

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Dating Game
Danielle Steel

About the Book

The roller-coaster ride of dating second time around...

Paris Armstrong never saw it coming. With two grown-up children and a lovely home in Connecticut, Paris was happy with her marriage, her family, her life. So when her husband of twenty-four years said they needed to talk, Paris couldn't imagine what he was about to say.

Saying goodbye to the world she knows and loves, Paris heads west, to San Francisco, and discovers being single in a world of men who are too young, too old, too married or too good to be true. With her dating track record veering between disappointing and disastrous, Paris comes to the conclusion that romance is not in her future - until she discovers the secret of turning despair into freedom and loss into joy.

In a poignant, wickedly funny novel about getting dumped and getting over it, Danielle Steel explores what it means to start again, and find something better than you had before.

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About the Author

Also by Danielle Steel

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DANIELLE STEEL

DATING
GAME

*On ne voit bien qu'avec le coeur.
L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux.
One can only see clearly with the heart.
What is essential is invisible to the eye.*

—Le Petit Prince

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

To those who are seeking, those who have sought, those who have found—the lucky devils! And especially, with great fondness and respect, to those who have ground through this unnatural process, and not only survived with their minds and hearts intact, but managed to find the needle in the haystack, and win the prize!

Climbing Everest is easier, and surely less fraught with danger and despair.

And to all of my friends, who have tried ineptly or expertly to find the perfect man for me, in other words someone at least as weird as I.

To those of you who have set me up on blind dates, which will give me something to laugh at in my old age, I—almost!—forgive you.

And above all, to my wonderful children, who have watched and shared, and loved and supported me with humor, encouragement, and infinite patience. For their love and eternal support, I am profoundly grateful.

With all my love,
d.s.

What is a date? A date is when two people, who hardly know each other, go out to dinner, and push their food around their plates nervously, while trying to ask as many questions as possible in the shortest possible time. As in: Do you ski? Play tennis? Do you like dogs? Why do *you* think your marriage fell apart? Why do *you* think your ex-wife said you were controlling? Do you like chocolate? Cheesecake? Have you ever been convicted of a felony? How do you feel about drugs? How many alcoholics are there in your family? What kind of medication are you on? Did you have plastic surgery, or is that your real nose? Chin? Upper lip? Breasts? Behind? What kind of surgery have you had? Do you like kids? Have you ever dated any? What foreign languages do you speak? What's your ideal honeymoon? Two weeks in the Himalayas?? Really? Have you ever been on safari? To Paris? To Des Moines? Are you religious? When did you last see your mother? How long have you been in therapy? Why not? How many DUIs have you had? Where does your wife think you are tonight? How long have you been married? Divorced? Widowed? Out of jail? On parole? Unemployed? What's your next career move? I'm sure the circus does offer fabulous travel opportunities, but what about the high wire? Have you been bulimic all your life? How many twelve-step groups *are* you a member of? When is later? How soon do you think you'll call??

A blind date is when well-meaning friends select two people from opposite ends of the earth, with as little in common as humanly possible, and lie to each of them about just how fabulous, interesting, normal, well adjusted, intelligent, and attractive the other half of the blind date is. Reality hits as they come through the door. You then pursue the same formula as on a regular date, hopefully in less time, and you pray that they wrote down your phone number wrong. After that you go home and cry, eventually laugh, and never speak to the friends who set you up again. And after you forget just how bad it was, you let the same friends, or others, do it to you again.

With love and empathy.
d.s.

