odile again.

In a sense both Armand and Liane were in shock until the end of the summer. Odile had been dead for six months by then, and they both realised one September afternoon, as they sat in the garden at the Consulate, looking at the roses and speaking of Odile, that neither of them was crying

as they spoke of her. Armand even told a funny story at Odile's expense and Liane laughed. They had survived it. They would live through it, each one because of the other. Armand had reached out a hand and taken Liane's long, delicate fingers in his own and held them. The tears sparkled then in his eyes as he looked at her.

'Thank you, Liane.'

'For what?' She tried to pretend she didn't know, but she did. He had done as much for her. 'Don't be silly.'

'I'm not. I'm very grateful to you.'

'We've needed each other for the past six months.' She said it openly and directly, her hand comfortable in his. 'Life is going to be very different without her.' It already was, for them both.

He nodded, thinking quietly to himself over the past six months. 'It is.'

Liane went up to Tahoe for two weeks then, before going back to college, and her father was relieved to see her. He still worried about her a great deal, concerned about her helping Armand constantly. He himself was only too aware that it was very much like her constant devotion to him. And Odile de Villiers had long since convinced Harrison that Liane needed other pastimes than caring for a lonely man. She was a young girl and there was much that she should do. The year before, she had been scheduled to make her debut, but when Odile fell ill, she had refused.

Harrison brought the subject up to Liane again in Tahoe, saying that she had mourned for long enough and that the debutante parties would do her good. She insisted that they seemed silly to her, and wasteful somehow, all that money spent on dresses and parties and dances. Harrison stared at her in amazement. She was one of the richest young women in California, heiress to the Crockett Shipping lines, and it seemed extraordinary to him that the thought of the expense should even cross her mind.

In October, when she went back to Mills, she had less time to help Armand with his dinner parties, but he was

on his feet again and fending well for himself, although he still felt Odile's absence sorely, as he confessed to Harrison when they had lunch together at his club.

'I won't lie to you, Armand.' Harrison looked at him over a glass of Haut-Brion '27. 'You'll feel it for a long time. Forever. But not in the same way you did at first. You'll feel it in a moment . . . a remembered word . . . something she wore . . . a perfume . . . But you won't wake up every morning, feeling as though there's a two hundred thousand pound weight on your chest, the way you did.' He still remembered it all too clearly as he finished his wine and the waiter poured him a second glass. 'Thank God, you'll never feel quite that agony again.'

'I would have been lost without your daughter.' Armand smiled a gentle smile. There was no way to repay the kindness, to let his friend know how much the child had helped him, or how dear she was.

'She loved you both dearly, Armand. And it helped her get over losing Odile.' He was a wise and canny man, and he sensed something then, even before Armand did, but he said nothing. He had a feeling that neither of them knew how much they needed each other, with or without Odile. Something very powerful had grown between them in the past six months, almost as though they were connected, as though they anticipated each other's needs. He had noticed it when Armand came up to Tahoe for the weekend, but he had said nothing. He knew that his instincts would have frightened them both, especially Armand, who might feel that he had in some way betrayed Odile.

'Is Liane very excited about the parties?' Armand was amused at Harrison's excitement. He knew that Liane didn't really care a great deal. She was making her debut more to please her father, being well aware of what was expected, and dutiful above all. He liked that about her. She was not dutiful in a blind, stupid way, but because she cared about other people. It was important to her to do the right thing, because she knew how other people felt about

it. She would have preferred not to have come out at all, yet she knew that her father would have been bitterly disappointed, so she went along with it for him.

'To tell you the truth' – Harrison sighed and sat back in his seat – 'I wouldn't admit it to her, but I think she's outgrown it.' She suddenly seemed much more grown up than nineteen. She had grown up a great deal in the past year, and she had been called upon to act and think as a woman for so long that it was difficult to imagine her with the giggling girls going to a grand ball for the first time.

And when the moment came, the truth of her father's words was more evident than ever. The others came out, blushing, nervous, frightened, excited to the point of being shrill, and when Liane sailed out slowly on her father's arm at the cotillion, she looked nothing less than regal in a white satin dress with her shimmering golden hair caught up in a little basket of woven pearls. She had the bearing of a young queen on her consort's arm, and her blue eyes danced with an inimitable fire as Armand watched her, a stirring in his soul.

The party Harrison gave for her was the most dazzling party of all. It was held at the Palace on Market Street, with chauffeured limousines pulling up directly to the inner court. Two orchestras had been hired to play all night and the champagne had been sent for from France. Liane wore a white velvet gown, trimmed with white ermine in delicate ropes all around the hem. The gown, like the champagne, had been sent for from France.

'Tonight, my little friend, you look absolutely like a queen.' Liane and Armand circled the room slowly in a waltz. He was there as Harrison's guest. Liane was escorted by the son of one of her father's oldest friends, but she found him stupid and boring and was pleased with the reprieve.

'I feel a little silly in this dress,' she had said, grinning. For an instant she looked fifteen again, and suddenly, with a quick shaft of pain, Armand had longed for Odile. He wanted her to see Liane too, to share the moment, drink the