

DANIELLE STEEL



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To my thoroughly wonderful children,
Beatrix, Trevor, Todd, Nick, Samantha,
Victoria, Vanessa, Maxx, and Zara, whose
love, laughter, kindness, and joy light up
my life.

To Sebastian, the best Christmas gift of all.

You are all God's greatest gifts to me, and
I thank Him each day with awe, for the
wonder of your love.

With all of my love to you.

d.s.

He Said/She Said

He said he'd always cherish me.
She said she'd love me forever.

He said he'd be my partner.
She said she'd be my best friend.

He said he'd listen to my stories.
She said she'd laugh at my jokes.

He said he'd always listen to me.
She said she'd always talk to me.

He said he'd always hug me.
She said she'd always hold my hand.

He said he'd always sleep with me.
She said she'd always kiss me goodnight.

He said he'd always love me.
She said she'd never leave me.

—Donna Rosenthal, Artist

TOXIC BACHELORS

1

THE SUN WAS BRILLIANT AND HOT, SHINING DOWN ON THE DECK of the motor yacht *Blue Moon*. She was 240 feet, eighty meters, of sleek, exquisite powerboat, remarkably designed. Pool, helipad, six elegant, luxurious guest cabins, a master suite right out of a movie and an impeccably trained crew of sixteen. The *Blue Moon*—and her owner—had appeared in every yachting magazine around the world. Charles Sumner Harrington had bought her from a Saudi prince six years before. He had bought his first yacht, a seventy-five-foot sailboat, when he was twenty-two. She had been called the *Dream*. Twenty-four years later, he enjoyed life on his boat as much as he had then.

At forty-six, Charles Harrington knew that he was a lucky man. In many ways, seemingly, life had been easy for him. At twenty-one, he had inherited an enormous fortune and had handled it responsibly in the twenty-five years since. He had made a career of managing his own investments and running his family's foundation. Charlie was well aware that few people on earth were as blessed as he, and he had done much to improve the lot of those less fortunate, both through the foundation and privately. He was well aware that he had an awesome responsibility, and even as a young man, he had thought of others first. He was particularly passionate about disadvantaged young people and children. The

foundation did impressive work in education, provided medical assistance to the indigent, particularly in developing countries, and was dedicated to the prevention of child abuse for inner-city kids. Charles Harrington was a leader of the community, doing his philanthropic work quietly, through the foundation, or anonymously, whenever possible. Charles Harrington was a humanitarian, and an extremely caring, conscientious person. But he also laughed mischievously when he admitted that he was extremely spoiled, and made no apologies for the way he lived. He could afford it, and spent millions every year on the well-being of others, and a handsome amount on his own. He had never married, had no children, enjoyed living well, and when appropriate, took pleasure in sharing his lifestyle with his friends.

Every year, without fail, Charlie and his two closest friends, Adam Weiss and Gray Hawk, spent the month of August on Charlie's yacht, floating around the Mediterranean, stopping wherever they chose. It was a trip they had taken together for the past ten years. It was one they all looked forward to, and would have done just about anything not to miss. Every year, come hell or high water, on August first, Adam and Gray flew to Nice and boarded the *Blue Moon* for a month—just as they had done on her predecessors every year before that. Charlie was usually on the boat for July as well, and sometimes didn't return to New York until mid- or even late September. All his foundation and financial matters were easily handled from the boat. But August was devoted to pure fun. And this year was no different. He sat quietly eating breakfast on the aft deck, as the boat shifted gently, at anchor, outside the port of St. Tropez. They had had a late night the night before, and had come home at four A.M.

In spite of the late night, Charlie was up early, although his recollections of the evening before were a little vague. They usually were when Gray and Adam were involved. They were a fearsome trio, but their fun was harmless. They answered to no one, none of the three men were married, and at the moment none had girlfriends. They had long since agreed that, whatever their situations, they would come aboard alone, and spend the month as

bachelors, living among men, indulging themselves. They owed no one apologies or explanations, and each of them worked hard in his own way during the rest of the year, Charlie as a philanthropist, Adam as an attorney, and Gray as an artist. Charlie liked to say that they earned their month off, and deserved their annual trip.