Chapter 1

IT WAS A perfect balmy May evening, just days after spring had hit the East Coast with irresistible appeal. The weather was perfect, winter had vanished literally overnight, birds were singing, the sun was warm, and everything in the Armstrongs' Connecticut garden was in bloom. The entire week had been blessed with the kind of weather that made everyone slow down, even in New York. Couples strolled, lunch hours stretched. People smiled. And in Greenwich that night, Paris Armstrong decided to serve dinner outside on the flagstone patio they had just redone near the pool. She and Peter were giving a dinner party on a Friday night, which was rare for them. They did most of their entertaining on Saturday, so Peter didn't have to rush home from work in the city on Friday night. But the caterers had only been available on this particular Friday. They had weddings booked for every Saturday night through July. It was harder for Peter, but he'd been a good sport when she told him about the Friday night plan. Peter indulged her most of the time, he always had. He liked making life easy for her. It was one of the myriad things she loved about him. They had just celebrated their twenty-fourth anniversary in March. It was hard to believe sometimes how the years had flown by and how full they had been. Megan, their eldest, had graduated from Vassar the year before, and at twenty-three, she had recently taken a job in L.A. She was interested in all aspects of film and had

landed a job as a production assistant with a movie studio in Hollywood. She was barely more than a gofer, as she admitted openly, but she was thrilled with just being there, and wanted to be a producer one day. William, their son, had just turned eighteen, and was graduating in June. He was going to UC Berkeley in the fall. It was hard to believe that their kids were grown. It seemed only minutes before that she had been changing diapers and carpooling, taking Meg to ballet, and Wim to hockey games. And in three months he'd be gone. He was due in Berkeley the week before the Labor Day weekend.

Paris made sure that the table had been set properly. The caterers were reliable and had a good eye. They knew her kitchen well. She and Peter liked to entertain, and Paris used them frequently. They enjoyed their social life and over the years they had collected an eclectic assortment of interesting friends. She set the flowers that she had arranged herself on the table. She had cut a profusion of multicolored peonies, the tablecloth was immaculate, and the crystal and silver gleamed. Peter probably wouldn't notice, especially if he was tired when he got home, but what he sensed more than saw was the kind of home she provided him with. Paris was impeccable about details. She created an atmosphere of warmth and elegance that people flourished in. She did it not only for him and their friends but for herself as well.

Peter provided handsomely for her too. He'd been generous with her and the children. He had been very successful over the years. He was a partner in a lucrative law firm, specializing in corporate accounts, and at fifty-one, he was the managing partner. The house he'd bought for them ten years before was large and beautiful. It was a handsome stone house, in one of the more luxurious neighborhoods in Greenwich, Connecticut. They'd talked about hiring a decorator, but in the end she had decided to decorate it herself, and loved doing it. Peter was thrilled

with the results. They also had one of the prettiest gardens in Greenwich. She'd done such a great job with the house that he had often teased her and told her she should become a decorator, and most people who saw the house agreed. But although artistic, her interests had always been similar to his.

She had a solid respect and understanding for the business world. They had married as soon as she graduated from college, and she had gone to business school and graduated with an MBA. She had wanted to start a small business of her own, but got pregnant in her second year of business school, and had decided to stay home with their children instead. And she'd never had any regrets. Peter supported her in her decision, there was no need for her to work. And for twenty-four years, she had felt competent and fulfilled, devoting herself full-time to Peter and their children. She baked cookies, organized school fairs, ran the school auction every year, made costumes by hand at Halloween, spent countless hours at the orthodontist with them, and generally did what many other wives and mothers did. She didn't need an MBA for any of it, but her extensive understanding of the corporate world, and her lively interest in it made it a lot easier when talking to Peter late at night about the cases he was working on. If anything, it even made them closer. She was, and had been, the perfect wife for him, and he had profound respect for the way she had brought up their children. She had turned out to be everything he had expected her to be—and Paris was equally pleased with him.

They still shared laughter on Sunday mornings, as they snuggled beneath the covers for an extra half-hour on cold wintry days. And she still got up with him at the crack of dawn every weekday, and drove him to the train, and then came back to take the kids to school, until they were old enough to drive themselves, which had come far too quickly for her. And the only dilemma she had now was trying to

figure out what she was going to do with herself when Wim left for Berkeley in August. She could no longer imagine a life without teenagers splashing in the pool in summer, or turning the house upside down as they overflowed the downstairs playroom on the weekends. For twenty-three of the twenty-four years of her marriage, her life had entirely and unreservedly revolved around them. And it saddened her to know that those days were almost over for good.

