



Three people, three birthdays,
three turning points...

Danielle STEEL

Happy Birthday

About the Book

Time to blow out the candles, say goodbye to the past, and make a wish for the future.

For **April Wyatt**, turning thirty is not what she had expected. She's single, with no interest in changing that in the foreseeable future. Her popular, successful restaurant in downtown New York - where she is chef and owner - consumes every ounce of her passion, attention and energy. Ready or not, though, April's life is about to change, in a tumultuous discovery on the morning of her milestone birthday.

April's mother, **Valerie**, is a popular TV personality and the queen of gracious living. Since her divorce long-ago, she has worked tirelessly to reach the pinnacle of her career and to create a camera-ready life in her Fifth Avenue penthouse. But she's having trouble equating her age with how she feels, and all the hours with her personal trainer, the careful work of top hairdressers and her natural good looks can't hide the fact that she is turning sixty, and the whole world discovers it on her birthday.

It is also **Jack Adams'** birthday - the most charismatic sports personality on TV, a man who has his pick of desirable younger women. But he fears his age may finally be catching up with him when he wakes up on his fiftieth birthday needing an emergency visit to the chiropractor...

A terrifying act of violence, an out-of-the-blue blessing, and two very unlikely love affairs soon turn lives inside out and upside down. As these three very different people celebrate

their birthdays, they discover that life itself is a celebration
– and that its greatest gifts are always a surprise...

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About the Author

Also by Danielle Steel

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DANIELLE
STEEL

HAPPY
BIRTHDAY

To Beatrix, Trevor, Todd, Nick,
Sam, Victoria, Vanessa,
Maxx, and Zara

May "Why not?" be an answer
that brings you joy, happiness,
and new horizons. May life
be kind and generous with you,
may the people at your side be gentle
and loving, and may you *always*
be greatly loved!!

I love you so much!
Mommy/d.s.

Life, a good life, a *great* life is
about “Why not?”
May we never forget it!

d.s.

Chapter 1

NOVEMBER FIRST WAS a day Valerie Wyatt dreaded every year, or at least for the last two decades, since she turned forty. She had successfully staved off the potential ravages of time, and no one who saw her would have guessed that she had turned sixty when she woke up that morning. She had been discreetly shedding years for a while and it was easy to believe her creativity about her age. *People* magazine had recently said she was fifty-one years old, which was bad enough. Sixty was beyond thinking and she was grateful that everyone seemed to have forgotten the right number. Valerie did everything she could to confuse them. She had had her eyes done for the first time when she turned forty and then again fifteen years later. The results were excellent. She looked rested and fresh, as though she had been on a terrific vacation. She had had the surgery done in L.A. during a summer hiatus. She had also had her neck done when she was fifty, giving her a smooth, youthful neckline with no sag anywhere, and her plastic surgeon agreed that she didn't need a full face-lift. She had great bones, good skin, and the eye and neck work had given her the effect she wanted. Botox shots four times a year added to her youthful looks. Daily exercise and a trainer three times a week kept her long, lean body toned and unmarked by age. If she had wanted to, she could have claimed to be in her forties, but she didn't want to seem ridiculous, and was content to knock nine years off her age. People also knew that she had a thirty-year-old daughter, so she couldn't stretch the truth too far. Fifty-one worked.

It took time, effort, maintenance, and money to maintain her appearance. It served her vanity, but it was also important for her career. Valerie had been the number-one guru of style and gracious living during a thirty-five-year career. She had started as a writer for a decorating magazine when she got out of college, and she had turned it into an intense dedication. She was the high priestess of how to entertain and for everything that went on in the home. She had licensing arrangements for fine linens, furniture, wallpaper, fabrics, exquisite chocolates, and a line of mustards. She had written six books on weddings, decorating, and entertaining and had a show that had among the highest ratings on TV. She had planned three White House weddings when presidential daughters and nieces got married, and her book on weddings had been number one on the *New York Times* nonfiction list for fifty-seven weeks. Her arch-competitor was Martha Stewart, but Valerie was in a class unto herself, although she'd always had deep respect for her rival. They were the two most important women in their field.

