

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# The Ranch

Danielle Steel

## About the Book

In *The Ranch*, bestselling author Danielle Steel brings reality to the meaning of friendship.

Mary Stuart, Tanya and Zoe had been inseparable in college, but had not seen each other for twenty years or more. Marriage, motherhood and careers had kept them apart until one summer, at a sprawling ranch in Wyoming, the three women are reunited and reach out to each other again.

Once they shared everything, but now pretence between them runs high. Mary Stuart, married for twenty-two years to a Manhattan lawyer, masks the guilt and fear that her husband will never forgive her for their son's death. Tanya, a singer and rock star, enjoys all the trappings of fame and success - a mansion in Bel Air, legions of fans, and a broken heart for the children she wanted but never had, and the men who have taken advantage of her, and the tabloids that have rocked her life. Zoe has her hands full as single mother to an adopted two-year-old and as a doctor at an AIDS clinic in San Francisco, until unexpected news forces her to re-evaluate both her future, and her current life.

But their friendship is still a bond they all treasure and share. For each of the women, a few weeks at the ranch bring healing and release, as old hurts are buried, ancient secrets revealed, and hope is renewed.

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About the Author

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DANIELLE STEEL

THE RANCH

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

With all my love,  
d.s.

## Chapter 1

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

Their apartment was at Seventy-eighth and Fifth, with a splendid view of Central Park. They had lived there for fifteen of the nearly twenty-two years of their marriage. Mary Stuart kept an impressive home. The children teased her sometimes about how "perfect" everything always was, how everything had to look and be just right, and it was easy to believe that about her. Just looking at her, it was easy to see that she was somewhat compulsive about it.

Even at six o'clock, on a hot June evening in New York, after six hours of meetings, Mary Stuart had just put on fresh lipstick, and she didn't have a hair out of place.

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

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



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

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

London, which had kept him away from home. And Mary Stuart had been busier than ever with her volunteer work.

Alyssa was spending her junior year at the Sorbonne. So Mary Stuart had more time to herself this year. It had given her a chance to catch up on a lot of things. She took on some additional charity work, did a lot of reading, and volunteered at the hospital on weekends. Or sometimes, on Sundays, she just indulged herself, and stayed in bed with a book, or devoured all of the *New York Times*. She had a full and busy life, and to look at her, no one would ever have suspected there was anything lacking. She looked at least five or six years younger than she was, although she had gotten thinner than usual that year, which should have been aging, but somehow it wasn't, and it actually made her seem even more youthful. There was a gentleness about her which people loved, and children responded to, particularly the ones she worked with. There was a genuine kindness which came from the soul that transcended social distinctions, and made one unaware of the world she came from. One was simply aware of something very touching about her, something almost wistful, it seemed, as one watched her, as though she understood great sorrow and had endured great sadness, and yet there was no sign of gloom about her. Her life seemed so completely perfect. Her children had always been the smartest, the most accomplished, the most beautiful. Her husband was enormously successful, both financially and in terms of the prestige he earned in winning highly visible, landmark international cases. He was highly respected in business, as well as in their social world.

Mary Stuart had everything most people wanted, and yet as one looked at her, one sensed that edge of sadness, it was a kind of compassion one felt more than saw, a loneliness perhaps, which seemed odder. How could anyone with Mary Stuart's looks and style, accomplishments and

family, be lonely? When one sensed that about her, divining her with the heart rather than the eyes, it seemed strange and unlikely, and made one question one's own intuitions about her. There was no reason to suspect that Mary Stuart Walker was lonely or sad, and yet if one looked hard enough at her, one knew she was. Behind the elegant facade, there was something tragic about her.

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

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

"They say it's going to be even hotter tomorrow," he said as he bagged her things and saw her glance at the *Enquirer*

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

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

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

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

It was a short walk to the building where she lived, and even after *six* o'clock it was still stifling. She thought Bill would be home, as usual, at around seven o'clock, and she would have dinner for him at seven-thirty or eight, depending on how he was feeling. She planned to put the potatoes in the oven when she got home, and then she'd have time to shower and change. Despite the cool way she looked, she was tired and hot after a long day of meetings.