She knew that once Wim left for college, life as she had known it for so long would be over. He would come home for the occasional weekend, and holidays, as Meg had while she was at Vassar, only less so because he would be so far away, on the West Coast. Once Meg had graduated, she had all but disappeared. She had gone to New York for six months, moved into an apartment with three friends, and then left for California as soon as she found the job she wanted in L.A. From now on, they would see her on Thanksgiving and Christmas, if they were lucky, and God only knew what would happen once she got married, not that she had any plans. Paris knew only too well that in August, when Wim left, her life would be forever changed.

After twenty-four years out of the job market, she couldn't exactly head for New York and go to work. She'd been baking cookies and driving carpools for too long. The only thing she had thought of doing so far was volunteer work in Stamford, working with abused kids, or on a literacy program a friend of hers had started in the public schools for underprivileged high school students who had managed to get most of the way through high school and could barely read. Beyond that, she had no idea what she was going to do with herself. Peter had told her years before that once the kids left, it would be a great opportunity for them to travel together, and to do things they had never been able to do before. But his work hours had stretched so noticeably in the last year, she thought it unlikely he would be able to get away. He rarely even made

it home for dinner anymore. From what Paris could see, for the moment at least, both of her children and her husband had busy, productive lives, and she didn't. And she knew she had to do something about it soon. The prospect of the vast amount of free time she was about to have on her hands was beginning to frighten her. She had talked to Peter about it on several occasions, and he had no useful suggestions to make. He told her she'd figure it out sooner or later, and she knew she would. At forty-six, she was young enough to start a career if she wanted to, the problem was that she didn't know what she wanted to do. She liked things the way they were, taking care of her children and husband, and attending to their every need on the week-ends—particularly Peter's. Unlike some of her friends, whose marriages had shown signs of strain over the years, or even ruptured entirely, Paris was still in love with him. He was kinder, gentler, more considerate, in fact he was more sophisticated and seasoned, and even better looking than he had been when they got married. And he always said the same about her.

Paris was slim and lithe and athletic. Once the children were older and she had more free time, she played tennis almost every day, and was in terrific shape. She wore her straight blond hair long, and most of the time wore it pulled back in a braid. She had classic Grace Kelly good looks, and green eyes. Her figure was noteworthy, her laughter easy, and her sense of humor quick to ignite, much to the delight of her friends. She used to love playing practical jokes, which never failed to amuse her children. Peter was far quieter by nature, and always had been. By the time he came home at night after a long day and the commute on the train, more often than not, he was too tired to do much more than listen to her, and make the occasional comment. He came to life more on the weekends, but even then he was quiet and somewhat reserved. And in the last year he had been consumed with work. This was, in fact, the first

dinner party they had given in three months. He had worked late every Friday night, and gone back into town some Saturdays, to clear things off his desk, or meet with clients. But Paris was always patient about it. She made few demands on him, and had a profound respect for his diligence about his work. It was what made him so good at what he did, and so highly admired in business and legal circles. She couldn't fault him for being conscientious, although she missed spending more time with him. Particularly now, with Meg gone for the past six months, and Wim busy with his own life and friends in the final weeks of his senior year. Peter's heavy workload in recent months reminded her yet again that she was going to have to find something to occupy her time in September. She had even thought of starting a catering business, or investing in a nursery, since she enjoyed her garden so much. But the catering business, she knew, would interfere with her time with Peter on the weekends, and she wanted to be available to him whenever he was home, which was seldom enough these days.

She took a shower and dressed after checking the table and cruising through the kitchen to check on the caterers, and everything seemed in good order. They were having five couples for dinner, all of them good friends. She was looking forward to it, and hoped Peter would get home in time to unwind before the guests arrived. She was thinking of him, when Wim stuck his head in her bedroom door while she was getting dressed. He wanted to tell her his plans, a house rule she rigidly enforced even at his age. She wanted to know where her children were at all times, and with whom. Paris was the consummate responsible mother and devoted wife. Everything in her life was in perfect order, and relatively good control.

