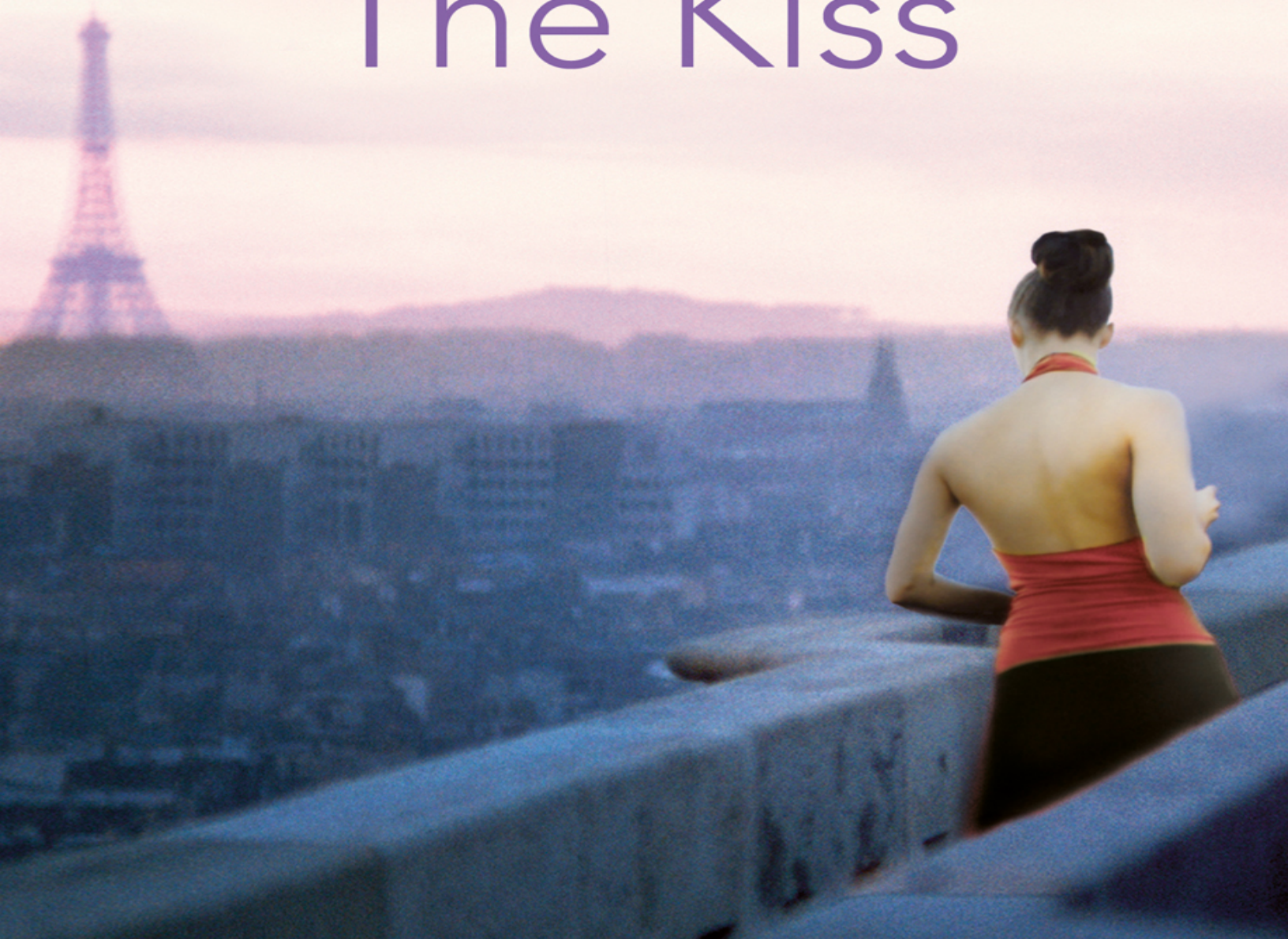


Danielle Steel

The Kiss



ABOUT THE BOOK

The longest, most winding journeys can begin with a single kiss. . .

Isabelle Forrester is the wife of a Parisian banker who has long since shut her out of his heart. Isabelle has one secret pleasure: a long-distance friendship by telephone with a Washington power broker who, like Isabelle, is trapped in a loveless marriage. To Bill Robinson, Isabelle is a kindred spirit who touches him across the miles with her warmth and gentle empathy. Agreeing to meet for a few precious, innocent days in London, they find their friendship changing, and on a warm June evening, they exchange their first, searching kiss. Time stands still – until in a flash of metal and glass a red double-decker bus, full of passengers, strikes their limousine and crushes it beneath its tremendous weight.

A long journey begins – towards healing, towards hope, towards dreams of a seemingly impossible future. Isabelle and Bill cling to life, their bodies shattered almost beyond repair. Together they must find the strength not only to embrace life again but to face what they have left behind. A tangle of changing relationships and the tragedy of another loss conspire to separate them once again. . . and this time they could lose each other forever.