Two of the three were bachelors by choice. Charlie insisted he wasn't. His single status, he claimed, was by happenstance and, so far, sheer bad luck. He said he wanted to get married, but hadn't found the right woman yet, despite a lifetime of searching. But he was still looking, with meticulous determination. He had been engaged four times in his younger days, although not recently, and each time something had happened to cause the wedding to be called off, much to his chagrin, and deep regret.

His first fiancée had slept with his best friend three weeks before the wedding, which had caused a veritable explosion in his life. And of course he had no choice but to call off the wedding. He had been thirty at the time. His second bride-to-be had taken a job in London as soon as they got engaged. He had commuted diligently to see her, while she continued to work for *British Vogue*, and could hardly make time to see him while he waited patiently in the flat he'd rented just so he could spend time with her. Two months before the wedding, she admitted that she wanted a career, and couldn't see herself giving up work when they got married, which was important to him. He thought she should stay home and have kids. He didn't want to be married to a career woman, so they agreed to part company—amicably of course, but it had been an enormous disappointment to him. He had been thirty-two at the time, and ever more determined to find the woman of his dreams. A year later he was sure he'd found her—she was a fantastic girl, and was willing to give up medical school for him. They went to South America together, on trips for the foundation, to visit children in developing countries. They had everything in common, and six months after they met, they got engaged. All went well, until Charlie realized his fiancée was inseparable from her twin sister, and expected to take her everywhere with them. He and the twin sister had taken an instant

dislike to each other, which turned into heated debates and endless arguments each time they met. He felt certain that they would continue to dislike each other in alarming ways. He had bowed out that time too, and his would-be bride agreed. Her sister was too important to her to marry a man who genuinely despised her twin. She had married someone else within a year, and her twin moved in with them, which told Charlie he'd done the right thing. Charlie's last engagement had come to a disastrous end five years before. She loved Charlie, but even after couples counseling with him, said she didn't want children. No matter how much she said she loved him, she wouldn't budge an inch. He thought at first he could convince her otherwise, but he never did, so they parted friends. He always did. Without exception. Charlie had managed to stay friends with every woman he had ever gone out with. At Christmastime, he was deluged with cards from women he had once cared about, decided not to marry, and who had since married other men. At a glance, if one looked at the photographs of them and their families, they all looked the same. Beautiful, blond, well-bred women from aristocratic families, who had gone to the right schools, and married the right people. They smiled at him from their Christmas cards, with their prosperous-looking husbands at their side, and their towheaded children gathered around them. He was still in touch with many of them, they all loved Charlie, and remembered him fondly.

His friends Adam and Gray kept telling him to give up on debutantes and socialites and go out with a "real" woman, the definition of which varied according to their respective descriptions. But Charlie knew exactly what he wanted. A well-born, well-heeled, well-educated, intelligent woman who would share the same values, same ideals, and had a similarly aristocratic background to his. That was important to him. His own family could be traced back to the fifteenth century, in England, his fortune was many generations old, and like his father and grandfather, he had gone to Princeton. His mother had gone to Miss Porter's, and finishing school in Europe, as had his sister, and he wanted to marry a woman just like them. It was an archaic point

of view, and seemed snobbish in some ways, but Charlie knew what he wanted and needed, and what suited him. He himself was old-fashioned in some ways, and had traditional values. He was politically conservative, eminently respectable, and if he had a fling here and there, it was always done politely, with the utmost discretion. Charlie was a gentleman and a man of elegance and distinction to his very soul. He was attentive, kind, generous, and charming. His manners were impeccable, and women loved him. He had long since become a challenge to the women in New York, and the many places where he traveled and had friends. Everybody loved Charlie, it was hard not to.