Valerie lived exactly the way she preached. Her Fifth Avenue penthouse, with a sweeping view of Central Park, and an important collection of contemporary art, looked camera ready at all times and so did she. She was obsessed with beauty. People wanted to live the way she told them to, women wanted to look the way she did, and young girls wanted a wedding just the way Valerie would have done it, or as she instructed them to do on her show and in her books. Valerie Wyatt was a household name. She was a beautiful woman, had a fabulous career, and lived a golden life. The only thing missing in her life was a man, and she hadn't been involved with anyone in three years. The thought of that depressed her that morning too. No matter how good she looked, the age on her driver's license was what it was, and who would want a woman of sixty? Even men in their eighties wanted girls in their twenties now.

With this birthday, Valerie felt she had become obsolete. It wasn't a pleasant thought, and she wasn't happy today.

She looked in the mirror intently as she prepared to leave her apartment that morning. She didn't have to be in the studio until noon for a taping, and she had two appointments before that. She was hoping the first one would cheer her up. And the only thing keeping her from a major panic attack was that at least no one knew her right age. But she was depressed anyway. She was relieved that the image she saw in the mirror reassured her that her life wasn't over yet. She wore her blond hair in a chic well-cut bob that framed her face, and had it colored regularly. She never had roots. It was the same color it always had been, and her figure was superb. She carefully selected a red wool coat from the closet to put over the short black dress she was wearing that showed off her spectacular long legs, and she was wearing sexy high heels from Manolo Blahnik. It was a great look and would be elegant and fashionable when she taped her show later that day.

The doorman hailed a cab for her when she left the apartment and she gave the driver an address on the Upper West Side. It was in a seedy neighborhood, and she noticed the driver looking at her admiringly in the rearview mirror. She was pensive as they sped through Central Park. The weather in New York had turned chilly two weeks before, the leaves had turned, and the last of them were falling off the trees. The red wool coat she was wearing looked and felt just right. Valerie was looking out the window of the cab as the radio droned on, and they exited from the park on the West Side. And then she felt an electric current run through her as she heard the announcer's voice.

"My, my, my, I never would have believed it, and I'll bet you won't either. She looks terrific for her age! Guess who's turning sixty today? Valerie Wyatt! Now that is a surprise! Good work, Valerie, you don't look a day over forty-five." She felt as though the announcer had just punched her in

the stomach. Hard! She couldn't believe it. How the hell did he know? Their researchers must check DMV records, she thought with a sinking feeling. It was the most popular morning radio talk show in New York, and everyone would know. She wanted to tell the driver to turn it off, but what difference would that make? She had already heard it, and so had half of New York. The whole world knew now that she was sixty years old. Or at least the better part of New York. It was humiliating beyond words, she fumed to herself. Was nothing private anymore? Not when you were as famous as Valerie Wyatt and had your own TV show, and had for years. She wanted to cry as she sat in the backseat wondering how many other radio shows it would be on, how many TV shows, what newspapers it would be in, or celebrity roundups announcing whose birthday it was and how old they were. Why didn't they just sky-write it over New York?

She was frowning as she paid the cabdriver and gave him a handsome tip. The day was off to a miserable start for her, and she never liked her birthday anyway. It was always a disappointing day, and despite her fame and success, she had no man to spend it with. She had no date or boyfriend, no husband, and her daughter was always too busy working to go out for dinner. And the last thing she wanted to do was make an issue of her age with friends. She was planning to spend the night at home alone, in bed.

She hurried up the dilapidated steps of the familiar brownstone, nearly tripping on a chipped step, and pushed the button on the intercom. The name on the bell was Alan Starr. Valerie came here at least twice a year and called between visits to boost her spirits or when she was bored. After she rang, a voice filtered into the chilly November air.

"Darling?" It was a happy voice, and he sounded excited to see her.

"It's me," she confirmed, and he buzzed her in. She pushed open the heavy door once it unlocked, and hurried

up the stairs to the second floor. The building was old and looked tired, but was clean. He was waiting in an open doorway and threw his arms around her, grinning broadly. He was a tall, handsome man in his early forties with electric blue eyes and shoulder-length brown hair. And despite the shabby address, he was somewhat well known around town.

"Happy birthday!" he said, hugging her close to him as he smiled with a look of genuine pleasure to see her. She pulled away, scowling at him unhappily.