The museum was planning an enormous fund-raising drive in the fall, they were hoping to give a huge ball in September, and they wanted her to be the chairman. But so far she had managed to decline, and was hoping only to advise them. She wasn't in the mood to put together a ball, and lately she much preferred her hands-on work, like what she did at the hospital with handicapped children, or more recently with abused kids in Harlem.

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

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

Their housekeeper was daily now, and there was no sound at all as Mary Stuart put the groceries away, turned the oven on, and stood looking for a long moment out the window at the park. She could see the playground a block away, in the park, and remembered the countless hours she had spent there, freezing in winter when her children were small, pushing them on the swings, watching them on the seesaw or just playing with their friends. It seemed a thousand years ago... too long... how did it all fly by so quickly? It seemed like only yesterday when the children were at home, when they had dinner together every night, with everyone talking at once about their activities, their plans, their problems. Even one of Alyssa and Todd's arguments would have been a relief now, and so much more comforting than the silence. It would be a relief when Alyssa came home in the fall, for her senior year at Yale after a year in Paris. At least once she was back, she'd come home occasionally for weekends.

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

"Hi, Mom... sorry I missed you. I just wanted to say hi, and see how you are. It's ten o'clock here, and I'm going out for a drink with friends. I'll be out late, so don't call me. I'll call you this weekend sometime. I'll see you in a few weeks... bye..." And then, almost as an afterthought, "... Oh... I love you..." There was a click then, when she hung up. The machine recorded the time, and Mary Stuart glanced at her watch, sorry to have missed her. It had been four o'clock in New York when Alyssa had called her, two and a half hours before. Mary Stuart was looking forward to meeting her in Paris in three weeks, and driving to the south of France, and then into Italy for a vacation. Mary Stuart planned to be there for two weeks, but Alyssa only wanted to come home

a few days before school began in September. She wanted to stay in Europe as long as she could, and was already saying that, after graduation, she wanted to go back to live in Paris. Mary Stuart didn't even want to think about that now. The last year, without her, had been far too lonely.

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

"Hi," the next message said, "this is Tony Jones, and your VCR is repaired. You can pick it up any time you want. Thanks, bye." Two messages about board meetings that had been changed. A question about the museum ball, and the committee being formed for it, and a call from the head of

volunteers at a shelter in Harlem. She jotted down a few notes, and remembered that she had to turn off the oven. Bill wasn't coming home. Again. He did that a lot now. He worked too hard. That was how he survived. And in her own way, so did she, with her endless merry-go-round of meetings and committees.

She turned off the oven, and decided to make herself eggs instead, but not yet, and then walked into her bedroom. The walls were a pale buttery yellow, with a white glazed trim, the carpet an antique needlepoint she'd bought in England. There were antique prints and water-colors on the walls, a handsome marble fireplace, and on the mantel silver-framed photographs of her children. There were comfortable overstuffed chairs on either side of it, and she and Bill liked to sit by the fire and read at night, or on weekends. They spent most of their weekends in the city now, and had for the past year. They had sold the house in Connecticut the summer before. With the children gone, and Bill traveling constantly, they never went there.

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

As she walked into the bedroom, and set down her handbag, her eyes went unwittingly toward the mantel. It was still reassuring to see them there, the children when they were four and five and ten and fifteen... the dog they had had when they were small, a big friendly chocolate Lab named Mousse. As always, she found herself drawn to them, and stood staring at their pictures. It was so easy to look at them, to just stand there and remember. It was like being drawn into another time, and she so often wished she could go back to that earlier time, when all their problems had



been simple. Todd's blond, cheery little face looked out at her from when he was a little boy and she could hear him calling her name again... or see him chasing the dog... or falling into the swimming pool when he was three and she dived in after him with all her clothes on. She had saved him then. She had always been there for him, and for Alyssa. There was a photograph of all of them three Christmases before, laughing, their arms around each other, horsing around while an exasperated photographer had begged them to be serious for a moment so he could take their picture.

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

"Stop that!" She nodded in answer. She knew better than to let herself do that. Self-indulgence was a luxury she could no longer afford. All she could do now was move forward. But she had moved to an unfamiliar land with a landscape she didn't like. It was bleak and unpopulated, and at times unbearably lonely. At times, she felt as though she had come there by herself, except that she knew Bill was there too, lost in the desert somewhere, in his own private hell. She had been searching for him there for over a year, but as yet she hadn't found him.