Marrying Charles Harrington would have been a major coup for anyone. But like the handsome prince in the fairy tale, he had searched the world, looking for the right woman, the perfect one for him. And instead he met lovely women everywhere, who seemed delightful and appealing at first, and always had a fatal flaw that stopped him in his tracks just before he got to the altar. As much as it was for them, it was disheartening for him. His plans to marry and have children had been thwarted every time. At forty-six, he was still a bachelor, through no fault of his own, he said. Wherever the right woman was hiding these days, he was still determined to find her, and Charlie felt sure he would, one day. He just didn't know when. And for all the impostors masquerading as the right women, he was able to detect their fatal flaws every time. The one thing he consoled himself with was that he hadn't married the wrong one. He was determined not to let that happen. And he was grateful that so far he hadn't. He was ever vigilant and relentless about those fatal flaws. He knew the right woman was out there somewhere, he just hadn't found her yet. But one day he knew he would.

Charlie sat with his eyes closed and his face to the sun, as two stewardesses served him breakfast, and poured him a second cup of coffee. He had drunk a number of martinis, preceded by champagne the night before, but after a swim before he sat down to breakfast he felt better. He was a powerful swimmer, and a skilled windsurfer. He had been the captain of the swimming

team at Princeton. Despite his age, he was fiercely athletic. He was an avid skier, played squash at every opportunity in the winter, and tennis in the summer. It not only improved his health, but he had the body of a man half his age. Charlie was a strikingly handsome man—tall, slim, with sandy blond hair that concealed whatever gray he'd acquired over time. He had blue eyes and, after the last month on the boat, a deep tan. He was a stunning-looking man, and his preference in women ran to tall, thin aristocratic blondes. He never thought about it particularly, but his mother and sister had both been tall blondes.

His mother had been spectacularly beautiful, and his sister had been a tennis star in college when she dropped out to take care of him. His parents had both been killed in a head-on collision while on vacation in Italy when he was sixteen. His sister had been twenty-one, and had left Vassar in her junior year, to come home and take on the responsibilities of running the family, in the absence of their parents. It still brought tears to Charlie's eyes when he thought about his sister. Ellen had said she would go back to finish college when he went to college two years later. It was a sacrifice she was more than willing to make for him. She had been an extraordinary woman, and Charlie adored her. But by the time he left for college, although he didn't know it, and she said nothing to him, Ellen was ill. She had managed to keep the seriousness of her illness from him for nearly three years. She said she was too busy working at the foundation to go back to college, and he had believed her. In fact, she had a brain tumor, and fought a valiant battle. They had determined early on that the tumor was inoperable because of its location. Ellen died at twenty-six, just months before Charlie graduated from Princeton. Charlie had no one to see him graduate. With his sister and parents gone, he was virtually alone in the world, with a vast fortune, and a great sense of responsibility for all they left him. He bought his first sailboat shortly after he graduated and for two years he sailed around the world. There was barely a day that went by that he didn't think about his sister and all she had done for him. She had even given up college for him, and had been there for him in every way until

she died, just as his parents had been before. Their family life had always been harmonious and loving. The only thing that had gone wrong in his early life was that everyone who had loved him, and whom he loved, had died, and left him alone. His worst fear was of loving someone else, and having them die too.

When he'd come back from traveling the world on his yacht, he was twenty-four years old. He had gone to Columbia Business School and gotten an MBA, and learned about his investments, and how to run the foundation. He had grown up overnight and become responsible for everything in his world. Charlie had never let anyone down in his life. He knew that neither his parents nor Ellen had abandoned him intentionally, but he was alone in the world, without family, at a very young age. He had remarkable material benefits, and a few well-chosen friends. But he knew that until he found the right woman, he would be alone in important ways. He wasn't going to settle for anything less than what he felt he deserved, a woman like his mother and Ellen, a woman who would stand by him till the end. The fact that they had ultimately left him alone and terrified wasn't something he admitted to himself, not often anyway. It hadn't been their fault. It was simply a rotten turn of fate. Which made it all the more important for him to find the right woman, one he knew he could count on, who would be a good mother to his children, a woman who was nearly perfect in every way. That was vital to him. To Charlie, that woman was worth the wait.