In a novel as compelling as it is compassionate, Danielle Steel weaves a story of courage in the face of unimaginable loss.

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Read an Extract from *A Perfect Life*

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Also by Danielle Steel

Copyright

*A single shattering moment
can change lives forever....*

THE KISS

DANIELLE STEEL

THE KISS

*"Courage is not the absence of
fear or despair,
but the strength to conquer them."*

*To my wonderful children,
who are my heart, my soul,
my courage,
To Beatrix, Trevor, Todd, Nick,
Sam, Victoria, Vanessa, Maxx,
and Zara,*

With all my love,

Mom

d.s.

A single moment,
etched in time,
shining brightly
like a star
in a midnight sky,
an aeon, an instant,
a million years
pressed into one,
when all stands still
and life explodes
into infinite dreams,
and all is changed
forevermore,
in the blink of an eye.

Chapter 1

Isabelle Forrester stood looking down at the garden from her bedroom window, in the house on the rue de Grenelle, in the seventh arrondissement in Paris. It was the house she and Gordon had lived in for the past twenty years, and both her children had been born there. It had been built in the eighteenth century, and had tall, imposing bronze doors on the street that led to the inner courtyard. The house itself was built in a U-shape around the courtyard. The house was familiar and old and beautiful, with tall ceilings and splendid boiseries, lovely moldings, and parquet floors the color of brandy. Everything around her shone and was impeccably tended. Isabelle ran the house with artistry and precision, and a firm but gentle hand. The garden was exquisitely manicured, and the white roses she'd had planted years before were often called the most beautiful in Paris. The house was filled with the antiques she and Gordon had collected over the years, locally and on their travels. And a number of them had been her parents'.

Everything in the house shone, the wood was perfectly oiled, the silver polished, the crystal sconces on the walls sparkled in the bright June sun that filtered through the curtains into her bedroom. Isabelle turned from the view of her rose garden with a small sigh. She was torn about leaving Paris that afternoon. She so seldom went anywhere anymore, the opportunities were so rare. And now that she

had a chance to go, she felt guilty about it, because of Teddy.

Isabelle's daughter, Sophie, had left for Portugal with friends the day before. She was eighteen years old and going to university in the fall. It was Isabelle's son, Theodore, who kept her at home, and had for fourteen years now. Born three months premature, he had been badly damaged at birth, and as a result, his lungs had not developed properly, which in turn had weakened his heart. He was tutored at home, and had never been to school. At fourteen, he had been bedridden for most of his life, and moved around the house in a wheelchair whenever he was too weak to do so under his own steam. When the weather was warm, Isabelle wheeled him into the garden, and depending on how he felt, he would walk a little bit, or just sit. His spirit was indomitable, and his eyes shone the moment his mother came into the room. He always had something funny to say, or something to tell her. Theirs was a bond that defied words and time and years, and the private terrors they had faced together. At times she felt as though they were two people with one soul. She willed life and strength into him, talked to him for hours, read to him, held him in her arms when he was too weak and breathless to speak, and made him laugh whenever she could. He saw life as she did. He always reminded her of a tiny fragile bird with broken wings.

She and Gordon had spoken to his doctors of a heart-lung transplant, performed in the States, but their conclusion was that he was too weak to survive the surgery or perhaps even the trip. So there was no question of risking either. Theodore's world consisted of his mother and sister and was limited by the elegant confines of the house on the rue de Grenelle. His father had always been uncomfortable in the face of his illness, and Teddy had had nurses all his life, but it was his mother who tended to him most of the time. She

had long since abandoned her friends, her own pursuits, and any semblance of a life of her own. Her only forays into the world in recent years were in the evening, with Gordon, and only rarely. Her entire mission in life was keeping Teddy alive, and happy. It had taken time and attention away from his sister, Sophie, over the years, but she seemed to understand it, and Isabelle was always loving to her. It was just that Teddy had to be the priority. His life depended on it. In the past four months, ever since the early spring, Theodore had been better, which was allowing his mother this rare and much-anticipated trip to London. It had been Bill Robinson's suggestion, a seemingly impossible one at first glance.

Isabelle and Bill had met four years before at a reception given by the American ambassador to France, who was an old classmate of Gordon's from Princeton. Bill was in politics, and was known to be one of the most powerful men in Washington, and probably the wealthiest. Gordon had told her that William Robinson had been responsible for putting the last president in the Oval Office. He had inherited a vast, almost immeasurable fortune, and had been drawn to politics and the power it afforded him since his youth. It suited him, and he in fact preferred to remain behind the scenes. He was a power broker and a king maker, but what had impressed Isabelle was how quiet and unpretentious he was, when they met. When Gordon explained Bill's circumstances to her, it seemed hard to believe that he was either as wealthy or as powerful as he was. Bill was enormously unassuming and discreet, and she had instantly liked that about him. He was easygoing, and looked surprisingly young, and he had a quick sense of humor. She had sat next to him at dinner and enjoyed his company immensely. She was pleased and surprised when he wrote to her the following week, and then later sent her an out-of-print art book they had discussed, which she had told him

she had been hunting for for ages. With far more pressing pursuits at hand, she had been amazed that he remembered, and touched that he had gone to the trouble of finding it and sending it to her. Art and rare books were his passion.