"I'm going over to the Johnsons' with Matt," Wim said, glancing at her, as she pulled up the side zipper of a white

lace skirt. She was already wearing a strapless tube top to match, and high-heeled silver sandals.

"Are you staying there, or going somewhere else afterward?" She smiled at him. He was a handsome boy, and looked like his father. Wim had been six foot three by the time he reached fifteen, and had grown another inch since. He had his father's dark brown hair and piercing blue eyes, and he smiled as he looked at his mother. Wim thought she always looked pretty, when she got dressed up, and he watched as she wound her long blond hair into a bun as they talked. He always thought his mother had a simple elegance about her, and he was as proud of her as she was of him. He was not only a good student, but had been a star athlete all through high school. "Are you going to a party tonight?" Paris asked wisely. For the past month at least, if not two, the seniors had been kicking up their heels, and Wim was always in the thick of things. Girls were crazy about him, and drawn to him like a magnet, although he had been going out with the same girl since Christmas, and Paris liked her. She was a nice girl from a wholesome family in Greenwich. Her mother was a teacher, and her father a doctor.

"Yeah, we might go to a party later." He looked momentarily sheepish. She knew him too well. He had been thinking of not telling her about it. She always asked so many questions. He and his sister both complained about it, but in another sense, they liked it. There was never any question about how much she loved them.

"Whose house?" she asked, as she finished her hair and put on just a dash of blush and lipstick.

"The Steins'," Wim said with a grin. She always asked. Always. And he knew before she said it what the next question would be.

"Will the parents be there?" Even at eighteen, she didn't want him at unsupervised parties. It was an invitation to trouble, and when they were younger, she had called to

verify it herself. In the past year, she had finally relented, and was willing to take Wim's word. But there were still incidents now and then when he tried to pull the wool over her eyes. As she said, it was his job to try and put one over on her, and hers to figure it out when he did. She was pretty good about sussing things out, and most of the time he was honest, and she was comfortable about where he went.

"Yes, the parents will be there," he said, rolling his eyes.

"They'd better be." She looked meaningfully at him, and then laughed. "I'm going to flatten your tires and put your car keys in the trash compactor, William Armstrong, if you lie to me."

"Yeah, yeah, Mom. I know. They'll be there."

"Okay. What time will you be home?" Curfews were still a standard at their house, even at eighteen. Until he left for college, Paris said, he had to follow their rules, and Peter agreed. He heartily approved of the boundaries she set for their kids, and always had. They stood united on that, as on all else. They had never disagreed about how they raised their children, or much of anything in fact. Theirs had been a relatively trouble-free marriage, with the exception of the usual minor arguments that were almost always about silly things like leaving the garage door open, forgetting to put gas in the car, or not sending a tux shirt out to be cleaned in time for a black tie event. But she rarely made those mistakes, and was organized to a fault. Peter had always relied on her.

"Three?" Wim asked cautiously about the curfew question, trying it on for size, and his mother instantly shook her head.

"No way. This isn't a graduation party, Wim. It's an ordinary Friday night." She knew that if she agreed to three now, he would be wanting to come home at four or five during the graduation celebrations, and that was way too late. She thought it was dangerous for him to be driving

around at those hours. "Two. Max. And that's a gift. Don't push!" she warned, and he nodded and looked pleased. The negotiations were complete, and he started to back out of her room, as she headed toward him with a purposeful look. "Not so fast ... I want a hug."

He smiled at her then, looking like a big goofy kid, and more a boy than the nearly grown man he was. And he obliged her with a hug, as she leaned up and kissed his cheek. "Have fun tonight, and drive carefully, please." He was a good driver, and a responsible boy, but she worried anyway. So far at least there had been no drunken incidents, and the few times he had had something to drink at parties, he had left his car and driven home with friends. He also knew that if things got out of hand, he could call his parents. They had established that agreement years before. If he ever got drunk, he could call them, and there would be an "amnesty." But under no condition, in those circumstances, did they want him to drive home.

