



Sisters
Danielle
Steel

About the Book

Four sisters, a Manhattan brownstone and a tumultuous year of loss and courage . . .

Candy is blazing her way through Paris, New York and Tokyo as fashion's latest international supermodel.

Tammy has a job producing the most successful hit show on TV, and a home she loves in Hollywood.

Sabrina, the eldest, is an ambitious young lawyer in New York.

Annie lives in Florence, devoted only to her art.

On one Fourth of July weekend, as they do every year, the four sisters come home to Connecticut for their family's annual gathering. But before the holiday is over, tragedy strikes and their world is utterly changed. Suddenly, they need to support each other and their father, and to pick up the pieces while one sister struggles to heal her shattered body and soul.

The year passes and another Fourth of July approaches - a season of grief and change gives way to new beginnings as the family comes together to savour its blessings and a future filled with unexpected gifts, surprises and, ultimately, hope.

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About the Author

Also by Danielle Steel

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One tumultuous year.

One Manhattan brownstone.

And four very different young women ...

Sisters

DANIELLE
STEEL

Sisters

To my mother Norma,
and to my incredibly wonderful fantastic most
fabulous in the entire world loving daughters:
Beatrix, Sam, Victoria, Vanessa, and Zara.

May you always, always, always be there for each
other, with tenderness, compassion, patience, loyalty,
and love. You are each the best gift that I have given
to the others.

And to Simon, Mia, Chiquita, Talulah, Gidget, and
Gracie, the absolutely best, most adorable, and most
beautiful dogs on the planet.

with all my love,
Mom/d.s.

Chapter 1

The photo shoot in the Place de la Concorde, in Paris, had been going since eight o'clock that morning. They had an area around one of the fountains cordoned off, and a bored-looking Parisian gendarme stood watching the proceedings. The model stood in the fountain for hours on end, jumping, splashing, laughing, her head thrown back in practiced glee, and each time she did it, she was convincing. She was wearing an evening gown hiked up to her knees, and a mink wrap. A powerful battery-operated fan blew her long blond hair out in a mane behind her.

Passersby stopped and stared, fascinated by the scene as a makeup artist in a tank top and shorts climbed in and out of the fountain to keep the model's makeup perfect. By noon, the model still looked like she was having a fabulous time, as she laughed with the photographer and his two assistants between shots as well as on camera. Cars slowed as they drove by, and two American teenagers stopped and stared in amazement as they strolled by and recognized her.

"Oh my God, Mom! It's *Candy*!" the older of the two girls intoned with awe. They were on vacation in Paris from Chicago, but even Parisians recognized Candy easily. She was the most successful supermodel in America, and on the international scene, and had been since she was seventeen. Candy was twenty-one now, and had made a fortune modeling in New York, Paris, London, Milan, Tokyo, and a dozen other cities. The agency could barely handle the volume of her bookings. She was on the cover of *Vogue* at

least twice a year, and was in constant demand. Candy was, without a doubt, the hottest model in the business, and a household name even to those who knew little about fashion.

Her full name was Candy Adams, but she never used her last name, just Candy. She didn't need more than that. Everybody knew her, her face, her name, her reputation as one of the world's leading models. She managed to make everything look like fun, whether she was running through snow barefoot in a bikini in the freezing cold in Switzerland, walking through the surf in an evening gown in the winter on Long Island, or wearing a full-length sable coat under a blazing sun in the Tuscan hills. Whatever she did, she looked as though she was having a ball doing it. Standing in the fountain in the Place de la Concorde in July was easy, despite the heat and the morning sun, in one of Paris's standard summer heat waves. The shoot was for another *Vogue* cover, for the October issue, and the photographer, Matt Harding, was one of the biggest in the business. They had worked together hundreds of times over the last four years, and he loved shooting with her.

Unlike other models as important as she was, Candy was always easy—good-natured, funny, irreverent, sweet, and surprisingly naïve after the success she'd enjoyed since the beginning of her career. She was just a nice person, and an incredible beauty. She didn't have a single bad angle. Her face was virtually perfect for the camera, with no flaws, no defects. She had the delicacy of a cameo, with finely carved features, miles of naturally blond hair that she wore long most of the time, and blue eyes the color of sky and the size of saucers. Matt knew she liked to party hard and stay out late, and amazingly it never showed in her face the next day. She was one of the lucky few who could get away with playing and never have it show afterward. She wouldn't be able to get away with it forever, but for now she still could.