"Oh shut up. Some asshole on the radio just told the whole goddamn world how old I am today." She looked on the verge of tears as she marched into the familiar living room, where several large Buddhas and a white marble statue of Quan Yin sat on either side of two white couches with a black lacquer coffee table between them. There was a distinct smell of incense in the room.

"What do you care? You don't look your age! It's just a number, darling," he reassured her as she tossed her coat onto the couch.

"I care. And I *am* my age, that's the worst part. I feel a hundred years old today."

"Don't be silly," Alan said as he sat down on the couch opposite her. There were two decks of cards on the table. Alan was said to be one of the best psychics in New York. She felt silly coming to him, but she trusted some of his predictions, and most of the time he cheered her up. He was a loving, warm person with a good sense of humor, and a number of famous clients. Valerie had come to him for years and a lot of what he predicted actually came true. She started her birthday with an appointment with him every year. It took some of the sting out of the day, and if the reading was good, it gave her something to look forward to. "You're going to have a fabulous year," he said reassuringly as he shuffled the deck of cards. "All the planets are lined up for you. I did an astrological reading

for you yesterday, and this is going to be your absolutely best year.” He pointed to the cards. She knew the drill. They had done this many times. “Pick five and place them face down,” he said, as he put the deck down in front of her, and she sighed. She picked the five cards, left them face down, and Alan turned them over one by one. There were two aces, a ten of clubs, a two of hearts, and the jack of spades.

“You’re going to make a lot of money this year,” he said with a serious expression. “Some new licensing agreements. And your ratings are going to be fantastic on the show.” He said pretty much the same thing every year, and so far he’d been right. But in her case, that was easy to predict. Valerie’s gracious living empire was sound.

“What’s with the jack of spades?” They both knew she’d wanted a man in her life since her last relationship ended. She had been divorced for twenty-three years, and had devoted more time and energy to her career than to romance. But she missed being involved with someone, and was disappointed that no one had turned up in years. She was beginning to think that no one ever would again. Maybe she was too old. She certainly felt it now.

“I think one of your lawyers might retire,” Alan said about the jack of spades. “Give me five more.”

This time the king of hearts showed up, and the queen of diamonds. Alan smiled.

“Well, that’s interesting. I see a new man,” he said, smiling wider, and she shrugged, unimpressed.

“You’ve been saying it for three years.”

“Patience, darling, patience. It’s worth waiting for the right one. I like this man. He’s important, powerful, very tall, and good-looking. I think you’re going to meet him through your work.” Valerie laughed at that.

“Not in my business. Any guy involved in decorating, lifestyle in the home, or the wedding industry is not likely

to be straight. I'm going to have to meet him somewhere else."

"Maybe he's one of your producers," Alan said, concentrating on the cards. "I definitely think you're going to meet him through work." He had said that before, and no one had appeared. His other predictions were often true, but lately not about men. "I think your daughter might have a baby this year," he said, turning over the queen of diamonds and handing her the deck again. Valerie smiled and shook her head.

"I don't think that's going to happen. She works harder than I do. She doesn't even have time to date. She's not married, and I'm not at all sure she wants a husband or a child." Nor was Valerie anxious to be a grandmother—that was definitely not on her wish list or her radar screen, and fortunately it was not on her daughter's either. Alan was off on that one.

"I think she might surprise you," Alan said, as Valerie turned over five more cards and the reading continued. It was similar to what he always predicted for her, success in business, a new man on the scene, and an assortment of small warnings about upcoming projects and deals and people she worked with. But this time the new man came up several times. Alan was adamant about it, and Valerie sighed as she listened. People always told her that she couldn't have everything, a fabulous career and romance in her life too. Life just didn't work that way. No one got everything they wanted, they said, and Valerie hadn't either. Like most people, her success hadn't come easily, and in her case she had wound up alone. The two of them chatted as she continued to turn over the cards, and Alan told her what he saw ahead for her. Most of it was good. Her health wasn't a problem, he said, and as usual her ratings would soar. He saw some kind of production deal in the Far East, possibly a line of furniture, that would be advantageous for her, and it was obvious as he read for her

that he genuinely liked her. She was honest, direct, and fair. Some people said she was tough, but it was mostly a standard of excellence that she applied to herself and everyone else. Valerie drove herself and everyone around her hard. She hadn't gotten to the top of her field by accident. She had crawled up the mountain for thirty-five years, with sheer hard work and a certain kind of genius and unfailing instinct about what she did. Alan admired her for that. He loved how straightforward she was. She didn't play games, or hide. What you saw was what you got. And he didn't need the cards to know how upset she was about her age today. Valerie said several times that sixty just seemed so goddamn old, and now everyone was going to know. He could see that the very thought of it made her want to cry.