She heard Wim go out and the front door close moments after they had exchanged the hug. And Paris was just coming down the stairs herself, as Peter walked in, with his briefcase in his hand, looking exhausted. It struck her as she looked at him how much he looked like Wim. It was like seeing the same person thirty-three years later, and noticing that made her smile warmly at him.

"Hi, sweetheart," she said as she went to Peter, and gave him a hug and a kiss, but he was so tired, he scarcely responded. She didn't mention how wiped out he looked, she didn't want to make him feel worse. But she knew he had been working on a merger for the past month, and the hours had been rough. The deal wasn't going well for his clients, at least not so far, and she knew he was trying to turn it around. "How was your day?" she asked as she took his briefcase out of his hand and set it down on the hall chair. She was sorry suddenly that she had planned the dinner party. There had been no way of knowing, when she

did, how busy he would be at work at the moment. She had booked the caterer two months before, knowing how busy they would be later.

"The day was long." He smiled at her. "The week was longer. I'm beat. What time are the guests coming?" It was nearly seven as he walked in the door.

"In about an hour. Why don't you lie down for a few minutes? You've got time."

"That's okay. If I fall asleep, I might never wake up."

Without asking, she walked into the pantry and poured him a glass of white wine, and then returned to hand it to him. He looked relieved. He didn't drink much, but at times like these, knowing he had a long evening ahead of him, it sometimes helped him forget the stresses of the day. It had been a long week, and he looked it.

"Thanks," he said, taking the glass from her, and taking a sip, before he wandered into the living room and sat down. Everything around him was impeccable and in perfect order. The room was full of handsome English antiques they had bought together over the years, in London and New York. Both of them had lost their parents young, and Paris had used some of her modest inheritance to buy things for the house. And Peter had helped her with it as well. They had some lovely pieces, which their friends always admired. It was a particularly nice house to entertain in. There was a large comfortable dining room, a big living room, a small den, and a library that Peter used as an office on weekends. And upstairs there were four big spacious bedrooms. They used the fourth one as a guest room, although they had hoped for a long time to use it as a room for a third baby, but it had never happened. She had never gotten pregnant after the first two, and although they'd talked about it, neither of them wanted to go through the stress of infertility treatments, and had been content with the two children they had. Fate had tailored their family perfectly for them.

Paris sat down on the couch, and snuggled up close to him. But tonight he was too tired to respond. Usually, he put an arm around her shoulders, and she realized as she looked at him, that he was showing signs of considerable strain. He was due for a check-up sometime soon, and she was going to remind him of it once the worst of the merger was done. They had lost several friends in the past few years to sudden heart attacks. At fifty-one, and in good health, he wasn't at high risk for that, but you never knew. And she wanted to take good care of him. She had every intention of keeping him around for another forty or fifty years. The last twenty-four had been very good, for both of them.

"Is the merger giving you a tough time?" she asked sympathetically. Sitting next to him, she could feel how tense he was. He nodded, as he sipped his wine, and for once didn't volunteer any details. He was too tired to go into it with her, or so she assumed. She didn't want to ask if there was anything else bothering him, it seemed obvious to her that it was the merger. And she hoped that once in the midst of their friends at dinner, he would forget about it and relax. He always did. Although he never initiated their social life, he enjoyed the plans she made for them, and the people she invited. She no longer even consulted him about it. She had a good sense of who he liked and who he didn't, and invited accordingly. She wanted him to have a good time too, and he liked not being responsible for their plans. She did a good job of being what he called their social director.

Peter just sat peacefully on the couch for a few minutes, and she sat quietly beside him, glad to have him home. She wondered if he was going to have to work that weekend, or go back into the city to see clients, as he had for several months on the weekends, but she didn't want to ask. If he did have to go in to the office, she would find something to

keep her busy. He looked better, as he stood up, smiled at her, and walked slowly upstairs, as she followed.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" she asked as he lay down on their bed, and set the glass down on his bedside table. He was so exhausted, he had decided to lie down after all before their dinner.