They had talked endlessly about a series of paintings that had been found at the time, lost since the Nazis absconded with them during the war, which had turned up in a cave somewhere in Holland. It had led them to speak of forgeries, and art thefts, and eventually restoration, which was what she had been doing when she met Gordon. She had been an apprentice at the Louvre, and by the time she retired when Sophie was born, she had been thought to be both skillful and gifted.

Bill had been fascinated by her stories, just as she was by his, and over the next months, an odd but comfortable friendship had formed between them, via telephone and letters. She had found some rare art books to send to him, and the next time he came to Paris, he called her and asked if he could take her to lunch. She hesitated and then couldn't resist, it was one of the rare times when she left Theodore at lunchtime. Their friendship had begun nearly four years before, and Teddy was ten then. And over time, their friendship had flourished. He called from time to time, at odd hours for him, when he was working late, and it was early morning for her. She had told him that she got up at five to tend to Teddy every morning. And it was another six months before he asked her if Gordon objected to his calling her. In fact, she had never told him. Bill's friendship had become her secret treasure, which she diligently kept to herself.

"Why should he?" she asked, sounding surprised. She didn't want to discourage his calls. She enjoyed talking to him so much, and there were so many interests they shared. In an odd way, he had become her only real contact with the

outside world. Her own friends had stopped calling years before. She had become increasingly inaccessible as she spent her days and nights caring for Teddy. But she had had her own concerns about Gordon objecting to Bill's calls. She had mentioned the first art books he sent when they arrived, and Gordon looked startled but said nothing. He evidenced no particular interest in Bill's sending them to her, and she said nothing to him about the phone calls. They would have been harder to explain, and they were so innocent. The things they said to each other were never personal, never inappropriate, neither of them volunteered anything about their personal lives, and they rarely spoke of their spouses in the beginning. His was simply a friendly voice that arrived suddenly in the dark hours of the early morning. And as the phone didn't ring in their bedrooms at night, Gordon never heard them. In truth, she suspected Gordon would object, if he knew, which was why she had never told him. She didn't want to lose the gift of Bill's calls or friendship.

Bill called every few weeks at first, and then slowly the calls began to come more often. They had lunch again a year after they had met. And once, when Gordon was away, Bill took her to dinner. They dined at a quiet bistro near the house, and she was stunned to realize, when she got home, that it was after midnight. She felt like a wilted flower soaking up the sun and the rain. The things they talked about fed her soul, and his calls and rare visits sustained her. With the exception of her children, Isabelle had no one to talk to.

Gordon was the head of the largest American investment bank in Paris, and had been for years. At fifty-eight, he was seventeen years older than Isabelle. They had drifted apart over the years, she was aware of it, and thought it was because of Teddy. Gordon could not tolerate the aura of constant illness that hung over the child like a sword waiting

to fall. He had never allowed himself to be close to him, and they all knew it. His aversion to Teddy's illness was so extreme, it was almost phobic. Teddy himself was acutely aware of it, and had thought his father hated him when he was younger. But as he grew older, he saw it differently. By the time he was ten, he understood that his father was frightened by his illness, panicked almost, and the only way he could escape it was to ignore him entirely, and pretend the child didn't exist. Teddy never held it against him, and he would speak of it openly with Isabelle, with a wistful look, as though talking about a country he wished he could visit, and knew he never could. The child and his father were strangers to each other, almost as though they had never met. Gordon blocked him out, and put all his energies into his work, as he had for years, and removed himself as much as possible from life at home, particularly his wife. The only member of his family he seemed even slightly drawn to was Sophie. Her character was far more similar to his than to her mother's. Sophie and Gordon shared many of the same points of view, and a certain coolness of outlook and style. In Gordon's case, it was born of years of erecting walls between himself and the more emotional side of life, which he perceived as weakness in all instances, and had no appeal to him. In Sophie's case, she simply seemed to have inherited the trait her father had created in himself. Even as a baby, she had been far less affectionate than her brother had been, and rather than turning to anyone for help, particularly Isabelle, she preferred to do everything for herself. Gordon's coolness had translated to independence in her, and a kind of standoffish pride. Isabelle wondered sometimes if it had been her instinctive reaction to her brother needing so much of her mother's time. In order not to feel shortchanged by what was not available to her, she had convinced herself and her own little world that she needed nothing from them. She shared almost no confidences with Isabelle, and never spoke of her feelings if

she could avoid it, which most of the time she could and did. And if she confided in anyone, Isabelle knew, it was not her mother but her friends. Isabelle had always cherished the hope that once Sophie grew up, they would find some common ground and become friends. But thus far, the relationship with her only daughter had not been an easy one for her.