If anything, she only got prettier with age, although at twenty-one, one could hardly expect her to be touched by the ravages of time, but some models started to show it even at her age. Candy didn't. And her natural sweetness still showed through just as it had the first day he'd met her, when she was seventeen and doing her first shoot for *Vogue* with him. He loved her. Everyone did. There wasn't a man or woman in the business who didn't love Candy.

She stood six foot one in bare feet, weighed a hundred and sixteen pounds on a heavy day, and he knew she never ate, but whatever the reason for her light weight, it looked great on her. Although she was thin in person, she always looked fabulous in the images he took of her. Just like *Vogue*, which adored her and had assigned him to work with her on this shoot, Candy was his favorite model.

They wrapped up the shoot at twelve-thirty, and she climbed out of the fountain as though she had only been in it for ten minutes, instead of four and a half hours. They were doing a second setup at the Arc de Triomphe that afternoon, and one that night at the Eiffel Tower, with the sparklers going off behind them. Candy never complained about difficult conditions or long hours, which was one of the reasons photographers loved working with her. That, and the fact that you couldn't get a bad photograph of her. Her face was the most forgiving on the planet, and the most desirable.

"Where do you want to go for lunch?" Matt asked her, as his assistants put away his cameras and tripod and locked up the film, while Candy slipped out of the white mink wrap and dried her legs with a towel. She was smiling, and looked as though she had enjoyed it thoroughly.

"I don't know. L'Avenue?" she suggested with a smile. She was easy. They had plenty of time. It would take his assistants roughly two hours to set up the shoot at the Arc de Triomphe. He had gone over all the details and angles

with them the day before, and he didn't need to be there until they had the shot fully ready. That gave him and Candy a couple of hours for lunch. Many models and fashion gurus frequented L'Avenue, also Costes, the Buddha Bar, Man Ray, and an assortment of Paris haunts. He liked L'Avenue too, and it was close to where they were going to shoot that afternoon. He knew it didn't matter where they went, she wasn't likely to eat much anyway, just consume gallons of water, which was what all the models did. They flushed their systems constantly so they didn't gain an ounce. And with the two lettuce leaves Candy usually ate, she was hardly likely to put on weight. If anything, she got thinner every year. But she looked healthy, in spite of her enormous height, and ridiculously light weight. You could see all the bones in her shoulders, chest, and ribs. Just as she was more famous than most of her counterparts, she was also thinner than most. It worried Matt for her sometimes, although she just laughed when he accused her of having an eating disorder. Candy never responded to comments about her weight. Most major models flirted with or suffered from anorexia, or worse. It went with the territory. Humans didn't come in these sizes, not after the age of nine. Adult women, who ate even halfway normally, just weren't that thin.

They had a car and driver who took them to the restaurant on the Avenue Montaigne, and as usual at that hour and time of year, it was mobbed. The couture collections were being shown the following week, and designers, photographers, and models had already started to fly in. In addition, it was high tourist season in Paris. Americans loved the restaurant, but so did trendy Parisians. It was always a scene. One of the owners spotted Candy immediately, and showed them to a table on the glassed-in terrace, which they referred to as the "Veranda." It was where she liked to sit. She loved the fact that she could

smoke in any restaurant in Paris. She wasn't a heavy smoker, but indulged occasionally, and she liked having the freedom to do it, without getting dark looks or ugly comments. Matt commented that she was one of the few women who made smoking look appealing. She did everything with grace, and could make tying her shoelaces look sexy. She simply had that kind of style.

Matt ordered a glass of white wine before lunch, and Candy asked for a large bottle of water. She had left the giant water bottle she usually toted around in the car. She ordered a salad for lunch, without dressing, Matt ordered steak tartare, and they settled back to relax, as people at tables around them stared at her. Everyone in the place had recognized her. She was wearing jeans and a tank top and flat silver sandals she had bought the year before in Portofino. She often had sandals made there, or in St. Tropez; she usually got there every summer.