"I'm fine," he said, and closed his eyes. And with that, she left him alone to rest for a minute, and went back downstairs to check how things were going in the kitchen. Everything was in order, and she went out to sit on the patio for a minute, smiling to herself. She loved her husband, her children, her house, their friends. She loved everything about all of it, and there was nothing she would have changed. It was the perfect life.

When she went back upstairs to wake him half an hour later, in case he'd fallen asleep, he was in the shower. She sat down in their bedroom and waited. The guests were going to arrive in twenty minutes. She heard the doorbell ring while he was shaving, and told him not to rush. No one was going anywhere, he had time. She wanted him to unwind and enjoy the evening. He looked at her and nodded in the mirror, with shaving foam all over his face, when she told him she was going downstairs to greet their friends.

"I'll be right down," he promised, and she told him again not to hurry. She wanted him to relax.

By the time Peter came down the stairs, two of the couples had already arrived, and a third was just walking toward the patio. The night was perfect, the sun had just set, and the warm night air felt more like Mexico or Hawaii. It was a perfect night for an outdoor dinner party, and everyone was in good spirits. Both of Paris's favorite women friends were there, with their husbands, one of whom was an attorney in Peter's firm, which was how they'd met fifteen years before. He and his wife were the parents of a boy Wim's age, who went to the same school,

and was graduating with him in June. The other woman had a daughter Meg's age, and twin boys a year older. The three women had spent years going to the same school and sports events, and Natalie had alternated with Paris for ten years, driving their daughters to ballet. Her daughter had taken it more seriously than Meg, and was dancing professionally now in Cleveland. All three were at the end of their years of motherhood, and depressed about it, and were talking about it when Peter walked in. Natalie commented quietly to Paris how tired he looked, and Virginia, the mother of the boy graduating with Wim, agreed.

"He's been working on a merger, and it's been really rough on him," Paris said sympathetically, and Virginia nodded. Her husband had been working on it too, but he looked a lot more relaxed than Peter did. But he also wasn't the managing partner of the firm, which put even more of a burden on Peter. He hadn't looked this tired and stressed in years.

The rest of the guests arrived minutes after Peter did, and by the time they sat down to dinner, everyone seemed to be having a good time. The table looked beautiful, and there were candles everywhere. And in the soft glow of the candlelight, Peter looked better to Paris when he sat down at the head of the table, and chatted with the women she had placed next to him. He knew both well, and enjoyed their company, although he seemed quieter than usual throughout the dinner. He no longer seemed so much tired as subdued.

When the guests finally left at midnight, he took his blazer off and loosened his tie, and seemed relieved.

"Did you have an okay time, sweetheart?" Paris asked, looking worried. The table had been just big enough, with twelve people seated at it, that she couldn't really hear what had gone on at his end. She had enjoyed talking to the men she sat next to about business matters, as she often

did. Their male friends liked that about her. She was intelligent and well informed, and enjoyed talking about more than just her kids, unlike some of the women they knew, although Virginia and Natalie were intelligent too. Natalie was an artist, and had moved on to sculpture in recent years. And Virginia had been a litigator before she gave up her career to have kids and stay home with them. She was just as nervous as Paris about what she was going to do with herself when her only son graduated in June. He was going to Princeton, so at least he'd be closer to home than Wim. But any way you looked at it, a chapter of their lives was about to end, and it left all of them feeling anxious and insecure.

"You were awfully quiet tonight," Paris commented as they walked slowly upstairs. The beauty of hiring caterers was that they took care of everything, and left the house neat as a pin. Paris had looked down the table at him regularly, and although he seemed to be enjoying his dinner partners, he seemed to listen more than talk, which was unusual, even for him.