She thought about making herself dinner then, but decided she wasn't hungry, and after taking off her suit, and changing into a pink T-shirt and jeans, she went back to the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Pretty, isn’t it? It’s particularly nice, since my current trainer is a woman. I fired the guy on the cover of the *Enquirer* last year. He called today, threatening to sue me, because his wife is furious about the piece. He’s got a lot to learn about the tabloids.” Tanya herself had learned it all the hard way. “And to answer your question, yeah, I’m okay. Sort of.” She had a soft purr that drove most men crazy, and Mary Stuart smiled when she heard her. It was like a breath of fresh air in a stifling room. She had felt that way about her the first day she met her. They had gone to college together twenty-six years before, in Berkeley. Those had

been crazy days, and they'd all been so young. There were four of them then. Mary Stuart, Tanya, Eleanor, and Zoe. They were suite mates in the dorm for the first two years, and then they'd rented a house on Euclid.

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

fantastic career. Twenty years after she'd begun, she was still the number one female singer in the country.

She and Mary Stuart had stayed good friends. Mary Stuart had married the summer after graduation too. But Zoe had gone on to medical school. She had always been the rebel in their midst, the one who burned for all the most revolutionary causes. The others used to tease her that she had come to Berkeley ten years too late, but it was she who always rallied them, who demanded that everything be fair and right, she who fought for the underdog in every situation... It was she who had found Ellie when she died, who had cried so desperately, and had had the guts to call Ellie's aunt and uncle. It had been a terrible time for all of them. Ellie had been closest to Mary Stuart, and she had been a wonderful, gentle girl, full of idealistic ideas and dreams. Her parents had been killed in an accident junior year, and her three roommates had become family to her. Mary Stuart wondered at times if she would ever have been able to cope with the pressures of the outside world. She was so delicate as to be almost unreal, and unlike the others, with their life's goals and their plans, she had been completely unrealistic, a total dreamer. She died three weeks before graduation. Tanya almost delayed her wedding over it, but they all agreed Ellie would have wanted it to go on and Tanya said that Bobby Joe would have killed her if she'd postponed it. Mary Stuart had been Tanya's maid of honor, and Zoe was her only bridesmaid.

Tanya would have been in Mary Stuart's wedding too, except that she was giving her first concert in Japan at the time. And Zoe hadn't been able to leave school. Mary Stuart was married at her parents' home in Greenwich.

The second time Tanya got married, Mary Stuart had seen it on the news. Tanya was twenty-nine, married her manager, and had a quiet ceremony in Las Vegas, followed by tabloids, helicopters, TV cameras, and every member of

the press that could be deployed within a thousand miles of Vegas.

Mary Stuart had never liked Tanya's new husband. Tanya said she wanted kids this time, they were going to buy a house in Santa Barbara, or Pasadena, and have a "real life." She had the right idea, but this time her husband didn't. He had two things on his mind, Tanya's career, and her money. And he did everything he could to push the one in order to obtain the other. Professionally, Tanya always said, he did a lot of good things for her. He made changes she could never have made on her own, set up concerts around the world for her, got her record contracts that broke all records, and pushed her from superstar to legend. After that, she could ask for just about anything she wanted. In the five years they were married, she had three platinum records, and five gold ones, and won every Grammy and musical award she could lay her hands on. And in spite of the small fortune he took from her in the end, her future was assured, her mom was living in a five-million-dollar house in Houston, and she had bought her sister and brother-in-law an estate near Armstrong.

She herself had one of the prettiest houses in Bel Air, and a ten-million-dollar beach house in Malibu she never went to. Her husband had wanted her to buy it. She had money and fame, but no kids. And after the divorce, she thought she needed a change, and started acting. She made two movies the first year, and won an Academy Award the second. At thirty-five, Tanya Thomas had anything and everything that most people thought she might have dreamed of. What she had never had was the life she would have shared with Bobby Joe, affection, love, and support, someone to be with her, and care about her, and children. And it was another six years before she married her third husband, Tony Goldman. He was a real estate developer in the Los Angeles area, and had gone out with half a dozen

starlets. There was no doubt that he was impressed with Tanya's career, but even Mary Stuart, always fiercely defensive on her friend's behalf, had to admit that he was a decent guy and obviously cared deeply about her. What worried Tanya's friends, and they were numerous by then, was whether or not Tony could keep his head in the heat of Tanya's life, or would it all be too much for him, and he'd go crazy. From all Mary Stuart had heard in the past three years, she had the impression that things had gone well, and she knew better than anyone, after being close to Tanya for the twenty years of her career, that what she read in the tabloids meant nothing.