Gordon's coldness toward his wife, on the other hand, was far more extreme. Sophie's seeming distance from her mother could be interpreted as an attempt to stand on her own two feet, in contrast to her brother's constant neediness, and to be different from him. In her case, it seemed almost an attempt to prove that she did not need the time and energy her mother did not have to give, due to Teddy's being constantly ill. In Gordon's case, it seemed to be rooted in something far deeper, which at times seemed, or felt to Isabelle at least, like a deep resentment of her, and the cruel turn of fate that had cast a handicapped son on them, for which he appeared to blame her.

Gordon had a dispassionate view of life, and generally observed life from a safe distance, as though he were willing to watch the game but not play it, unlike Teddy and Isabelle, who were passionate about everything they felt, and expressed it. The flame that she and the child shared was what had kept Teddy alive through a lifetime of illness. And her devotion to her son had long since distanced Gordon from her. Emotionally, Gordon had been removed from her for years, since shortly after Teddy's birth. Years before she met Bill, Gordon had moved out of their bedroom. At the time, he had explained it by saying that she went to bed too late and rose too early, and it disturbed him. But she had sensed accurately that there was more to it than that. Not wanting to make things worse between them or confront him, she had never dared to challenge him about it. But she

had known for a long time that Gordon's affections for her had at first diminished, and then finally disappeared.

Isabelle could no longer even remember the last time they had touched or kissed, or made love. It was a fact of life she now accepted. She had long since learned to live without her husband's love. She had often suspected that he not only associated Teddy's illness with her, but blamed her for it, although the doctors had reassured her that his infirmities and premature birth had not been her fault. She and Gordon never actually discussed it, and there was no way to acquit herself of his silent accusations. But she always felt them, and knew they were there. It was as though just seeing Isabelle reminded Gordon of the child's sickroom, and just as he had rejected his son from birth, out of a horror of his defects and illness, he had eventually rejected Isabelle as well. He had put up a wall between himself and his wife to shut out the images of illness he detested. He hadn't been able to tolerate what he perceived as weakness since he was a child himself. The wall between them was one Isabelle no longer attempted to scale, although she had at first. Her attempts at drawing closer to him after Teddy's birth had been futile, Gordon had resisted all her efforts, until finally she accepted the vast, lonely chasm between them as a way of life.

Gordon had always been cool and businesslike by nature. He was said to be ruthless in business, and not a warm person in any aspect of his life, but in spite of that, he had been affectionate with her at first. His standoffishness had almost seemed like a challenge to her, and was unfamiliar to her. But because of that, each smile won, each warm gesture, had felt like a victory to her, and all the more impressive because he showed no warmth to anyone else. She had been very young then, and intrigued by him. He seemed so competent, and so powerful in her eyes, and in many ways impressive. He was a man in total control of

every aspect of his world. And there had been much about Isabelle that Gordon had liked, and which had reassured him that she would make a perfect wife. Her ancestry certainly, her aristocratic heritage and name, her important connections, which had served him well at the bank. Her family's fortune had evaporated years before, but their importance in social and political circles had not. Marrying her had increased his stature socially, which was an important factor for him. She was the perfect accessory to enhance both his standing and his career. And in addition to the appeal of her pedigree, there had been a childlike innocence about her that had briefly opened the door to his heart.

In spite of whatever social ulterior motives he may have had, there was a basic sweetness to Isabelle as a young girl that would have been hard for any man to resist. She was compassionate, kind, without guile. And the loftiness of Gordon's style, his considerable attentions toward her, and his exquisite manners when he courted her, had elicited a kind of hero worship from her. She was fascinated by his intelligence, impressed by his power and success in the world, and Gordon had been smooth enough with the advantage of being seventeen years older than Isabelle, to say all the right things to her. Even her family had been thrilled when he proposed. It had been obvious to them that Gordon would be a perfect husband and take extraordinarily good care of her, or so they thought. And in spite of his reputation for being tough in his dealings at the bank, he seemed extremely kind to her, which ultimately proved not to be the case.

By the time Isabelle met Bill Robinson, she was a lonely woman standing vigil over a desperately ill child, with a husband who seldom even spoke to her, and leading an unusually isolated life. Bill's voice was sometimes the only contact she had with another adult all day, other than

Teddy's doctor, or his nurse. And he appeared to be the only person in her world who was genuinely concerned about her. Gordon rarely, if ever, asked her how she was. At best, if pressed, he told her that he would be out for dinner that night, or that he was leaving in the morning on a trip. He no longer shared with her what he did in the course of his days. And their brief conversations only reinforced her feeling of being shut out of his life. The hours she spent talking to Bill opened the windows to a broader, richer world. They were like a breath of fresh air to Isabelle, and a lifeline she clung to on dark nights. It was Bill who had become her best friend in the course of their conversations over the years, and Gordon who was now the stranger in her life.