"I'm just tired," he said, looking distracted, as they passed Wim's room. He was still out, presumably at the Steins', and wouldn't be home a minute before he had to be, at two.

"Are you feeling okay?" Paris asked, looking worried. He had had big deals before, but he didn't usually let them get to him like this. She was wondering if the deal was about to fall through.

"I'm ..." He started to say "fine," and then looked at her and shook his head. He looked anything but fine as they walked into their room. He hadn't wanted to talk to her about it that night. He had been planning to sit down with her the following morning. He didn't want to spoil the evening for her, and he never liked talking about serious subjects before they went to bed. But he couldn't lie to her either. He didn't want to anymore. It wasn't fair to her. He

loved her. And there was going to be no easy way to do this, no right time or perfect day. And the prospect of lying next to her and worrying about it all night was weighing heavily on him.

"Is something wrong?" Paris looked startled suddenly, and couldn't imagine what it was. She assumed it was something at the office, and just hoped it wasn't bad news about his health. That had happened to friends of theirs the year before. The husband of one of her friends had been diagnosed with a brain tumor and died within four months. It had been a shock to all of them. They were beginning to approach the age where things happened to friends. All she could do was pray that Peter didn't have news of that kind to share with her. But he looked serious as he sat down in one of the comfortable easy chairs in their bedroom where they liked to sit and read sometimes, and he pointed to the chair facing him, without reassuring her.

"Come sit."

"Are you okay?" she asked again, as she sat down facing him and reached for his hands, but he sat back in the chair, and closed his eyes for a minute, before he began. When he opened them, she knew she had never seen such agony in them before.

"I don't know how to say this to you ... where to start, or how to begin...." How do you drop a bomb on someone you've cared about for twenty-five years? Where do you drop it and when? He knew he was about to hit a switch that would blow their lives all to bits. Not only hers, but his. "I ... Paris ... I did a crazy thing last year ... well, maybe not so crazy ... but something I never expected to do. I didn't intend to do it. I'm not even sure how it happened, except that the opportunity was there, and I took it, and shouldn't have, but I did...." He couldn't look at her as he said it, and Paris said not a word as she listened to him. She had an overwhelming sense that something terrible was about to happen to her, and to them. Sirens were going

off in her head, and her heart was pounding as she waited for him to continue. This wasn't about the merger, she knew suddenly, it was about them.

"It happened while I was in Boston for three weeks on the deal I was working on then." She knew the one, and nodded silently. Peter looked at her with agony in his eyes, and he wanted to reach out to her, but didn't. He wanted to cushion the blow for her, but he had the decency to know there was no way he could. "There's no point going into the details about how or why or when. I fell in love with someone. I didn't mean to. I didn't think I would. I'm not even sure what I was thinking then, except that I was bored, and she was interesting and bright and young, and it made me feel alive being with her. And younger than I've felt in years. I guess it was like turning the clock back for a few minutes, only the hands got stuck, and once we got back, I found I didn't want to get out of it. I've thought about it, and agonized, and tried to break it off several times. But ... I just can't ... I don't want to.... I want to be with her. I love you. I always have. I never stopped loving you, even now, but I can't live like this anymore, between two lives. It's driving me insane. I don't even know how to say this to you, and I can only imagine what it must be like to be on the receiving end, and God, I'm so sorry, Paris ... I really am...." There were tears in his eyes as he said it, and she covered her mouth with her hands, like watching an accident about to happen, or a car hit a wall, about to kill everyone in it. She felt, for the first time in her life, as though she were about to die. "Paris, I don't know how to say this to you," he said, as tears rolled down his cheeks. "For both our sakes ... for all our sakes ... I want a divorce." He had promised Rachel he would do it that weekend, and he knew he had to, before the double life he was leading drove them both crazy. But saying it, and living it, and seeing Paris's face, were harder than he had ever dreamed. Seeing the way she looked at him made him wish there

were some other way. But he knew there wasn't. Even though he had loved her for all these years, he was no longer in love with her, but with another woman, and he wanted out. Sharing a life with her made him feel like he was buried alive. And he realized now, with Rachel, all that he had been missing. With Rachel, he felt as though God had given him a second chance. And whether it came from God or not, it was what he wanted and knew he had to have. As much as he cared about Paris, and felt sorry for her, and guilty about what he was doing to her, he knew that his life, his soul, his being, his future was with Rachel now. Paris was his past.