“Are you coming down to St. Tropez this weekend?” Matt asked, assuming she was. “There's a party on Valentino's yacht.” He knew that Candy would have been one of the first to be asked, and she rarely turned down an invitation, and surely not this one. She usually stayed at the Byblos Hotel, with friends, or on someone's yacht. Candy always had a million options, and was in huge demand, as a celebrity, a woman, and a guest. Everyone wanted to be able to say she'd be there, so others would come. People used her as a lure, and proof of their social prowess. It was a hard burden to carry, and often crossed the line into exploitation, but she didn't seem to mind, and was used to it. She went where she wanted to, and where she thought she'd have the best time. But this time she surprised him. Despite her incredible looks, she was a woman of many facets, and not the mindless, superficial beauty some expected. Candy was not only gorgeous but decent, and very bright, even if still naïve and young, despite her

success. Matt liked that about her. There was nothing jaded about Candy, and she enjoyed it all, whatever she did.

"I can't go to St. Tropez," she said, picking at her lettuce. So far, he had seen her actually swallow two bites.

"Other plans?"

"Yeah," she said simply, smiling. "I have to go home. My parents give a Fourth of July party every year, and my mother would kill me if I didn't show up. It's a command performance for me and my sisters." Matt knew she was close to them. None of her sisters were models, and if he remembered correctly, she was the youngest. She talked about her family a lot.

"Aren't you doing the couture shows next week?" More often than not, she was Chanel's bride, and had been Saint Laurent's before they closed. She made a spectacular bride.

"Not this year. I'm taking two weeks off. I promised. Usually I go home for the party, and come back just in time for the shows. This year I figured I'd stay home for a couple of weeks and hang out. I haven't seen all my sisters in one place since Christmas. It's pretty hard with everyone away from home, mostly me. I've hardly been in New York since March, and my mom's been complaining, so I'm staying home for two weeks and then I have to go to Tokyo after that for a shoot for Japanese *Vogue*." It was where a lot of the models made big money, and Candy made more than most. The Japanese fashion magazines ate her up. They loved her blond looks and her height.

"My mom gets really pissed when I don't come home," she added, and he laughed. "What's so funny?"

"You. You're the hottest model in the business, and you're worried about your mom getting mad if you don't go home for the Fourth of July barbecue, or picnic, or whatever it is. That's what I love about you. You're really still a kid." She shrugged with an impish smile.

"I love my mom," she said honestly, "and my sisters. My mom gets really upset when we don't come home. Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas. I missed Thanksgiving once, and she gave me shit about it for a year. As far as she's concerned, family comes first. I think she's right. When I have kids, I want that too. This stuff is fun, but it doesn't last forever. Family does."

Candy still had all the same values she'd been brought up with, and believed in them profoundly, no matter how much she loved being a supermodel. But her family was even more important to her. Much more so than the men in her life, who thus far had been brief and fleeting, and from what Matt had observed were usually jerks, either young ones just trying to show off by being out with her, or older ones who often had a more sinister agenda. Like many other beautiful young women, she was a magnet to men who wanted to use her, usually by being seen with her, and enjoying the perks of her success. The most recent one had been a famous Italian playboy who was notorious for the beautiful women he went out with—for about two minutes. Before that, there had been a young British lord, who looked normal but had suggested whips and bondage, and Candy found out later he was bisexual and deep into drugs. Candy had been startled, and ran like hell, although it was not the first time she'd had that kind of offer. In the last four years, she'd heard it all. Most of her relationships had been short-lived. She didn't have the time or the desire to settle down, and the kind of men she met were not the kind she wanted to stay with. She always said that she'd never been in love, although she had been out with a lot of men, but none of them worthwhile, since the boy she'd been involved with in high school. He was still in college now, and they had lost touch.

Candy had never gone to college. Her first big modeling break had happened in her senior year in high school, and

she had promised her parents she'd go back to school later. She wanted to take advantage of the opportunities she had, while she had them. She put aside a ton of money, although she'd spent plenty on a penthouse apartment in New York, and a lot of great clothes and fancy pastimes. College was becoming an ever more unlikely plan. She just couldn't see the point. Besides, as she always pointed out to her parents, she wasn't nearly as smart as her sisters, or so she claimed. Her parents and sisters denied it, and still thought she should go to college when her life slowed down, if it ever did. But for now, she was still going at full speed, and loving every minute of it. She was on the fast track, fully enjoying the fruits of her enormous success.

"I can't believe you're going home for a Fourth of July picnic, or whatever the hell it is. Can I talk you out of it?" Matt asked hopefully. He had a girlfriend, but she wasn't in France, and he and Candy had always been good friends. He enjoyed her company, and it would be much more amusing having her in St. Tropez for the weekend.

"Nope," she answered, obviously unswayable. "My mom would be heartbroken. I can't do that to her. And my sisters would be really pissed. They're all coming home too."