She had tried to explain it to Bill once in one of their early-morning phone calls, in the second year of their friendship. Teddy had been sick for weeks, she was feeling run-down and exhausted and vulnerable, and she was depressed over how cold Gordon had been to her the night before. He had told her that she was wasting her time nursing the boy, that it was obvious to everyone that he was going to die before long, and she had best make her peace with it. He had said that when the boy died finally, it would be a mercy for all of them. She had had tears in her voice and her eyes, when she spoke of it to Bill that morning, and he had been horrified by the callousness of the child's father, and his cruelty to Isabelle.

"I think Gordon resents me terribly for all the years I've spent taking care of Teddy. I haven't had as much time to spend with him as I should have." She entertained for him, but not as frequently as she knew he felt she should. Gordon had long since convinced her that she had failed him as a wife. And it irked Bill to hear how ready she was to accept what Gordon said.

"It seems reasonable, under the circumstances, that Teddy should be your first priority, Isabelle," Bill said gently.

He had been quietly researching doctors for her for months, in the hope of finding a miracle cure for Teddy, but he hadn't been encouraged by what he'd been told by the physicians he'd consulted. According to Isabelle, the child had a degenerative disease that was attacking his heart, his lungs were inadequate, and his entire system was slowly deteriorating. The consensus of opinion was that it would be a miracle if he survived into his twenties. And it tore at Bill's heart knowing what Isabelle went through, and would have to face someday.

Over the next few years, their friendship had deepened. They spoke on the phone frequently, and Isabelle wrote him long philosophical letters, particularly on the nights she spent awake, sitting at Teddy's bedside. Teddy had long since become the hub of her life, and not only had it alienated her from Gordon, but there were times when it also kept her from Sophie, who berated her mother for it on more than one occasion. She had accused her mother of only caring about her brother. And the only one Isabelle could talk to about it was Bill, in their lengthy conversations in the heart of the night.

The moments they shared transcended their daily realities, the pressures of the political arena seemed to vanish into thin air when he talked to her. And for Isabelle, she was transported to a time and a place when Teddy wasn't ill, Gordon hadn't rejected her, and Sophie was never angry. It was like being lifted out of the life she led into the places and topics that she had once cared about so deeply. Bill brought her a new view of the world, and they chatted easily and laughed with each other. He spoke to her of his own life at times, the people he knew, the friends he cared about, and once in a while, in spite of himself, he spoke of his wife and two daughters, both of whom were away in college. He had been married since he was twenty-two years old, and thirty years later, what he had left was only

the shell of a marriage. Cindy, his wife, had come to hate the political world, the people they met, the things Bill had to do, the events they had to go to, and the amount of time he had to travel. She had total contempt for politicians. And for Bill for having devoted a lifetime to them.

The only things Cynthia was interested in, now that the girls were gone, were her own friends in Connecticut, going to parties, and playing tennis. And whether or not Bill was part of that life seemed unimportant to her. She had shut him out emotionally years before and led her own life, not without bitterness toward him. She had spent thirty years with him coming and going, and putting political events ahead of everything that mattered to her. He had never been home for graduations and holidays and birthdays. He was always somewhere else, grooming a candidate for a primary or an election. And for the past four years, he had been a constant visitor at the White House. It no longer impressed her, and she was only too happy to tell him how much it bored her. Worse than that, she had dismissed the man along with a career she detested. Whatever there had once been between them was long gone. She had had a face-lift the year before, and he knew that she had been having discreet affairs for years. It had been her revenge for a single indiscretion he'd committed ten years before, with the wife of a congressman, and never repeated. But Cindy was not long on forgiveness.

Unlike Isabelle and Gordon, he and Cindy still shared a bedroom, but they might as well not have bothered. It had been years since they'd made love. It was almost as though she took pride in the fact that she was no longer sexually interested in her husband. She was in good shape, had a constant tan, her hair had gotten blonder over the years, and she was almost as pretty as she had been when he married her thirty years before, but there was a hardness about her now, which he felt rather than saw. The walls she

had erected between them were beyond scaling, and it no longer occurred to him to try. He put his energies into his work, and he talked to Isabelle when he needed a hand to hold or a shoulder to cry on, or someone to laugh with. It was to Isabelle that he admitted he was tired or disheartened. She was always willing to listen. She had a gentleness about her that he had never found in his wife. He had liked Cindy's lively spirit, her looks, her energy, and her sense of fun and mischief. She had been so much fun to be with when they were young, and now he wondered, if he disappeared off the face of the earth, if she would even miss him. And like their mother, his daughters seemed pleasant when they were home, but essentially indifferent to him. It no longer seemed to matter to anyone whether or not he was home. He was treated as an unexpected visitor when he arrived from a trip, and he never really felt he belonged there. He was like a man without a country. He felt rootless. And a piece of his heart was tucked away in a house on the rue de Grenelle in Paris. He had never told Isabelle he loved her, nor she him, but for years now, he had been deeply devoted to her. And Isabelle greatly admired him.