As Valerie listened to Alan's reading in his West Side apartment, Jack Adams literally crawled across his bedroom floor with tears in his eyes. He had never experienced pain like this in his life. Never. Well, maybe once or twice while playing professional football in his youth, but not since then—and surely not in recent years. He felt like someone had planted a tomahawk in his back. The shooting pains went straight up to his brain and down his legs. He couldn't stand up or walk. He made it to the bathroom and pulled himself up slowly, clutching the sink. He grabbed his cell phone off the counter and sat down on the toilet seat with a scream.

"Oh my God," he said, as he found the number in his phone. When he saw himself in the mirror, he looked like he'd been shipwrecked, and felt a thousand years old.

Jack had been to a Halloween party the night before and had met an incredible girl there at the bar. He'd been wearing a Superman costume, and she had been Catwoman, wearing skintight patent leather, hip boots, and

whiskers. She had an unforgettable body, and when she took the mask off, her face wasn't bad either. She said she was a model, but he'd never heard of her. She was twenty-two years old, with dyed jet-black hair and green eyes. He was six feet four and she had been only a few inches shorter than he was. And the sex they had later when they got back to his apartment was beyond acrobatic. They'd both had a fair amount to drink, and he couldn't remember having that much fun in a long time. She was typical of the girls he went out with, always in their early twenties, often models, sometimes actresses, and usually any pretty girl who crossed his path. Jack had never had trouble meeting women, or seducing them. Girls had been throwing themselves at him since his teens, more than he knew what to do with at times. And like candy, he could never resist them, and Catwoman had been no exception. The only thing different about her was that the last time he made love to her the night before, something in his back had snapped and he couldn't move. He had let out such a terrifying shout of pain that she had offered to call 911, but he was mortified and refused, and tried to pretend it didn't hurt as much as it did. He had suggested she go home, and she had. And he had spent the rest of the night in agony, waiting to call his chiropractor, which he was doing now. The receptionist answered and promised to get the doctor immediately when she heard that Jack Adams was on the line. He sounded terrible even to her. And he said it was an emergency.

The man who answered Jack's call sounded jovial and happy to talk to him. Jack Adams had been a patient for a dozen years. "What's up, Jack? My nurse said it was urgent."

"I think it is," he said in barely more than a whisper. Even talking hurt. Breathing hurt. He had visions of himself in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. "I don't know what the hell I did last night. I think I pulled a muscle in my back

or something. I may have torn a ligament. I can hardly walk." He could see himself paralyzed. The pain was beyond belief. He had almost thought it was a heart attack at first. Whatever it was, it was killing him.

"How'd you manage that, or do I want to know?" Frank Barker teased him. He knew how active Jack's sex life was. They laughed about it at times, but Jack wasn't laughing now. He was on the verge of tears, and the chiropractor could hear it.

"Probably not. Can I come in?"

"How fast can you get here?" Jack Adams was a very important patient, and Frank was happy to fit him in, particularly for an emergency like this.

"Twenty minutes," Jack said through clenched teeth. He had no idea how he would leave his apartment, but he'd get there somehow. He hung up and called the car service he used, and crawled into his gym clothes that were on the bathroom floor. He would have gone in his underwear if he had to. He wondered if he should be going to a hospital, but Frank would know what to do. He always did. And this couldn't be as bad as it seemed. That just wasn't possible. He had passed a kidney stone once, and this was worse.

He was downstairs ten minutes later, moving slowly and bent over. The doorman saw him and helped him into the car. He asked what had happened and Jack was vague. Ten minutes later, they were at the chiropractor's office and the driver helped him inside, where they led him into a room. Frank was with him in five minutes, and examined him. Jack could hardly move, and after the examination, the chiropractor looked at his chart and smiled.