"Yeah, but that's different. I'm sure they don't have choices like parties on Valentino's yacht."

"No, but they have stuff to do too. We all go home for the Fourth of July, no matter what."

"How patriotic," he said cynically, teasing her, as people continued to walk past their table and stare. You could see Candy's breasts through her paper-thin white tank top, which was a man's undershirt, a "wife beater" as they called it in the business. She wore them a lot, and didn't need a bra. She had had her breasts enlarged three years before, and they contrasted sharply with her rail-thin body. The new ones weren't huge, but they were spectacular looking and

had been done well. They were still soft to the touch, unlike most breast implants, particularly those that cost less. She had had hers done at the best plastic surgeon in New York, much to her mother and sisters' horror. But she explained that she needed to do it for her work. None of her sisters or her mother would have considered doing such a thing, and two of them didn't need to. And her mother still had a great figure and was beautiful at fifty-seven.

All the women in the family were knockouts, although their looks were very different from each other. Candy looked nothing like the other women in her family. She was by far the tallest, and she had her father's looks and height. He was a very good-looking man, had played football at Yale, was six foot four, and he had blond hair like hers when he was young. Jim Adams was turning sixty in December. Neither one of her parents looked their age. They were still a striking couple. Like Candy's sister Tammy, her mother was a redhead. Her sister Annie's hair was chestnut brown with coppery auburn highlights, and her sister Sabrina's hair was almost jet black. They had one of every color, their father liked to tease them. And in their youth, they had looked like the old Breck ads, eastern, patrician, distinguished, and handsome. The four girls had been beautiful as children, and often caused comment, and still did when they went out together, even with their mother. Because of her height, weight, fame, and profession, Candy always got the most attention, but the others were lovely too.

They finished lunch at L'Avenue. Matt ate a pink *macaron* with raspberry sauce on it, while Candy grimaced and said it was too sweet, and drank a cup of black *café filtre*, allowing herself one tiny square of chocolate as a treat, which was rare. The driver took them to the Arc de Triomphe after lunch. They had a trailer for her there, parked on the Avenue Foch, behind the Arc de Triomphe, and after a short time she emerged in a startlingly beautiful red evening

gown, trailing a sable wrap behind her. She looked absolutely breathtaking, as two policemen helped her cross through the traffic to where Matt and his crew were waiting for her under the huge French flag flying from the Arc de Triomphe. Matt beamed as he saw her coming. Candy was truly the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, and possibly in the world.

“Holy shit, kid, you look unbelievable in that dress.”

“Thanks, Matt,” she said modestly, smiling at the pair of gendarmes, who also looked dazzled by her. She had nearly caused several accidents, as crazed Parisian drivers came to a screeching halt to stare as the two policemen led her through the traffic.

They finished shooting under the Arc just after five o'clock. She went back to the Ritz for a four-hour break then. She took a shower, called her agency in New York, and was at the Eiffel Tower for the last of the shoot at nine P.M., when the light was soft. They finished shooting at one A.M., after which she went to a party she had promised to attend. And she walked back into the Ritz at four o'clock in the morning, full of energy, and none the worse for wear. Matt had dropped out two hours before. As he had pointed out, there was nothing like being twenty-one years old. At thirty-seven, he couldn't keep up with her, nor could most of the men who pursued her.

Candy packed her bags, took a shower, and lay down for an hour after that. She had had a good time that night, but the party she had gone to had been standard fare, nothing new and different for her. She had to leave the hotel at seven A.M., and be at Charles de Gaulle airport by eight o'clock for a ten A.M. flight, which would get her into Kennedy by noon, local time. With an hour to get her bags and go through customs, and a two-hour drive to Connecticut, she would be home at her parents' house by three P.M., in plenty

of time for their Fourth of July party the next day. She was looking forward to spending the night with her parents and sisters before the craziness of the party the following night.

Candy smiled at the familiar concierges and security as she walked out of the Ritz, in jeans, and a T-shirt, her hair in a ponytail she had barely bothered to comb. She was carrying a huge old alligator Hermès bag in a brandy color that she had found in a vintage store at the Palais Royal. A limousine was waiting outside for her, and she was on her way. She knew she'd be back in Paris again soon, since so much of her work was there. She had two shoots already scheduled in Paris in September, after her trip to Japan at the end of July. She hadn't figured out August yet, and was hoping to take a few days off, either in the Hamptons, or the south of France. She had endless opportunities for good times and work. It was a great life for her, and she was looking forward to spending a couple of weeks at home. It was always fun for her, even though her sisters teased her about the life she led. The little girl who had been Candace Adams, the tallest, most awkward girl in every grade, had turned into the swan who was known simply as "Candy" around the world. But even though she loved what she did, and had a great time wherever she was, there was no place like home, and no one on the planet she loved as she did her sisters and her mom. She loved her dad as well, but they shared a different bond.

