

DANIELLE STEEL

THE RANCH

Delacorte



Press

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Also by Danielle Steel

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WANDERLUST	GOING HOME
SECRETS	

To Victoria and Nancy,
special, precious friends,
sisters of my heart,
who make me laugh,
hold my hand when I cry,
and are always, always, always
there for me.

With all my love,
d.s.

C H A P T E R

1

In any other supermarket, the woman walking down the aisle, pushing a cart between canned goods and gourmet spices, would have looked strangely out of place. She had impeccably groomed shoulder-length brown hair, beautiful skin, huge brown eyes, a trim figure, perfectly done nails, and she was wearing a navy linen suit that looked as though she had bought it in Paris. She wore high-heeled navy blue shoes, a navy Chanel bag, and everything about her was perfection. She could have easily pretended she'd never seen a supermarket before, but she looked surprisingly at home here. In fact, she often stopped at Gristede's at Madison and Seventy-seventh on the way home. Most of the shopping was done by their housekeeper, but in a funny old-fashioned way, Mary Stuart Walker liked doing the shopping herself. She liked cooking for Bill at night when he came home, and they had never had a cook, even when the children were younger. Despite the impeccable way she looked, she liked taking care of her family, and attending to every minute detail herself.

Their apartment was at Seventy-eighth and Fifth, with a splendid view of Central Park. They had lived there for fifteen of the nearly twenty-two years of their marriage. Mary Stuart kept an impressive home. The children teased her sometimes about how “perfect” everything always was, how everything had to look and be just right, and it was easy to believe that about her. Just looking at her, it was easy to see that she was somewhat compulsive about it. Even at six o’clock, on a hot June evening in New York, after six hours of meetings, Mary Stuart had just put on fresh lipstick, and she didn’t have a hair out of place.

She selected two small steaks, two baking potatoes, some fresh asparagus, some fruit, and some yogurt, remembering too easily the days when her shopping cart had been filled with treats for the children. She always pretended to disapprove, but couldn’t resist buying the things they saw on TV and said they wanted. It was a small thing in life, spoiling them a little bit, indulging them bubble-gum flavored cereal was so important to them, she never could see the point of refusing to buy it for them and forcing them to eat a healthy one they’d hate.

Like most people in their world in New York, she and Bill expected a great deal from their children, a high standard for everything, near perfect grades, impressive athletic ability, complete integrity, high morals. And as it turned out, Alyssa and Todd were good-looking, bright and shining in every way, outstanding in and out of school, and basically very decent people. Bill had teased them ever since they were young, and told them that he expected them to be the perfect kids, he and their mother were counting on it in fact. By the time they were ten and twelve, Alyssa and Todd groaned whenever they heard the words. But there was more than a little truth to the speech, and they knew it. What their father really meant was that they had to do their absolute best in and out of school, perform at the top of their ability, and even if they didn’t always succeed they had to try hard. It was a lot to expect of anyone, but Bill Walker had always set high standards, and they met them. As rigid as their mother seemed to be sometimes, it was their father who was the real perfectionist, who expected it all from them, and from their mother. It was Bill who really put the pressure on all of them, not just his children, but his wife as well.

Mary Stuart had been the perfect wife to him for nearly twenty-two years, providing him with the perfect home, the perfect children, looking beautiful, doing what was expected of her, entertaining for him, and keeping a home that not only landed them on the pages of *Architectural Digest*, but was a happy place to come home to. There was nothing showy or ostentatious about their way of life, it was all beautifully done, meticulously handled. You couldn't see the seams in anything Mary Stuart did. She made it all look effortless, although most people realized it couldn't be as easy as she made it seem. But that was her gift to him. Making it all seem easy. For years, she had organized charity events which raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for important charities, sat on museum boards, and worked ceaselessly assisting the cause of injured, diseased, or seriously underprivileged children. And now, at forty-four, with the children more or less grown, in addition to the charity events she still organized, and the committees she sat on for the past three years she'd been doing volunteer work with physically and emotionally handicapped children in a hospital in Harlem.

She sat on the board of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Lincoln Center, and helped to organize assorted fund-raising events each year, because everyone wanted her to help them. She kept extraordinarily busy, particularly now, with no children to come home to, and Bill constantly working late at the office. He was one of the senior partners in an international law firm on Wall Street. He handled all of their most important cases relating to Germany and England. He was a trial lawyer primarily, and the things Mary Stuart did socially had always done a great deal to enhance his reputation. She entertained beautifully for him, and always had, although this year had been very quiet. He had spent much of the year traveling abroad, particularly for the past several months, preparing a massive trial in London, which had kept him away from home. And Mary Stuart had been busier than ever with her volunteer work.