"It's your birthday, Jack! Happy birthday!"

"Oh please . . . don't even say it . . . what the hell did I do to myself last night?" He wanted it to be something minor, but it didn't feel that way. This felt like major damage. He told the doctor exactly how and when it had happened, and Frank couldn't resist teasing him a little.

"It's these young girls, Jack . . . they're a handful!"

"I think she's a gymnast or something, or a contortionist. I'm in pretty decent shape, and she damn near killed me. What did I tear?" It made him feel ancient that a night of acrobatic sex had left him in this condition, and on his birthday yet. He had turned fifty today. Such an ugly number. He suddenly wondered if he'd ever have sex again. Maybe not the way he had the night before.

"I'm going to send you for an MRI. I have a feeling you may have ruptured a disk. I hope not, you may have only herniated it. Let's take a look."

"Shit," Jack said, looking as though it were a death sentence. "Will I need surgery?" He looked panicked.

"I hope not. We'll see what the MRI tells us. I'll get you in right away." Frank was a genius at getting technicians and physicians to accommodate his important clients. "One thing's for sure, I think you'd better take it easy for a night or two." He smiled broadly as Jack sat up, wincing in pain. He had invited friends to downtown Cipriani that night, among them several young models, but he already knew he'd have to cancel. There was no way he could sit for dinner. And he had to go to the office, at least for a few minutes. He'd called on his way over to tell them he'd be late, but didn't say why. He didn't want to admit to the condition he was in, at least not until he knew more.

Jack went back to his car and went to the hospital for the MRI. Frank had set it up for him, and as he walked into the hospital, bent over like an old man, two men asked him for an autograph, which was even more humiliating. He had been one of the most important players in the NFL, had won six MVP awards as starting quarterback, was a twelve-time pro bowler, had won four Super Bowls for his team, and was in the Hall of Fame. Now he could hardly stand up or walk after one night with a twenty-two-year-old. He told the two fans he signed the autographs for that he'd been in

a car accident. They had been thrilled to see him, in no matter what condition.

The MRI took an hour and a half, and they told him he'd been lucky. From what the technician could see, the disk was probably herniated not ruptured, and he didn't need surgery, just rest, and physical therapy once it calmed down. It was a hell of a way to start his birthday. He was fifty years old, and his career as a wild and crazy lover had ended with a major bang and a herniated disk. It made him feel even worse.

He had taken a painkiller by the time he got to work, still wearing his gym clothes and looking ragged. He hadn't shaved or combed his hair, but dead or alive, he had to go in for a few minutes. He had to see the producer about what to prepare for a special the next day. Jack had been one of the most important sportscasters on TV since he retired twelve years ago, at thirty-eight. He had a serious knee injury that finally put him out of the game for good, but even that had been nowhere near as painful as this. It had been an illustrious career and a respectable end. And his career as sportscaster and network hero had been satisfying too. He liked what he did and the network, fans, and ratings loved him. He had a personable on-camera presence that added new fans to his old ones, and he had always been irresistible to women, and equally unable to resist them. His marriage had ended in divorce five years before he retired. He had cheated on his wife constantly, and he gave Debbie credit that they had parted friends. He had been a lousy husband and he knew it. The opportunities and temptations constantly put in his path as an NFL superstar had been too much for him and their marriage.

Debbie had married one of the team doctors within a year of their divorce, and was happy and had had three more kids, all boys. And she and Jack had a son who was twenty-one, a senior at Boston University, and he had

absolutely no interest in football, except to admire what his father had accomplished. Basketball was his sport, since he was tall too, but he was a better student than Jack had ever been and wanted to go to law school. He had no interest whatsoever in pro sports. He didn't even watch football on TV.

Jack hobbled across the lobby when he got to the network, almost crawled into the elevator, and stood doubled over after pressing the button for his floor. He couldn't stand up straight, and didn't see the face of the woman who got into the elevator after him. All he saw were high-heeled black shoes, a red coat, and good legs. But he didn't want to think about that now. A monastery maybe for his golden years.