As they drove through Paris in the early morning traffic, she settled back against the seat. And as glamorous as she looked, at heart she was in many ways still her mom's little girl.

Chapter 2

The sun beat down on the Piazza della Signoria in Florence, as a pretty young woman bought a gelato from a street vendor. She asked for lemon and chocolate in fluent Italian, and savored the combination as the two scoops of ice cream dripped from the cone onto her hand. She licked the excess gelato away, while the sun glinted off her dark copper hair, and she walked past the Uffizi gallery on her way home. She had lived in Florence for two years, after finishing college with a bachelor's degree in fine arts at the Rhode Island School of Design, a respected institution for people with artistic talent, mostly designers, but there had been a number of fine arts students there too. After Rhode Island, she got a master's degree at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, which she had loved too. She had dreamed of studying art in Italy all her life, and had finally come here, after Paris, and this was where she knew she was meant to be.

She took drawing classes every day, and was learning the painting techniques of the old masters. In the past year, she felt she had done some very worthwhile work, although she still felt she had much to learn. She was wearing a cotton skirt and sandals she had bought from a street vendor for fifteen euros, and a peasant blouse she had bought on a driving trip to Siena. She had never been as happy in her life as she was here. Living in Florence was her dream come true.

She was planning to attend an informal life drawing class with a live model, at an artist's studio at six o'clock that night, and she was leaving for the States the next day. She hated to leave, but had promised her mother she'd come home, as she did every year. It was wrenching for her to leave Florence even for a few days. She was returning in a week, and then leaving for a trip to Umbria with friends. She had seen a lot of Italy since she'd been there, gone to Lake Como, spent some time in Portofino, and it seemed as if she had visited every church and museum in Italy. She had a particular passion for Venice and the churches and architecture there. She knew with absolute certainty that Italy was where she was meant to be, she had come alive since she'd been there. It was where she had found herself.

She had rented a tiny garret apartment in a crumbling building, which suited her to perfection. The work she was doing showed the fruits of her hard work for the past several years. She had given her parents one of her paintings for Christmas, and they had been astounded by the depth and beauty of her work. It was a painting of a madonna and child, very much in the style of the Old Masters, and using all of her new techniques. She had even mixed the paint herself, according to an ancient process. Her mother said it was truly a masterpiece, and had hung it in the living room. Annie had carried it home herself, wrapped in newspapers, and unveiled it for them on Christmas Eve.

Now she was going home for the Fourth of July party they gave every year, which she and her sisters moved heaven and earth to attend. It was a sacrifice for Annie this year. There was so much work she wanted to do, she hated to pull herself away, even for a week. But like her sisters, she didn't want to disappoint her mother, who lived to see them, and thrived having all four of her girls home at the same time. She talked about it all year. There was no phone in Annie's quaint apartment, but her mother called her often

on her cell phone to see how she was, and she loved hearing the excitement in her daughter's voice. Nothing thrilled Annie more than her work and the deep satisfaction she derived from studying art, here at its most important source, in Florence. She got lost for hours at times in the Uffizi, studying the paintings, and drove often to see important work in neighboring towns. Florence was Mecca for her.

She had recently become romantically involved with a young artist from New York. He had arrived in Florence only six months before, and they had met only days after he arrived, when she got back from spending Christmas with her family in Connecticut. They met at the studio of a fellow artist, a young Italian, on New Year's Eve, and their romance had been hot and heavy ever since. They loved each other's work, and shared their deep commitment to art. His work was more contemporary, and hers more traditional, but many of their views and theories were the same. He had taken some time out to work as a designer, which he had hated, calling it prostitution. He had finally saved enough money to come to Italy to paint and study for a year.