The big draw Tony had had for her, Mary Stuart knew, was that Tony was divorced and had three children. They had been nine, eleven, and fourteen the day of the wedding, and Tanya loved them dearly. The oldest and youngest were boys and were crazy about her, and the little girl was completely bowled over by her and couldn't believe that Tanya Thomas was marrying her father. She bragged about it to everyone, and even started trying to look and dress like Tanya, which on an eleven-year-old was less than appropriate, and Tanya used to take her shopping and buy her things constantly to tone it down, but still make her feel pretty. She was great with the kids, and kept talking about having a baby. But having married Tony at forty-one, she was hesitant about getting pregnant. She was afraid she was too old, and Tony was not keen on having more children, so Tanya never pushed it. She had enough on her plate without negotiating with Tony about having a baby. She had two concert tours back-to-back in the first two years of their marriage, the tabloids were going crazy with her, and she had been battling a couple of lawsuits. It was hardly an atmosphere conducive to sanity, let alone conception. It was easier to just take on Tony's kids, and she had, wholeheartedly. He even said that she was a better

mother to them than his first wife. But Mary Stuart had noticed that in spite of Tony's easy, friendly ways, Tanya always seemed to be handling everything herself, managers, lawyers, concert tours, death threats, facing all the agonies and worries alone, while Tony closed his own business deals, or went to Palm Springs to play golf with his buddies. He seemed less involved in her life than Mary Stuart had hoped he would be. She knew better than anyone how rough Tanya's life was, how lonely, how hard she worked, how brutal the demands of the fans, how painful the betrayals. Oddly enough, Tanya rarely complained, and Mary Stuart always admired her for it. But it annoyed her when she saw Tony waving to the cameras as they went to the Oscars or the Grammys. He always seemed to be around for the good times, and none of this hard stuff. Mary Stuart thought of that now, as Tanya mentioned the trainer's wife who had called threatening her, over the headlines in the tabloids. Tanya had learned better than anyone over the years that there was nothing anyone could do to fight the tabloids. "Actually, Tony wasn't too thrilled either," Tanya said very quietly. The tone of her voice concerned Mary Stuart. She sounded tired and lonely. She had been fighting all the same battles for a long time, and they were very wearing. "Every time the tabloids claim I'm having an affair, he goes crazy. He says I'm embarrassing him with his friends, and he doesn't like it. I can see his point." She sighed, but there was nothing she could do about it. There was no way to stop them. And the press loved to torment her, with her splendid blond mane, her huge blue eyes, and her spectacular figure. It was hard for any of them to believe that she was just a regular woman, and would have rather drunk Dr Pepper than champagne. But that bit of news wouldn't have sold their papers.



Tanya had always worn her hair blond, and constant, careful cosmetic repair kept her looking sinfully young. She was claiming to be thirty-six now, and had successfully shed the additional eight years that she and Mary Stuart had in common. But no one would have suspected from looking at her that she was lying. "I don't exactly love it myself when they claim I'm having an affair, but the people they talk about are usually so ridiculous, it doesn't bother me most of the time... except for Tony." And the kids. It was embarrassing for all of them, but there was nothing she could do to stop it. "I think they just run off a list of possibles on a computer somewhere, and throw you together with anyone they feel like."

Tanya shrugged, and put her feet up on the coffee table in front of her, as she narrowed her eyes and thought of Mary Stuart. She hadn't talked to her in months. They were the two closest of the old group. Tanya knew that Mary Stuart no longer talked to Zoe, and hadn't for years, and even she had all but lost track of Zoe. She called her every year or two, and they still exchanged Christmas cards, but Zoe's life seemed so separate from theirs. She was an internist in San Francisco. She had never married, never had kids. She was completely devoted to her work, and gave every spare moment of her time to free clinics. It was the kind of work she had always believed in. Tanya hadn't even seen her in the last five years, since the last concert she'd done in San Francisco.