The woman in the red coat and black shoes pressed the button for her floor and stood near him. "Are you all right?" she asked with concern.

"Not really, but I'll live," he said, and tried to look up at her and winced. She looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn't remember who she was, and then it hit him. She was the gracious lifestyle guru of the world, and he was hunched over like Quasimodo, in gym clothes, flip-flops, uncombed hair, in need of a shave. He was in so much pain he almost didn't care. He had always thought she looked a little too perfect on TV, but there was a sympathetic look in her eyes now, which confirmed to him just how bad he looked. It was pathetic. And as he looked at her, he noticed a tiny pinprick of blood on either side of her mouth, barely noticeable, but it caught his eye. "I herniated a disk," he explained, "and I think you cut yourself shaving," he added. She looked startled and touched her face.

"It's nothing," she said vaguely about the pinpricks, as they stopped at his floor. That didn't always happen, but it had today. She had gone to get her Botox shots after seeing the psychic, and before work. She had no intention of explaining it to him, and wondered if he knew anyway. She

knew who he was too, and had seen him around the network, looking handsome. He was a mess today, and seemed very sick or badly injured.

"Do you need help getting out?" She seemed sorry for him. It was obvious just how much he was hurting.

"If you could just keep the door open till I get out. If I get hit with it, I'll probably be a quadriplegic. I had a little too much Halloween last night," he said as he shuffled through the elevator door. He had been hoping to have a little too much birthday celebration too, but that was clearly no longer in the cards for him, and maybe never would be again, he thought mournfully, as he thanked her, and the doors closed behind him.

He could hardly move by the time he got to his office and collapsed on the couch and lay down with a loud moan. His favorite production assistant, Norman Waterman, came in and stared at him in amazement. Norman had worshipped him as a kid and knew all the statistics on him better than Jack did himself. He still had all his football cards, and Jack had signed every one of them for him.

"Holy shit, Jack! What happened to you? You look like you got hit by a train."

"Yeah, I did. I had an accident last night. Herniated disk. Is George here? I have to see him about the show tomorrow."

"I'll get him. Hey, happy birthday by the way!"

"How do you know?" Jack looked at him, distressed.

"Are you kidding? You're a legend, man. I've always known your birthday, and they announced it on the news this morning."

"My birthday or my age?" Jack asked, looking panicked.

"Both, of course. People know anyway. Anyone who ever followed football knows how old you are. You're NFL history."

"That's all I need. I'm going to spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair, and now they're reminding everyone of

how old I am. Terrific." He told most of the girls he went out with that he was thirty-nine, and they weren't old enough to have followed his career or care. A lot of them believed him, and they were all excited to go out with Jack Adams. Announcing on the news that he was fifty was not going to help his dating career, but neither had Ms. Catwoman, who had reduced him to rubble in one night. He felt like crap. "What are you doing to celebrate tonight?" Norman asked innocently as Jack groaned.

"Suicide probably. Just get George, will you?"

"Sure, Jack . . . and happy birthday again." He said it with feeling as Jack closed his eyes, lying on the couch in agony, and didn't answer. Norman's admiration of him was touching, but all he wanted for this birthday was to be out of pain and to have his life back again. A life of sex and women.

* * *

At her desk several floors above, Valerie was going through a stack of fabric samples she wanted to use on a show about redoing your living room, and others for a segment on decorating for Christmas. Some of them were pretty good. There were stacks of samples and photographs all over her desk. Everything was in meticulous order, and she had her shows organized well in advance. She had a busy week ahead. She had checked in the mirror when she got in, to look for the spots of blood Jack had mentioned. They were tiny specks, and she washed them off, thinking that it was rude of him to mention it, particularly given the way he looked. He had always seemed very cocky to her when she saw him, and he always looked to be right off the cover of *Sports Illustrated* or *GQ*. Now in sharp contrast, he appeared as though he had been living in a cave

somewhere or washed up on a beach after a shipwreck, but he'd been visibly in a lot of pain. And then she forgot about him, as she made notes for her upcoming shows. She had only two hours to work before she met her daughter for their birthday lunch at La Grenouille. Lunch at the elaborate French restaurant was an annual tradition for them, and it was the only birthday celebration Valerie would have today.