Annie was more fortunate. At twenty-six, her family was still willing to help her. She could easily see herself living in Italy for the rest of her life, nothing would please her more. And although she loved her parents and sisters, she hated to go home. Every moment away from Florence and her work was painful for her. She had wanted to be an artist ever since she was a little girl, and as time went on, her determination and inspiration grew more intense. It set her apart from her sisters, whose pursuits were more worldly, and who were more involved in the moneymaking world, her oldest sister as an attorney, her next sister as the producer of a TV show in L.A., and her youngest sister as a supermodel whose face was known around the world. Annie was the only artist in the group, and could not have cared

less about “making it” in the world as a commercial success. She was happiest when deeply engrossed in her work, and never even considered whether it would sell. She realized how lucky she was to have parents who supported her passion, although she was determined to become self-supporting one day. But for now, she was soaking up ancient techniques and the extraordinary atmosphere of Florence like a sponge.

Her sister Candy was in Paris often, but Annie could never tear herself away from her work to see her, and although she loved her youngest sister deeply, she and Candy had very little in common. When she was working, Annie didn't even care if she combed her hair, and everything she owned was splattered with paint. Candy's world of beautiful people and high fashion was light-years from her world of starving artists, and discovering the best way to mix her paints. Whenever she saw Candy, her supermodel sister tried to convince Annie to get a decent haircut and wear makeup, and Annie just laughed. It was the farthest thing from her mind. She hadn't been shopping or bought anything new to wear in two years. Fashion never made a blip on her radar screen. Annie ate, slept, drank, and lived art. It was what she knew and loved, and her current boyfriend Charlie was as passionate about it as she. They had been nearly inseparable for the past six months, and had traveled all over Italy together, studying both important and obscure works of art. The relationship was really going well. As she had told her mother on the phone, he was the first noncrazy artist she had ever met, and they had so much in common. Annie's only concern was that he planned to go back to New York at the end of the year, unless she could convince him to stay. She worked on him every day to extend his stay in Florence. But as an American, he couldn't work legally in Italy, and his money would run out eventually. With her parents' backing, Annie could live as long as she wanted in

Florence. She was well aware of and deeply grateful for the blessing they provided her.

Annie had promised herself to be financially independent by the time she was thirty, hoping to sell her paintings in a gallery by then. She had had two shows in a small gallery in Rome, and had sold several paintings. But she couldn't have managed without her parents' help. It embarrassed her at times, but there was no way she could live on the sales of her paintings yet, and maybe not for many years. Charlie teased her about it at times, without malice, but he never failed to point out that she was one lucky girl, and if she was living in a threadbare-looking garret, it was something of a fraud. Her parents could have afforded to rent her a decent apartment, if she so chose. That was certainly not the case for most of the artists they knew. And however much he might have teased her about her parents supporting her, he had a deep respect for her talent and the quality of the work she produced. There was no question in his mind, or anyone else's, that she had the potential to be a truly extraordinary artist, and even at twenty-six she was well on her way. Her body of work showed depth, substance, and remarkable skill with technique. Her sense of color was delicate. Her paintings were a clear indication that she had a real gift. And when she mastered a particularly difficult subject, Charlie told her how proud of her he was.

He had wanted to travel to Pompeii with her that weekend, to study the frescoes there, and she had told him that she was going home for the week, for the Fourth of July party her parents gave every year.

"Why is that such a big deal?" He wasn't close to his family, and had no plans to visit them during his sabbatical year. He had mentioned more than once that he thought it was childish of her to be so attached to her sisters and parents. She was twenty-six after all.

"It's a big deal because my family is very close," she explained. "It's not about the Fourth of July as a holiday. It's about spending a week with my sisters, and my mom and dad. I go home for Thanksgiving and Christmas too," she warned, so there would be no disappointment or misunderstanding about it later on. The holidays were sacred times for all of them.

Charlie had been mildly annoyed, and rather than waiting for another week to go to Pompeii with her, he said he would make the trip with another artist friend. Annie was disappointed not to go with him, but decided not to make an issue of it. At least that way he'd have something to do while she was gone. He had recently hit a slump in his work, and was struggling with some new techniques and ideas. For now, it wasn't going well, although she was sure he'd pull out of it soon. He was a very talented artist, although an older artist who had advised him in Florence said that the purity of his work had been corrupted by the time he had spent doing design. The senior artist thought there was a commercial quality to his work which he needed to undo. His comments had insulted Charlie profoundly, and he hadn't spoken to his self-appointed critic for weeks. He was extremely sensitive about his art, as many artists were. Annie was more open to critiques, and welcomed them, in order to improve her work. Like her sister Candy, there was a surprising modesty about her, and who she was. She was without artifice or malice, and was astonishingly humble about her work.