The feelings Bill and Isabelle had expressed toward each other over the years were officially never more than friendship. Neither of them had ever admitted to each other, or themselves, that there was more to it than simply admiration, ease, and a delight in the lost art of conversation. But Bill had noticed for years that when her letters didn't come, he worried, and when she couldn't take his calls, because Teddy was too ill, or she went somewhere with Gordon, he missed her. More than he would have cared to admit. She had become a fixture of sorts to him, someone he could count on and rely on. And he meant as much to her. He was the only person, other than her fourteen-year-old son, whom she could talk to. She and

Gordon had never been able to talk to each other as she and Bill did.

Gordon was in fact more English in style than American. His parents had both been American, but he had been brought up in England. He had gone to Eton, and was then sent to the United States for college, and went to Princeton. But immediately after graduation, he returned to England and from there moved to Paris for the bank. But no matter what his origins were, he appeared to be far more British than American.

Gordon had met Isabelle one summer at her grandfather's summer house in Hampshire, when she was visiting from Paris. She was twenty years old then and he was nearly forty, and had never married. Despite a string of interesting women in his life, some of them racier than others, he had never found anyone worthy of a commitment, or marriage. Isabelle's mother had been English and her father was French. She had lived in Paris all her life, but visited her grandparents in England every summer. She spoke English impeccably, and she was utterly enchanting. Charming, intelligent, discreet, affectionate. Her warmth and her light and her almost elfin quality had struck him from the moment they met. For the first time in his life, Gordon believed that he was in love. And the potential social opportunities offered by their alliance were irresistibly appealing to him. Gordon came from a respectable family, but not nearly as illustrious as Isabelle's. Her mother came from an important British banking family, and was distantly related to the queen, and her father was a distinguished French statesman. It was, finally, a match that Gordon thought worthy of him. Her lineage was beyond reproach, and her shy, genteel, unassuming ways suited him to perfection. Her mother had died before Isabelle and Gordon met, and her father was impressed by him, and approved of the match. He thought Gordon the perfect husband for

Isabelle. Isabelle and Gordon were engaged and married within a year. And he was in total command. He made it very clear to her right from the first that he would make all their decisions. And Isabelle came to expect that of him. He had correctly sensed that, because of her youth, she would pose no objections to him. He told her who they would see, where they would live, and how, he had even chosen the house on the rue de Grenelle, and bought it before Isabelle ever saw it. He was already head of the bank then, and had a distinguished position. His status was greatly enhanced by his marriage to Isabelle. And he in turn provided a safe, protected life for her. It was only as time went by that she began to notice the restrictions he placed on her.

Gordon told her who among her friends he didn't like, who she could see, and who didn't meet with his approval. He expected her to entertain lavishly for the bank, and she learned how to very quickly. She was adept and capable, remarkably organized, and entirely willing to follow his directions. It was only later that she began to feel that he was unfair at times, after he had eliminated a number of people she liked from their social circle. Gordon had told her in no uncertain terms that they weren't worthy of her. Isabelle was far more open to new people and new opportunities, and the varied schemes and choices that life offered. She had been an art student, but took a job as an apprentice art restorer at the Louvre when she married Gordon, despite his protests. It was her only area of independence. She loved the work and the people she met there.

Gordon found it a bohemian pursuit, and insisted that she give up her job the moment she got pregnant with Sophie. And after the baby was born, in spite of the joys of motherhood, Isabelle found that she missed the museum and the challenges and rewards it offered. But Gordon wouldn't hear of her returning to work after the baby was

born, and she got pregnant again very quickly, and this time lost the baby. Her recovery was long, and it wasn't as easy afterward to get pregnant again. And when she did, she'd had a difficult pregnancy with Teddy, which resulted in his premature birth, and all the subsequent worries about him.

It was then that she and Gordon began drifting apart. He had been incredibly busy at the bank then. And he was annoyed that, with a sick child under their roof, she was no longer able to entertain as frequently, or pay as close attention as he liked to her domestic and social duties to him. In truth, in those early years of Teddy's life, she had had almost no time for Gordon or Sophie, and she felt at times that they banded together against her, which seemed terribly unfair to her. Her whole life seemed to revolve around her sick child. She could never bring herself to leave him, in spite of the nurses they hired, and unfortunately by then, her father had died, her mother years before. She had no one to support her through Teddy's early years, and she was always at his side. Gordon didn't want to hear about Teddy's problems, or their medical defeats and victories. He detested hearing about it, and as though to punish her, he removed himself almost instantly from any intimacy in their marriage. It had been easy to believe eventually that he no longer loved her. She had no concrete proof of it, he never threatened to leave her, not physically at least. But she had a constantly uneasy feeling that he had set her adrift and swum off.