"What about you?" Tanya suddenly asked Mary Stuart pointedly. "How are you doing?" There was an edge to her voice, a pointed end she used to probe into her old friend's soul, but Mary Stuart saw her coming and silently dodged her.

"I'm fine. Doing all the same things, committee work, board meetings, volunteer work in Harlem. I just spent the whole day at the Metropolitan talking about a big fund-

raising event they're planning for September." Her voice was even and controlled and cool, but Tanya knew her far better than that, and Mary Stuart knew it. She could fool a lot of people, even Bill at times, but never Tanya.

"That's not what I meant." There was a long silence while neither woman was sure what to say, and Tanya waited for what Mary Stuart would answer. "How are you, Mary Stuart? Really?"

Mary Stuart sighed, and looked out the window. It was dark now. And she was alone in the silent apartment. She had been alone for all intents and purposes for over a year. "I'm okay." Her voice trembled, but only slightly. It was better than when Tanya had seen her a year before, on a disastrous rainy day when Mary Stuart wished that her own life had ended. "I'm getting used to it." But so much had changed. So much more than she had expected.

"And Bill?"

"He's fine too, I guess. I never see him."

"That doesn't sound so fine to me." There was another long pause, but they were used to it, Tanya was thinking. "What about Alyssa?"

"She's fine, I think. She loves Paris. I'm meeting her there in a few weeks. We're going to spend a month running around Europe. Bill has a big case in England, and he's going to be over there for the summer, so I thought I'd go over and see her." She sounded happier as she spoke of it, and Tanya smiled. Alyssa Walker was one of Tanya's favorite people.

"Will you be in England with him?" Tanya asked in her soft drawl, and Mary Stuart hesitated and then answered quickly.

"No, I'll be here. He's really too busy to pay any attention to me during a case like that, and I have so much to do here." *So much to do here.* She knew all the right things to say, all the cover-ups, the language of despair... We'll have

to get together sometime... no, things are fine... everything is just terrific... Bill is so incredibly busy with work right now... he's on a trip... I have a meeting... have to see my board... have to go downtown... uptown... to Europe to see my daughter... The politics of hiding, the correct thing to say in order to buy solitude and silence, and a place to grieve in peace away from prying eyes and pity. A way of pushing people away without saying how bad it really was.

"You're not okay, Mary Stuart." Tanya went after her with the single-mindedness she was known for. She would leave no stone unturned until she found the truth, the answer, the culprit. It was that determination for the pursuit of truth that she and Zoe had had in common. But Tanya had always been far subtler about it, and far kinder when she discovered whatever it was she wanted. "Why won't you tell me the truth, Stu?"

"I am telling you the truth, Tan," Mary Stuart insisted... Stu... Tan... Tannie... the names of so long ago... the promises... the hope... the beginning. It always felt so much like the end now, when everything winds down and you begin to lose it all, instead of find it. Mary Stuart hated that about her life now. "We're fine, honest."

"You're lying, but I'm not sure I blame you. You're entitled." That was the difference between Zoe and Tanya. Zoe would never have let her lie, let her hide. She would have felt an obligation to expose her, to shine a bright light on her pain, thinking she could heal it. At least Tanya understood that she couldn't. She had her own worries now. The tabloids weren't right about the affair, but they weren't far off the mark that she and Tony were having problems. Despite the fact that he had thought it was fun for a while, he was no longer enjoying the spotlight placed on them by the press, or the lies, the threats, the stalkers, the lawsuits, the people constantly trying to take advantage of her, and either embarrass or use her, whatever it cost them. It was

utterly exhausting, and impossible to have any kind of decent private life. How could you even find the real woman amidst all the nonsense? Lately, Tony had complained about it constantly, and she sympathized with him, but other than retire, which she didn't want to do, and he didn't expect it of her, there was really nothing she could do to change it. All they could do was get away from time to time, and that helped, but a trip to Hawaii, or even Africa, or the south of France, did nothing to solve the problems. It provided a brief, pleasurable escape, but no real solution. As insane as it sounded even to him, despite her phenomenal success, her vast fame, and millions of adoring fans, in fact the very life she led made her a victim. And little by little, Tony had come to hate it. For the moment, all she could do was promise him to keep as low a profile as she could. She hadn't even gone to Texas to see her mother the week before, as planned, because she was afraid that if she left town, she'd fuel the rumors. Lately, he said constantly that it was all getting to be too hard on him, and on his kids, and just the way he said it, made Tanya feel panicked. Particularly since she knew there was nothing she could do to change the situation. Their torments all came from outside sources.