She had been trying to get Candy to visit her for months, and between her trips to Paris and Milan, there had been ample opportunity, but Florence was off Candy's beaten path, and Annie's scene among starving artists wasn't for her. Candy loved going to places like London and St. Tropez between jobs. Annie's art scene in Florence was light-years from Candy's life, and the reverse was true as well. Annie

had no desire to fly to Paris to meet her sister, or stay in fancy hotels like the Ritz. She was much happier wandering around Florence, eating gelato, or going to the Uffizi for the thousandth time in her sandals and peasant skirt. She preferred that to getting dressed up or wearing makeup or high heels, as everyone in Candy's crowd did. She disliked the superficial people Candy hung out with. Candy always said that Annie's friends all looked like they needed a bath. The two sisters lived in totally different worlds.

"When are you leaving again?" Charlie asked her, when he came to her apartment. She had promised to cook him dinner the night before she left, after her class. She bought fresh pasta, tomatoes, and vegetables, and she planned to make a sauce she had just heard about. Charlie brought a bottle of Chianti, and poured her a glass while she cooked, as he admired her from across the room. She was a beautiful girl, completely natural and unassuming. To anyone who met her, she seemed like a simple girl, when in fact she was extremely well educated in her field, highly trained, and came from a family that he had long since guessed was very well off, although Annie never mentioned the advantages she had had in her youth, and still did. She led a quiet, hardworking artist's life. The only sign of her somewhat upper-class roots was the small gold signet ring she wore on her left hand, with her mother's crest. Annie was quiet and modest about that too. The only yardstick she measured herself and others by was how hard they worked on their art, how dedicated they were.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," she reminded him, as she set down a big bowl of pasta on the kitchen table. It smelled delicious, and she grated the Parmesan herself. The bread was hot and fresh. "That's why I'm cooking for you tonight. When are you and Cescio going to Pompeii?"

"Day after tomorrow," he said quietly, smiling at her across the table, as they sat down on two of the unmatched,

slightly shaky chairs she had found discarded in the street. She had acquired most of her furniture that way. She spent as little as possible of her parents' money, just for rent and food. There were no obvious luxuries in her life. And the little car she drove was a fifteen-year-old Fiat. Her mother was terrified it wasn't safe, but Annie refused to buy a new one.

"I'm going to miss you," he said sadly. It was going to be the first time they'd been separated since they met. He told her he was in love with her within a month of their first date. She liked him better than she had anyone in years, and was in love with him too. The only thing that worried her about their relationship was that he was going back to the States in six months. He was already nagging her to move back to New York, but she wasn't ready to leave Italy yet, even for him. It was going to be a hard decision for her when he left. Despite her love for him, she was loath to give up the opportunity for ongoing studies in Florence for any man. Until now, her art had always come first. This was the first time she had ever questioned that, which was scary for her. She knew that if she left Florence for him, it would be a huge sacrifice for her.

"Why don't we go somewhere after we get back from Umbria?" he suggested, looking hopeful, and she smiled. They were planning to go to Umbria with friends in July, but he loved and needed time alone with her.

"Wherever you want," she said, and meant it. He leaned across the table and kissed her then, and she served him the pasta, which they both agreed was delicious. The recipe had been good, and she was a very good cook. He often said that meeting her had been the best thing that had happened to him since he'd arrived in Europe. When he said it, it touched her heart.

She was taking photographs of him to show her sisters and her mom, but they had figured out that this was an

important relationship for her. Her mother had already said to her sisters that she hoped Charlie would convince Annie to move back. She respected what Annie was doing in Italy, but it was so far away, and she never wanted to come home anymore, she was so happy there. It had been a great relief when she'd agreed to come home for the Fourth of July, as usual. Her mother was afraid with each passing year that one of them would break tradition and stop coming home as they always had. And once that happened, it would never be the same again. So far none of the girls was married or had children, but their mother was well aware that once that happened, things would change. In the meantime, until it did, she savored her time with them, and cherished their visits every year. She realized that it was nothing short of a miracle that all four of her daughters still came home three times a year, and even managed to visit whenever possible in between.

Annie came home less frequently than the others, but she was religious about the three major holidays they celebrated together. Charlie was far less involved with his family and said he hadn't been home to New Mexico to see them for nearly four years. She couldn't imagine not seeing her parents or sisters for that long. It was the one thing she missed in Florence, her family was too far away.