After Teddy, there were no more babies. Gordon had no desire for them, and Isabelle had no time. She gave everything she had to her son. And Gordon continued to convey to her, with and without words, that she had failed him. It was as though she had committed the ultimate crime, and Teddy's illness were her fault. There was nothing about the boy Gordon was proud of, not the child's artistic abilities, nor his sensitivity, nor his fine mind, nor his sense

of humor despite the burdens he bore. And Teddy's similarity to Isabelle only seemed to annoy Gordon more. He seemed to have nothing but contempt for her, and a deep, silent rage that he never expressed in words.

What Isabelle didn't know, until a cousin of Gordon's told her years later, was that Gordon had had a younger brother who suffered from a crippling illness as a child and had died at the age of nine. He had never even mentioned his brother to Isabelle, nor had anyone else. The subject was taboo to him. And although his mother had doted on Gordon when he was younger, the latter part of his childhood was spent watching his mother nurse his brother, until he died. The cousin wasn't entirely sure what the illness had been, or what had exactly happened, but she knew that Gordon's mother had fallen ill after the boy died. She had lingered then, with a long illness, and died a slow, painful death. And what seemed to have stayed with Gordon was a sense of betrayal by both of them, for stealing attention from him, and tenderness and time, and eventually dying and abandoning him.

The cousin said that her mother had been convinced that Gordon's father had died of a broken heart, although several years later, but he had never recovered from the double loss. In effect, Gordon felt he had lost his entire family as a result of one sick child. And then he lost Isabelle's time and attention to Teddy's illness. It had explained things to her when the cousin explained it to Isabelle, but when she had tried to speak of it to Gordon, he had brushed her off, and said it was all nonsense. He claimed he had never been close to his brother and had never had any particular sense of loss. His mother's death was a dim memory by then, and his father had been a very difficult man. But when Isabelle spoke to him of it, despite his protests, she had seen the look of panic in his eyes. They had been the eyes of a wounded child, not just an angry man. She wondered then if

it was why he had married so late, and remained so distant from everyone, and it explained, finally, his resistance to Teddy in every possible way. But whatever she had come to understand did not help her with Gordon. The gates to Heaven never opened between them again, and Gordon saw to it that they remained firmly closed, and stayed that way.

She tried to explain it to Bill, but he found it impossible to understand, and inhuman of Gordon to desert her emotionally. Isabelle was one of the most interesting women he'd ever met, and her gentleness and kindness only made her more appealing to him. But whatever he thought of her, Bill had never suggested any hint of romance to her, he didn't even allow himself to think it. Isabelle had conveyed to him clearly right from the first that that was not an option. If they were going to be friends, they had to respect each other's respective marriages. She was extremely proper, and loyal to Gordon, no matter how unkind he'd been to her, or distant in recent years. He was still her husband, and much to Bill's dismay, she respected him, and had a profound regard for her marriage. The idea of divorce or even infidelity was unthinkable to her. All she wanted from Bill was friendship. And no matter how lonely she was with Gordon at times, she accepted that now as an integral part of her marriage. She wasn't searching for anything more than that, and would have resisted it in fact, but she was grateful for the comfort that Bill offered. He gave her advice on many things, had the same perspective on most things as she did, and for a little while at least, while they talked, she could forget all her worries and problems. In her eyes, Bill's friendship was an extraordinary gift that he gave her, and one that she treasured. But it was no more than that.

The idea of the trip to London had come up purely by accident, during one of their early-morning conversations. She'd been talking about an upcoming exhibit at the Tate

Gallery, which she was dying to see, but knew she never would, as it wasn't scheduled to come to Paris. And Bill suggested that she fly to London for the day, or even two days, to see it, and enjoy a little time there on her own, without worrying about her husband or her children for a change. It had been a revolutionary idea to her and something she'd never done before. And at first, she insisted that she couldn't possibly go. Leaving Teddy was something she never did.

"Why not?" Bill asked finally, stretching out his long legs, and resting his shoes on his desk. It was midnight for him, and he'd been in the office since eight that morning. But he had stayed just a little later, so he could call her. "It would do you a world of good, and Teddy's been better for the past two months. If there's a problem, you could be home within a couple of hours."