Alyssa was spending her junior year at the Sorbonne. So Mary Stuart had more time to herself this year. It had given her a chance to catch up on a lot of things. She took on some additional charity work, did a lot of reading, and volunteered at the hospital on weekends. Or sometimes, on Sundays, she just indulged herself, and stayed in bed with a book, or devoured all of the *New York Times*.

She had a full and busy life, and to look at her, no one would ever have suspected there was anything lacking. She looked at least five or six years younger than she was, although she had gotten thinner than usual that year, which should have been aging, but somehow it wasn't, and it actually made her seem even more youthful. There was a gentleness about her which people loved, and children responded to, particularly the ones she worked with. There was a genuine kindness which came from the soul that transcended social distinctions, and made one unaware of the world she came from. One was simply aware of something very touching about her, something almost wistful, it seemed, as one watched her, as though she understood great sorrow and had endured great sadness, and yet there was no sign of gloom about her. Her life seemed so completely perfect. Her children had always been the smartest, the most accomplished, the most beautiful. Her husband was enormously successful, both financially and in terms of the prestige he earned in winning highly visible, landmark international cases. He was highly respected in business, as well as in their social world.

Mary Stuart had everything most people wanted, and yet as one looked at her, one sensed that edge of sadness, it was a kind of compassion one felt more than saw, a loneliness perhaps, which seemed odder. How could anyone with Mary Stuart's looks and style, accomplishments and family, be lonely? When one sensed that about her, divining her with the heart rather than the eyes, it seemed strange and unlikely, and made one question one's own intuitions about her. There was no reason to suspect that Mary Stuart Walker was lonely or sad, and yet if one looked hard enough at her, one knew she was. Behind the elegant facade, there was something tragic about her.

"How ya doin' today, Mrs. Walker?" The man at the checkout grinned at her. He liked her. She was beautiful, and she was always polite to him. She asked about his family, his wife, his mother for years before she died. She used to come in with the kids, but now they were gone, so she came in alone and always chatted with him. It would have been hard not to like her.

"I'm fine, Charlie, thank you." She smiled at him, and looked even younger. She looked scarcely different than she had as a girl, and when she came into the store in blue jeans on the weekends,

sometimes she looked just like her daughter. "Hot today, isn't it?" she said, but she didn't look it. She never did. In winter, she looked well-dressed despite the brutal cold and the layers everyone wore, the boots against the snow and slush, the hats and the scarves and the earmuffs. And in summer, when everyone else looked frazzled in the deadly heat, she looked calm and cool and unruffled. She was just one of those people. She looked as though nothing ever went wrong, she never lost control, and certainly never lost her temper. He had seen her laugh with her kids too. The daughter was a real beauty. The son was a good kid . . . they all were. Charlie thought her husband was a little stiff, but who's to say what makes some people happy? They were a nice family. He assumed the husband was in town again. She had bought two baking potatoes and two filet mignons.

"They say it's going to be even hotter tomorrow," he said as he bagged her things and saw her glance at the *Enquirer* and then frown in disapproval. Tanya Thomas, the singing megastar, was on the cover. The headline said TANYA HEADED FOR ANOTHER DIVORCE. AFFAIR WITH TRAINER BREAKS UP MARRIAGE. There were terrible photographs of her, an inset of the muscle-bound trainer in a T-shirt, and another of her current husband fleeing from the press, hiding his face as he disappeared into a nightclub. Charlie glanced at the headlines and shrugged. "That's Hollywood, they all sleep around out there. It's a wonder they even bother to get married." He had been married to the same woman for thirty-nine years, and for him the vagaries of Hollywood were like tales from another planet.

"Don't believe everything you read," Mary Stuart said somewhat sternly, and he looked at her and smiled. Her gentle brown eyes looked troubled.

"You're too nice about everyone, Mrs. Walker. They're not the same kind of people we are, believe me." He knew, he had seen some movie people come in regularly over the years, with different men and women all the time, they were a pretty jazzy crowd. They were a totally different kind of human being from Mary Stuart Walker. He was sure she didn't even understand what he was saying.

"Don't believe what you read in the tabloids, Charlie," she said again, sounding unusually firm, and with that she picked up her groceries with a smile, and told him she'd see him tomorrow.