Charlie drove her to the airport the next day. It was going to be a long journey for her. She was flying to Paris, had a three-hour layover at the airport, and was catching a four ^{P.M.} flight to New York. She was getting to New York at six, local time, and expected to be home just after they finished dinner around nine. She had called her sister Tammy the week before, and they were getting home within half an hour of each other. Candy was arriving earlier, and Sabrina only had to drive in from New York, if she could drag herself out of the office, and of course she was bringing her awful dog. Annie was the only member of the family who hated

dogs. The others were inseparable from theirs, except Candy when she traveled for work. She had her absurdly spoiled toy Yorkshire terrier with her the rest of the time, usually dressed in pink cashmere sweaters and bows. Annie had missed out on the dog-loving gene, although her mother was happy to have them home, with or without dogs.

"Take care of yourself," Charlie said solemnly, and then kissed her long and hard. "I'm going to miss you." He looked tragic and abandoned as she left.

"Me too," Annie said softly. They had made love for hours the night before. "I'll call you," she promised. They stayed in touch by cell phone when they were apart, even for a few hours. Charlie liked to stay in close touch with the woman he loved, and to have her near at hand. He had told her once that she was more important to him than his family. She couldn't say the same, and wouldn't have, but there was no question in her mind that she was very much in love with him. For the first time, she felt as though she had met a kindred spirit, and maybe even a possible mate, although she had no desire to marry for the next several years, and Charlie said the same. But they were thinking of living together for the last months of his stay, and had talked about it again the night before. She was thinking about suggesting it to him when she got back. She knew it was what he wanted, and she was ready to consider it now. They had gotten extremely close to each other in the last six months. Their lives were completely intertwined. He often said to her that he would love her no matter what, if she got fat, old, lost her teeth, her talent, or her mind. She had laughed at what he said, and assured him that she would do her best not to lose her teeth or mind. What mattered most to both of them was their art.

They called her flight then, and they kissed one last time before she left. She waved before disappearing through the

gate, and her last sight of him was a tall, handsome young man waving at her with a look of longing in his eyes. She hadn't invited him to join her this time, but she was thinking of doing so for her Christmas trip, particularly if it was around the time he was going back. She wanted him to meet her family, although she knew that her sisters could be a little overwhelming at times. They all had strong opinions, particularly Sabrina and Tammy, and were all so different from Annie and the life she led. In many ways, she had more in common with Charlie than with them, although she loved them more than life itself. Their sisterly bond was sacred to each of them.

Annie settled into her seat for the brief flight to Paris. She sat next to an old woman who said she was going to visit her daughter there. After they landed, Annie wandered around the Paris airport. Charlie called her on her cell phone, the moment she turned it on after the flight.

"I miss you already," he said mournfully. "Come back. What am I going to do without you for a week?" It was unlike him to be that clingy, and it touched her that he was. They had been together so much that this trip was hard for both of them. It made her realize how attached to each other they had become.

"You'll have fun in Pompeii," she reassured him, "and I'll be back in a few days. I'll bring you back some peanut butter," she promised. He'd been complaining about missing it since he arrived. There was nothing about the States that Annie missed, except her family. Otherwise she loved living in Italy, and had adapted totally to the culture, language, habits, and food in the past two years. In fact, it was always a form of culture shock now when she went back. She missed Italy more than she did the States, which was part of why she wanted to stay. She felt so totally at home there, as though this were meant to be her place. She hated to give that up, if Charlie wanted her to go back to the States with

him in six months. She felt torn between a man she loved, and a place where she felt so comfortable and at ease in her own skin, as though she had lived there all her life. Her Italian was fluent as well.

The Air France flight left Charles de Gaulle airport on time. Annie knew Candy had left the same airport six hours before, but Candy hadn't wanted to wait and go on Annie's flight, mostly because Candy flew first class, and Annie flew economy. But Candy was selfsupporting and Annie wasn't. She wouldn't have considered flying first class at her parents' expense, and Candy said she'd rather die than fly in economy, squashed into a seat, with no leg room, and people squeezed into their seats on either side, unable to lie down. The first-class seats turned into proper beds, and she had no desire to miss out on that. She told Annie she'd see her at home. She had thought of paying the difference in her fare but knew that Annie would never take charity from her sister.

Annie was perfectly content in her economy seat as the plane took off. And although she missed Charlie, just thinking about seeing her family made her impatient to get home. She sat back in her seat with a smile, and closed her eyes, thinking of them.