"I'm coming to New York next week, that's why I called," Tanya explained. "I figured in your busy life I'd better make a date with you, or you'd be having dinner with the governor and hitting him up for money for one of your causes." Over the years, Tanya had been incredibly generous with the groups Mary Stuart cared about most, and twice she had donated her time and given a performance, but not in a while. Lately, she was just too busy. She never seemed to have a moment for herself now. And her current agent and manager were tougher than the ones she'd had before, who had cut her a little slack, but the new ones were pushing her to do more concerts. There were

fortunes to be made, from albums made from the concerts, licensing deals for dolls and perfume and cutting new CD's and tapes and Tanya was hotter than she ever had been. They wanted her to capitalize on it, but at the moment she was leaning more toward making another movie. "I'm doing a TV show in New York," she told Mary Stuart, "but actually I'm talking to some agent about writing a book. I got a call from a publisher, and I don't think I'm interested, but I'll listen to them. What's left to say about me?" There had already been four unauthorized biographies about her, all of them cruel, and mostly inaccurate, but she was generally good-natured about them. After the first one, which had come as a terrible blow, she had called Mary Stuart in the middle of the night in hysterics. They had been there for each other a lot over the years, and by now they both felt certain that they always would be. It was the kind of friendship you don't reproduce in later life. It begins, it grows, you nurture it from sapling to oak tree. Later on, the roots don't form the same way. Theirs had taken hold long since, and were there, buried in solid ground, for the duration.

"When are you coming in? I'll meet you at the airport," Mary Stuart offered.

"I'll pick you up on the way into town, and we can go to the hotel and talk. I'll be in on Tuesday." Tanya was flying in on the recording company's plane, as she always did. It was just like hopping in a car for her, and the casual way she flew around always amused Mary Stuart. "I'll call you from the plane."

"I'll be here," Mary Stuart said, feeling suddenly like a kid. There was something about the way Tanya swept her up and took her under her wing that made her feel young again, instead of a thousand years old. She grinned at the thought of seeing her again, it had been ages since the last time,

she couldn't even remember when, although Tanya could, distinctly.

"See you, kiddo," Tanya said, smiling at her end. And then, sounding more serious, and as gentle as Mary Stuart always remembered, "I love you."

"I know." She nodded as tears sprang to her eyes. It was kindness which Mary Stuart could no longer tolerate. The loneliness was so much easier to deal with. "I love you too," she said, choking on her own words, and then, "... I'm sorry..." She closed her eyes, fighting back the waves of her own emotions.

"Don't be, baby... it's okay... I know... I know." But the truth was she didn't. No one knew. No one could possibly understand what she felt now. Not even her husband.

"I'll see you next week," Mary Stuart said, sounding composed again, but Tanya wasn't fooled. There was a flood of agony held behind the dam that Mary Stuart had built to keep her grief in check, and Tanya couldn't help wondering how long she could stand it.

"See you Tuesday. Just wear jeans. We'll go have a hamburger, or order room service or something. See ya..." And then she was gone, and Mary Stuart was thinking of her, and the days in Berkeley, before they had all moved on to their lives, before life had gotten so full, and so hard, and they had all had their dues to pay. It had all been so easy then... at first. Until Ellie had died, just before graduation. That had been their entry into the real world, and as she thought of it, she glanced at a photograph on her night table, of the four of them in freshman year. They looked like children to her now, even younger than her own daughter. She saw Tanya with her long blond mane, looking sexy and sensational, and Zoe with long red pigtails, so earnest and intense, and Ellie so ethereal with a little halo of blond curls, and Mary Stuart herself, all eyes and legs and long dark