It was a short walk to the building where she lived, and even after six o'clock it was still stifling. She thought Bill would be home, as usual, at around seven o'clock, and she would have dinner for him at seven-thirty or eight, depending on how he was feeling. She planned to put the potatoes in the oven when she got home, and then she'd have time to shower and change. Despite the cool way she looked, she was tired and hot after a long day of meetings. The museum was planning an enormous fund-raising drive in the fall, they were hoping to give a huge ball in September, and they wanted her to be the chairman. But so far she had managed to decline, and was hoping only to advise them. She wasn't in the mood to put together a ball, and lately she much preferred her hands-on work, like what she did at the hospital with handicapped children, or more recently with abused kids in Harlem.

The doorman greeted her as she came in, took the groceries from her, and handed them to the elevator man, and after thanking him, she rode upstairs to their floor-through apartment in silence. The building was solid and old, and very handsome. It was one of her favorites on Fifth Avenue, and the view as she opened her front door was spectacular, particularly in winter, when Central Park was blanketed with snow, and the skyline across the park stood etched in sharp contrast. It was lovely in summer too, everything was lush and green, and from their vantage point on the fourteenth floor, everything looked so pretty and peaceful. You could hear no noise from below, see none of the dirt, sense none of the danger. It was all pretty and green, and the final late bloom of spring had exploded at last after the seemingly endless, long, bleak winter.

Mary Stuart thanked the elevator man for helping her, locked the door after he left, and walked the length of the apartment to the large, clean white kitchen. She liked open, functional, simple rooms like this one to work in, and aside from three framed French prints, the kitchen was completely pristine, with white walls, white floor, and long expanses of white granite counters. The room had been in *Architectural Digest* five years before, with a photograph of Mary Stuart sitting on a kitchen stool in white jeans and a white angora sweater. And despite the excellent meals Mary Stuart actually prepared, it was hard to believe anyone really cooked there.

Their housekeeper was daily now, and there was no sound at all

as Mary Stuart put the groceries away, turned the oven on, and stood looking for a long moment out the window at the park. She could see the playground a block away, in the park, and remembered the countless hours she had spent there, freezing in winter when her children were small, pushing them on the swings, watching them on the seesaw or just playing with their friends. It seemed a thousand years ago . . . too long . . . how did it all fly by so quickly? It seemed like only yesterday when the children were at home, when they had dinner together every night, with everyone talking at once about their activities, their plans, their problems. Even one of Alyssa and Todd's arguments would have been a relief now, and so much more comforting than the silence. It would be a relief when Alyssa came home in the fall, for her senior year at Yale after a year in Paris. At least once she was back, she'd come home occasionally for weekends.

Mary Stuart left the kitchen and walked to the small den, where she often did her paperwork. They kept the answering machine there, and she flipped it on and heard Alyssa's voice instantly. It made her smile just to hear her.

"Hi, Mom . . . sorry I missed you. I just wanted to say hi, and see how you are. It's ten o'clock here, and I'm going out for a drink with friends. I'll be out late, so don't call me. I'll call you this weekend sometime. I'll see you in a few weeks . . . bye . . ." And then, almost as an afterthought, ". . . Oh . . . I love you . . ." There was a click then, when she hung up. The machine recorded the time, and Mary Stuart glanced at her watch, sorry to have missed her. It had been four o'clock in New York when Alyssa had called her, two and a half hours before. Mary Stuart was looking forward to meeting her in Paris in three weeks, and driving to the south of France, and then into Italy for a vacation. Mary Stuart planned to be there for two weeks, but Alyssa only wanted to come home a few days before school began in September. She wanted to stay in Europe as long as she could, and was already saying that, after graduation, she wanted to go back to live in Paris. Mary Stuart didn't even want to think about that now. The last year, without her, had been far too lonely.

"Mary Stuart . . ." The next voice was her husband's. "I won't be home for dinner tonight. I'll be in meetings until seven o'clock, and I just found out I have to have dinner with clients. I'll see you at

ten or eleven. Sorry.” There was a click and he was gone, the information imparted, clients more than likely waiting for him while he called, and besides, Bill hated machines. He said that he was constitutionally unable to relate to them, and he would never have left her a personal message on the recording. She teased him about it at times. She used to tease him about a lot of things, but not so many lately. It had been a hard year for them. So much had changed . . . so many startling revelations and disappointments . . . so much heartbreak. And yet, outwardly, they all seemed so normal. Mary Stuart wondered how that was possible sometimes. How your heart could break, shattered beyond repair, and yet you went on, making coffee, buying sheets, turning down beds, and attending meetings. You got up, you showered, you dressed, you went to bed, but inside a part of you had died. In years past, she had wondered how other people lived through it. It had morbidly fascinated her at times. But now she knew. You went on living. You just did. Your heart kept beating and refused to let you die. You kept walking, talking, breathing, but inside everything was hurting.