It made sense, but in twenty years of marriage, she had never gone anywhere without Gordon. Theirs was a remarkably old-fashioned European marriage, unlike the very liberated arrangement he had shared in recent years with Cindy. In fact, these days, it was far more common for Bill and Cindy to travel separately than together. He no longer made any effort to spend vacations with her, except for an occasional week here and there in the Hamptons. And Cindy seemed much happier without him. The last time he had suggested they take a trip together, she had come up with a million excuses, and then left on a trip to Europe with one of their daughters. The message was clear between them. The spirit of their marriage had long since disappeared, although it was something neither of them was willing to acknowledge. She did whatever she wanted, and with whom, as long as she wasn't too obvious about it. And Bill had the political life he loved, and his phone calls to Isabelle in Paris. It was an odd disparity between them.

In the end, after several conversations, Bill convinced Isabelle to go to London. Once the decision had been made, she was excited about it. She could hardly wait to see the exhibit, and do a little shopping in London. She was planning to stay at Claridge's, and perhaps even see an old school friend who had moved to London from Paris.

It was only days later that Bill discovered he needed to meet with the American ambassador to England. He had been a major donor to the last presidential campaign, and Bill needed his support for another candidate, and he wanted to get him on board early, to establish a floor for their contributions. With his support, Bill's dark horse candidate was suddenly going to become a great deal more attractive. And it was a pleasant coincidence that Isabelle would be there at the same time. She teased him about it when he told her he would be in London when she was.

"Did you do that on purpose?" she asked with her slightly British-tinged English. And along with it, she had the faintest of French accents, which he found charming. At forty-one, she was still beautiful, and didn't look her age. She had dark brown hair with a reddish tinge, creamy porcelain skin, and big green eyes flecked with amber. At his request, she had sent him a photograph two years before, of herself and the children. He often looked at it and smiled while they were talking during their late-night or early-morning phone calls.

"Of course not," he denied it, but her question wasn't entirely inappropriate. He had been well aware of her travel plans, when he made the appointment with the ambassador in London. He had told himself that it was convenient for his schedule to be there then, but in his heart of hearts he knew there was more to it than that.

He loved seeing her, and looked forward for months to the few times a year he saw her in Paris. He either found an excuse to go, when he hadn't seen her in a while, or stopped to see her on his way to somewhere else. He

usually saw her three or four times a year, and when he was in Paris, they saw each other for lunch. She never told Gordon about it when they met, but insisted nonetheless to Bill, and herself, that there was nothing wrong or clandestine about their seeing each other. The labels she and Bill put on things were polite, concise, appropriate. It was as though they met each other carrying banners that said "friends," and they were of course. Yet he had been aware for a long time that he felt far more for her than he ever could have said to her, or anyone else.

He was looking forward to being in London. His meeting at the embassy would only occupy him for a few hours, and beyond that, he planned to spend as much time as possible with her. Bill had assured her that he was dying to see the exhibit at the Tate as well, and she was thrilled at the prospect of sharing that with him. It was after all, she told herself, her principal reason for going to London. And seeing Bill was going to be an unexpected bonus. She had it all sorted out in her head. They were the perfect friends, nothing more, and the fact that no one knew about their friendship was only because it was simpler that way. They had nothing to hide, she told herself. She wore a cloak of respectability in his regard that seemed to be desperately important to her. It was a boundary she had long since established for them, and one that Bill respected, for her sake. He would never have done anything to upset her or frighten her away. He didn't want to jeopardize anything, or anyone, that had become so infinitely precious to him.

As she stood in her bedroom in the house on the rue de Grenelle, she looked at her watch, and sighed. It was time to leave, but at the last moment, she hated the thought of leaving Teddy. She had left a thousand instructions for the nurses who would be caring for him while she was away. They were the same nurses he always had, but they were going to be sleeping in the same room with him while she

was away. And as she thought of Teddy, she tiptoed softly next door, to the bedroom next to her own. She wanted to check on Teddy one last time. She had already said good-bye to him, but she felt her heart give a tug as she thought of leaving him. And for just an instant, she wondered if it was a good idea for her to go to London. But he was sleeping peacefully when she looked in, and the nurse looked up with a smile and a wave, as though to shoo her on her way. The nurse on duty was one of Isabelle's favorites, she was a large, smiling, sunny-faced girl from Bretagne. Isabelle waved back at her, and then gently backed out of the room and closed the door. There was nothing left for her to do, it was time for her to go.

Isabelle picked up her handbag and a small overnight case, straightened the simple black suit she wore, and glanced at her watch again. She knew that at that exact moment Bill was still on his plane traveling from New York. He had been working there for the past few days. Most of the time, he commuted to Washington.

She put her suitcase on the backseat of her car, and put her black Hermes Kelly bag on the passenger seat next to her. She drove onto the rue de Grenelle with a smile in her eyes as she turned the radio on, and set off for Charles de Gaulle, as Bill Robinson sat staring out the window of the Gulfstream he owned and used constantly. He was smiling to himself as he thought of her. He had coordinated his flight to arrive in London at the same time as Isabelle's. And he was overwhelmed by a sense of anticipation.