It was not good news to Valerie when her impeccably efficient secretary Marilyn had told her that her birthday had been announced on television that morning, and more than once. So not only everyone who listened to the radio now knew her age, but anyone who watched morning news too. The cat was certainly out of the bag. And it did nothing to console her when Marilyn told her that it was Jack Adams's, the retired quarterback and sportscaster's, birthday too. Valerie didn't bother to tell her she'd just seen him in the elevator doubled over in pain. Valerie didn't give a damn if it was his birthday or how old he was, it was bad enough that she had turned sixty and the whole goddamn world now knew it. How much worse could it get? The entire planet now knew that she was an old woman, and even Alan Starr's predictions for love and success in the coming year were no consolation for that, and who knew if they would happen anyway. The reality of her age was depressing beyond belief. Sixty felt like the new ninety to her.

Chapter 2

APRIL WYATT ROLLED out of bed without even remembering what day it was for the first few minutes. The alarm went off, and she was up and on her feet, and shuffled off to the bathroom. It was just after four A.M. She wanted to be at the fish market in the South Bronx by five, and at the produce market by six. She had a lot to buy for her restaurant. She was halfway through brushing her teeth when she remembered that it was her birthday. Normally, she didn't really care, but she was upset about it this year. She was turning thirty and had been dreading it. She hated "landmark birthdays". They made you measure yourself against everyone else's yardstick, and by traditional standards she didn't measure up. By thirty you were supposed to be married, have children and/or a successful job, and maybe even own a house. April had a restaurant, didn't have a husband or even a boyfriend, and was light-years away from having kids or even thinking about it. She was in debt up to her ears to her mother for the building she had put up the money for so April could open the restaurant that had been her dream and was now the joy of her life. It was doing well, but she was still paying back the debt to her mother. She never pressed her about it, but April wanted to pay it off. She figured that in another five years, maybe she would, if the restaurant kept making money the way it was. The building, with the apartment above it where she lived and had an office, was in the meat-packing district of New York. It had been a slum years before, and the building had needed a lot of renovation to bring it up to code, which April had done, spending as little

on it as she could. She had put everything she could into the restaurant itself. Her apartment was a dump.

So on the yardstick of where she was supposed to be at thirty, she had a business and a career but not much else. No man, no kids, no house of her own, and a pile of debt. But she had her dream, and she loved it. She had called the restaurant April in New York. It was crowded almost every night, and they had gotten several great reviews in the three years since they'd opened. And it was her baby, one hundred percent. It was everything she had wanted it to be, and they had a flock of loyal fans. They were open seven days a week, and April was there herself day and night. She bought all the food, was the head chef, and visited guests at their tables too, although she was happiest in the kitchen. She had to show her face once in a while, particularly for faithful fans. She selected all the wines herself, and they had an interesting wine list at moderate prices. Those who loved it said it was the best restaurant in New York.

April had left college after the first year to take a year off and had never gone back, despite all her parents' aspirations for her. Her father was a medieval history professor at Columbia, and she had gone there for a year and been miserable the entire time. All she wanted was to be a chef. She had never gotten excited about her mother's passion for gracious living—all that interested her was what happened in the kitchen. Fancy weddings and table settings meant nothing to her, or how nice the living room looked. What she loved was preparing delicious food that everyone liked to eat.

She had spent six years in France and Italy going to school and apprenticing to become a chef, and she eventually worked at some of the best restaurants in Europe. She had been an apprentice of Alain Ducasse in Paris, and later an under pastry chef at the Tour d'Argent. She had worked in Florence and Rome, and by the time she came back to the States at twenty-five, she had some