“Hi,” the next message said, “this is Tony Jones, and your VCR is repaired. You can pick it up any time you want. Thanks, bye.” Two messages about board meetings that had been changed. A question about the museum ball, and the committee being formed for it, and a call from the head of volunteers at a shelter in Harlem. She jotted down a few notes, and remembered that she had to turn off the oven. Bill wasn’t coming home. Again. He did that a lot now. He worked too hard. That was how he survived. And in her own way, so did she, with her endless merry-go-round of meetings and committees.

She turned off the oven, and decided to make herself eggs instead, but not yet, and then walked into her bedroom. The walls were a pale buttery yellow, with a white glazed trim, the carpet an antique needlepoint she’d bought in England. There were antique prints and watercolors on the walls, a handsome marble fireplace, and on the mantel silver-framed photographs of her children. There were comfortable overstuffed chairs on either side of it, and she and Bill liked to sit by the fire and read at night, or on weekends. They spent most of their weekends in the city now, and had for the past year. They had sold the house in Connecticut the summer before.

With the children gone, and Bill traveling constantly, they never went there.

"My life seems to be on a shrink cycle these days," Mary Stuart had said jokingly to a friend, "with the kids gone, and Bill away, we seem to be paring everything down. Even our apartment is beginning to seem too big for us." But she would never have had the heart to sell it. The children had grown up there.

As she walked into the bedroom, and set down her handbag, her eyes went unwittingly toward the mantel. It was still reassuring to see them there, the children when they were four and five and ten and fifteen . . . the dog they had had when they were small, a big friendly chocolate Lab named Mousse. As always, she found herself drawn to them, and stood staring at their pictures. It was so easy to look at them, to just stand there and remember. It was like being drawn into another time, and she so often wished she could go back to that earlier time, when all their problems had been simple. Todd's blond, cheery little face looked out at her from when he was a little boy and she could hear him calling her name again . . . or see him chasing the dog . . . or falling into the swimming pool when he was three and she dived in after him with all her clothes on. She had saved him then. She had always been there for him, and for Alyssa. There was a photograph of all of them three Christmases before, laughing, their arms around each other, horsing around while an exasperated photographer had begged them to be serious for a moment so he could take their picture.

Todd had insisted on singing outrageous songs to them, while Alyssa laughed hysterically, and even she and Bill couldn't stop laughing. It had felt good to be so silly. It always felt good to be with them. It made the sound of Alyssa's voice on the machine that night even more poignant. And then, as she always did, Mary Stuart turned away from the photographs, the little faces that both caressed and tormented her, that tore at her heart and soothed it. There was a catch in her throat as she went to her bathroom and washed her face, and then looked sternly at herself in the mirror.

"Stop that!" She nodded in answer. She knew better than to let herself do that. Self-indulgence was a luxury she could no longer afford. All she could do now was move forward. But she had moved to an unfamiliar land with a landscape she didn't like. It was bleak

and unpopulated, and at times unbearably lonely. At times, she felt as though she had come there by herself, except that she knew Bill was there too, lost in the desert somewhere, in his own private hell. She had been searching for him there for over a year, but as yet she hadn't found him.

She thought about making herself dinner then, but decided she wasn't hungry, and after taking off her suit, and changing into a pink T-shirt and jeans, she went back to the den, sat down at the desk, and looked over some papers. It was still light outside at seven o'clock, and she decided to call Bill and tell him she'd gotten his message on the machine. They had very little to say to each other these days, except about his work, or her meetings, but she called him anyway. It was better than letting go completely. No matter how lost they had been for the past year, Mary Stuart was not ready to let go yet. And she knew she probably never would be. Giving up wasn't something that fit into her scheme of things, it wasn't something she believed in. They owed each other more than that after all these years. When times got rough, you did not abandon the ship. In Mary Stuart's life, you went down with it if you had to.

She dialed his number and heard it ring, and then finally a secretary answered. No, Mr. Walker wasn't available. He was still in meetings. She would tell him Mrs. Walker had called him.