"Oh God," he heard a groan behind him on the deck of the boat. He laughed as soon as he heard the voice. He opened his eyes and turned to see Adam in white shorts and a pale blue T-shirt slip into a seat across the table from him. The stewardess poured him a cup of strong coffee, and Adam took several sips before he said another word. "What the hell did I drink last night? I think someone poisoned me." His hair was dark, his eyes nearly ebony, and he hadn't bothered to shave. He was of medium build with powerful shoulders and rugged looks. He

wasn't a handsome man in the way Charlie was, but he was intelligent, funny, attractive, had charm, and women loved him. What he lacked in movie-star looks, he made up for with brains, power, and money. He had made a lot of it in recent years.

"I think you drank mostly rum and tequila but that was after the bottle of wine at dinner." They'd had Château Haut-Brion on board, before going into St. Tropez to check out the bars and discos. Charlie wasn't likely to find his perfect woman there, but there were plenty of others to keep them all busy in the meantime. "And I think the last time I saw you at the discothèque before I left, you were drinking brandy."

"I figured. I think it's the rum that does me in. I turn into an alcoholic on the boat every year. If I drank like that at home, I'd be out of business." Adam Weiss winced in the sunlight, put on his dark glasses, and grinned. "You're a shit influence on me, Charlie, but a great host. What time did I come in?"

"Around five, I think." Charlie sounded neither admiring nor reproachful. He made no judgments on his friends. He just wanted them to have fun, and they always did, all three of them. Adam and Gray were the best friends he'd ever had, and they shared a bond that exceeded mere friendship. The three men felt like brothers, they'd seen each other through a lot in the last ten years.

Adam had met Charlie just after Rachel divorced him. He and Rachel had met at Harvard as sophomores, and gone to Harvard Law School together. She had graduated from law school *summa cum laude*, and passed the bar on the first try, although she never practiced law. Adam had had to take it a second time, but was nonetheless a terrific lawyer, and had done well. He had joined a firm that specialized in representing rock stars and major athletes—and he loved his work. He and Rachel had gotten married the day after they graduated from law school, and the marriage had been welcomed and celebrated by both families, who knew each other on Long Island. Somehow he and Rachel never met till college, although their parents had been friends. He had never wanted to meet the daughters of his parents' friends, so he

had found her on his own, although he knew who she was as soon as they met. She had seemed like the perfect girl for him.

When they married, they had everything in common, and a lifetime of happiness ahead of them. Rachel got pregnant on their honeymoon, and had two babies in two years, Amanda and Jacob, who were now fourteen and thirteen. The marriage had lasted five years. Adam was always busy working, building his career, and coming home at three in the morning, after going to concerts or sporting events with his clients and their friends. But in spite of the temptations all around him—and there had been many—he had been faithful to her. Rachel, however, got tired of being alone at night and fell in love with their pediatrician, whom she had known since high school, and had an affair with him while Adam was making money hand over fist for them. He became a partner in the firm three months before she left him, and she told him he'd be fine without her. She took the kids, the furniture, half of their savings, and married the doctor as soon as the ink was dry on their divorce. Ten years later he still hated her, and could barely bring himself to be civil to her. The last thing he wanted was to marry again and have the same thing happen. It had nearly killed him when she left with the kids.