serious experience under her belt. She had worked for a year at one of the finest restaurants in New York, and then, thanks to her mother, had spent a year setting up the restaurant of her dreams. What she had wanted to do was serve the best of everything, both favorite delicacies *and* simple foods that people loved to eat, not drowning in elaborate sauces or a menu people wanted to face only once in a while. She offered fabulous pasta, which she made herself as she had learned to do in Rome and Florence, steak tartare exactly the way they made it in France. She served escargots for those who loved them, foie gras both hot and cold, and boudin noir. She offered the finest salmon, unforgettable cheeseburgers on homemade buns, mac and cheese, meat loaf and corned beef hash like your grandmother used to make, gourmet pizzas, roast and Southern fried chicken, French leg of lamb, and mashed potatoes that melted in your mouth. There was caviar and blinis, spring rolls and dim sum, Maine lobsters and crab, and soft-shell crab in the summer, fabulous shrimp and oysters that she picked out herself. The menu was a combination of everything people loved to eat, and she loved to cook, with an entire section of comfort food, everything from matzoh-ball soup to polenta, pastina, pancakes, French toast and waffles, at any hour of the day, not just for Sunday brunch. She had brought the pastry chef from the Hotel Ritz in Paris to make exquisite pastries, desserts, and soufflés. She also had good, moderate-priced wines from all over the world, with an excellent sommelier to help choose them.

The restaurant had been a hit overnight, not only with her clients but with their kids as well. Her children's menu included grilled cheese sandwiches that kids and adults loved, hot dogs and hamburgers, tiny pizzas, plain pasta with nothing on it, mac and cheese, tiny bite-sized servings of fried chicken, and French fries the way she had learned to make them in France, which everyone loved. And for the

kids' desserts, hot fudge sundaes, s'mores, banana splits, milk shakes, and root beer floats. When parents told their kids they were going to April's, their children were ecstatic. And if an adult wanted to order from the children's menu, that was okay too. It was the kind of restaurant that April would have loved to go to as a child, and that she enjoyed as an adult. And so did everyone who went there.

They were constantly booked for lunch, dinner, and Sunday brunch. And at this time of year, for the month of November, she served white truffles with pasta or scrambled eggs for those who loved them. She paid a fortune for the white truffles, which could only be found in one area of Italy, and were flown in from Elba every November for a brief three-week season. They had just come in from Italy two days before, and only serious food enthusiasts knew and loved the delicate roots that were found underground and were pungent and aromatic when shaved on pasta or risotto. She was going to start serving them that night. One of the things she loved about her birthday was that it was white truffle season, which she was crazy about. They were a big investment for her since white truffles cost a fortune.

April in New York was a smash hit, and it was her entire life. She had no time for, or interest in, anything else. And it was only on a day like this that she allowed herself to think about what else she didn't have in her life. In fact, she had nothing else, but she didn't want anything other than a restaurant. She hadn't had a serious romance in five years, but she didn't have time for one anyway. Before that, in Paris, she had been in an abusive relationship, with another chef who walked out on her every five minutes and had once threatened her with a butcher's knife. It had taken her two years, a shrink, and eighteen months on Prozac to get over him, and she'd been gun-shy ever since. Since then, her relationships had been brief, infrequent, and

superficial. The restaurant seemed to satisfy all her needs for now.

What shocked her, and was something of a wake-up call, was turning thirty today. Thirty seemed so grown up, or maybe just plain old. It made her suddenly wonder if she'd ever be married and have kids, and how she'd feel about it if she didn't. What if all she had was a string of restaurants instead? She wanted to open a second one, one day, but not yet. She wanted to get everything about this one right first. Even after three years, there were things she still wanted to improve on, systems she wanted to refine and change. She had just hired a second sommelier, because the one she had said he was overworked and, unlike her, didn't want to work seven days a week. April didn't mind working that hard at all. It was the nature of the business. She had no idea what she'd do with herself if she took a day off, so she never did.

As she drove to the new Fulton Fish Market in the Bronx, she thought about her birthday again. Her mother had always loved the fact that they were born on the same day, but it had always annoyed April as a child. She hated sharing "her day" with someone else, but now that she was older, she didn't mind. She already knew that this year was going to be hard for her mother. She had been dreading turning sixty for months. And if April felt a little skittish about turning thirty, she could only imagine how much worse it was for her mother, whose success rested partly on her image of youth. April felt sorry for her, and she knew that it bothered her mother too that there hadn't been a serious man in her own life, or even any man, for several years. She worried about that for April too, and nagged her about it from time to time. April didn't have time to think about it, and it was only on a day like today that it came to mind. She forgot about it again as she got out of her truck and joined in the fray at the fish market, where other chefs were selecting seafood for their restaurants. She was busy