"Thank you," Mary Stuart said softly, and hung up, swiveling slowly in the chair to look out at the park again. If she let herself, she would see couples strolling there in the warm June air at sunset, but she didn't want to. She had nothing to say to them now, nothing to learn from them. All they brought her now was pain, and the memories of what she and Bill once shared. Perhaps they would again. *Perhaps . . .* she let herself think the word, but not the inevitable conclusion if they didn't. That was unthinkable, and prodding herself again, she went back to her papers. She worked for another hour, as the sun went down, making committee lists, and suggestions for the group she'd met with that afternoon, and when she glanced outside again, it was almost dark, and the velvet night seemed to engulf her. It was so quiet in the apartment, so empty in a way that it almost made her want to call out, or reach for someone. But there was no one there. She closed her eyes and lay her head back against

the chair, and then as though Providence had been listening to her, and still gave a damn, although she doubted that, the phone rang.

"Hello?" She sounded surprised and very young, she had been pulled back a long way from her own thoughts, and in the twilight room, with her hair a little ruffled, she looked incredibly pretty as she answered.

"Mary Stuart?" The voice was a soft drawl, and it made her smile at once just to hear her. It was a voice she had known for twenty-six years now. She hadn't heard from her for months, but somehow she was always there when she needed her, as though she knew. They shared the powerful bond of ancient friendship. "Is that you? You sounded like Alyssa for a minute." The voice on the other end was feminine, deeply sensual, and still had faint whispers of Texas in it.

"No, it's me. She's still in Paris." Mary Stuart sighed as she felt a strong hand reach out and pull her back to shore. It was amazing how she was always there at odd moments. She often did that. They were there for each other, and always had been. And as she thought about it, Mary Stuart remembered what she had seen at Gristede's. "Are you okay? I was reading about you this afternoon." Mary Stuart frowned, thinking about the headline.

"Pretty, isn't it? It's particularly nice, since my current trainer is a woman. I fired the guy on the cover of the *Enquirer* last year. He called today, threatening to sue me, because his wife is furious about the piece. He's got a lot to learn about the tabloids." Tanya herself had learned it all the hard way. "And to answer your question, yeah, I'm okay. Sort of." She had a soft purr that drove most men crazy, and Mary Stuart smiled when she heard her. It was like a breath of fresh air in a stifling room. She had felt that way about her the first day she met her. They had gone to college together twenty-six years before, in Berkeley. Those had been crazy days, and they'd all been so young. There were four of them then. Mary Stuart, Tanya, Eleanor, and Zoe. They were suite mates in the dorm for the first two years, and then they'd rented a house on Euclid.

They'd been inseparable for four years; they had been like sisters. Ellie had died in their senior year, and after that things changed. After graduation they all grew up and moved on to their lives. Tanya had married right away, two days after graduation. She married her childhood sweetheart from her hometown in East Texas.

They were married in the chapel, and it had lasted all of two years. Within a year of graduation, her meteoric career had taken off and blown her life to bits, and her marriage along with it. Bobby Joe managed to hang on for another year, but it was too much for him. He was way out of his element, and he knew it. It had been frightening enough for him to have a wife who was educated and talented, but a superstar was more than he could deal with. He tried, he wanted to be fair, but what he really wanted was for her to give it all up and stay in Texas with him. He didn't want to leave home, didn't want to give up his daddy's business, they were contractors and they were doing well, and he knew what he could handle and what he couldn't. And to his credit, tabloids, agents, concerts, shrieking fans, and multimillion dollar contracts were not what he wanted, and they were Tanya's whole life. She loved Bobby Joe, but she wasn't about to give up a career that was everything she'd ever dreamed of. They got separated on their second anniversary, and were divorced by Christmas. It took him a long time to get over her, but he had since remarried and had six kids, and Tanya had seen him once or twice over the years. She said he was fat and bald and as nice as ever. She always said it a little wistfully, and Mary Stuart knew that Tanya was always aware of the price she had paid, the dues that life had collected from her in exchange for her wild success, her fantastic career. Twenty years after she'd begun, she was still the number one female singer in the country.

She and Mary Stuart had stayed good friends. Mary Stuart had married the summer after graduation too. But Zoe had gone on to medical school. She had always been the rebel in their midst, the one who burned for all the most revolutionary causes. The others used to tease her that she had come to Berkeley ten years too late, but it was she who always rallied them, who demanded that everything be fair and right, she who fought for the underdog in every situation. . . . It was she who had found Ellie when she died, who had cried so desperately, and had had the guts to call Ellie's aunt and uncle. It had been a terrible time for all of them. Ellie had been closest to Mary Stuart, and she had been a wonderful, gentle girl, full of idealistic ideas and dreams. Her parents had been killed in an accident junior year, and her three roommates had become family to her. Mary Stuart wondered at times if she would ever have been