In the decade since it had happened, he had avoided any risk of attachment by dating women nearly half his age, with one tenth the brain. And in the milieu where he worked, they were easy to find. At forty-one, he dated women between twenty-one and twenty-five, models, starlets, groupies, the kind of women who hung around athletes and rock stars. Half the time he could barely remember their names. He was up-front with all of them, and generous with them. He told them when they met him that he would never remarry, and whatever they were doing was just for fun. They never lasted more than a month—if they lasted that long. He was only interested in a few dinners, going to bed with them, and moving on. Rachel had taken his heart with her, and tossed it in a dumpster somewhere. He talked to her now only when he had to, which was less and less often as the kids grew older. Most of the time, he sent her terse e-mails about their

arrangements, or had his secretary call her. He wanted nothing to do with her. Nor did he want a serious involvement with anyone else. Adam loved his freedom, and nothing on earth would have made him jeopardize that again.

His mother had finally stopped complaining about his being single, or almost, and she had finally stopped trying to introduce him to a "nice girl." Adam had exactly what he wanted, a rotating smorgasbord of playmates to entertain him. If he wanted someone to talk to, he called his friends. As far as he was concerned, women were for sex, fun, and to keep at a distance. He had no intention of getting close enough to get hurt again. Unlike Charlie, he wasn't looking for the perfect woman. All he wanted was the perfect bedmate for as long as it lasted, hopefully no longer than two weeks, and he kept it that way. Adam wanted no serious involvements. The only things he was serious about were his children, his work, and his friends. And as far as he was concerned, the women in his life were not his friends. Rachel was his sworn enemy, his mother was his cross to bear, his sister was a nuisance, and the women he went out with were barely more than strangers. Most of the time he was a lot happier, felt safer, and was more comfortable with men. Particularly Charlie and Gray.

"I think I had fun last night," Adam said with a sheepish grin. "The last thing I remember was dancing with a bunch of Brazilian women who didn't speak English, but man, could they move. I sambaed myself into a frenzy, and must have had about six hundred drinks. They were amazing."

"So were you." Charlie laughed out loud, as both men turned their faces to the sunshine. It felt good, even with Adam's headache. Adam played as hard as he worked. He was the top lawyer in his field these days, eternally stressed and anxious, he carried three cell phones and a pager, and spent his life either in meetings or flying somewhere to see clients in his plane. He represented a roster of major celebrities, all of whom seemed to get themselves into trouble with alarming regularity, but Adam loved what he did, and had more patience with his clients than he

did with anyone else, except his kids, who meant everything to him. Amanda and Jacob were the sweet spot in his life.

"I think I made a date with two of them for tonight," Adam said, smiling at the memory of the Brazilian beauties. "They couldn't understand a word I said. We'll have to go back tonight and see if they're there." Adam was beginning to revive after a second cup of coffee, just as Gray appeared, wearing dark glasses, with his mane of uncombed white hair sticking up straight. He often wore it that way, but it seemed particularly appropriate as he groaned and sat down at the table, wearing a bathing suit and a T-shirt that was clean but splattered with paint.

"I'm too old for this," he said, gratefully accepting a cup of coffee, and opening a small bottle of Unterberg. The bitter taste settled his stomach after the excesses of the night before. Unlike Adam and Charlie, he was not in fabulously athletic shape. He was long and lean and looked somewhat undernourished. As a boy, he had looked like a poster child for starving children somewhere. Now he just looked very thin. He was an artist and lived in the West Village, where he worked for months on intricate, beautifully done paintings. He managed to survive, though barely, if he sold two a year. And like Charlie, he had never married, nor had kids. He was respected in the art world, but had never been a commercial success. He didn't care. Money meant nothing to him. As he told them frequently, all he cared about was the integrity of his work. He offered some of the Unterberg to Adam and Charlie, and both made a face and shook their heads.

"I don't know how you drink that stuff," Adam said, grimacing at the smell of it. "It works, but I'd rather have the hangover than drink that."

"It's great. It works. Maybe you should just hook me up to an IV of it, if we're going to keep drinking like this. I always forget how bad it gets. Do we qualify for AA yet?" Gray said as he downed the Unterberg, then the coffee, and then dove into a plate of eggs.