She sat in silence for endless minutes, staring at him, unable to believe what she had just heard, yet believing it. She could see in his eyes that he meant every word he had said. "I don't understand," she said, as tears sprang to her eyes and started rolling down her cheeks. This couldn't be happening to her. It happened to other people, people with bad marriages, or who fought all the time, people who had never loved each other as she and Peter did. But it was happening. It had never even occurred to her once for a single instant in twenty-four years of marriage that he might leave her one day. The only way she had ever thought she might lose him was if he died. And now she felt as though she had. "What happened?... Why did you do that to us?... Why?... Why won't you give her up?" It never even occurred to her in those first instants to ask him who it was. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that he wanted a divorce.

"Paris, I tried," he said, looking devastated. He hated seeing the look of total destruction in her eyes, but the music had to be faced. And in an odd, sick way, he was glad he had done it finally. He knew that no matter what it cost them both emotionally, he had to be free. "I can't give her up. I just can't. I know it's rotten of me, but it's what I want. You've been a good wife, you're a wonderful person.

You've been a great mother to our kids, and I know you always will be, but I want more than this now.... I feel alive when I'm with her. Life is exciting, I look forward to the future now. I've felt like an old man for years. Paris, you don't see it yet, but maybe this is a blessing for both of us. We've both been trapped." His words ran through her like knives.

"A blessing? You call this a blessing?" Her voice sounded shrill suddenly. She looked as though she were about to get hysterical, and he was afraid of that. It was an enormous shock, like learning that someone you loved had suddenly died. "This is a tragedy, not a blessing. What kind of a blessing is it to cheat on your wife, walk out on your family, and ask for a divorce? Are you crazy? What are you thinking of? Who is this girl? What kind of spell did she put on you?" It had finally occurred to her to ask, not that it mattered now. The other woman was a faceless enemy, who had won the war before Paris even knew there was a battle. Paris had lost everything without ever being warned that their life and marriage were at stake. It felt like the end of the world as she stared at him, and he shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. He didn't want to tell her who it was, he was afraid Paris would do something in some crazed jealous state, but he had more faith in her than that, and she would find out sooner or later anyway. If nothing else, once they found out, their children would tell her who she was. And he was planning to marry her, although he didn't intend to tell Paris that yet. The divorce was enough of a shock for her for now.

"She's an attorney in my office. You met her at the Christmas party, although I know she tried to stay away from you, out of respect. Her name is Rachel Norman, she was my assistant on the case in Boston. She's a decent person, she's divorced, and she has two boys." He was trying to give her respectability in Paris's eyes, which was pointless, he knew, but he felt he owed Rachel that, so she

didn't sound like a whore to Paris. But he suspected she would anyway. Paris just stared at him as she cried, while tears dripped off her chin onto the skirt she wore. She looked broken and beaten to a pulp, and he knew it would take him a long time to forgive himself for what he'd done. But there was no other way. He had to do this, for all their sakes. He had promised Rachel he would. She had waited a year, and said it was long enough. Above all, he didn't want to lose her, whatever it took.

"How old is she?" Paris asked in a dead voice.

"Thirty-one," he said softly.

"Oh my God. She's twenty years younger than you are. Are you going to marry her?" She felt another wave of panic clutch her throat. As long as he didn't, there was always hope.

"I don't know. We have to get through all this first, that's traumatic enough." Just telling her made him feel a thousand years old. But thinking of Rachel made him feel young again. She was the fountain of youth and hope for him. He hadn't realized how much had been missing from his life until he fell in love with her. Everything was exciting about her, just having dinner with her made him feel like a boy again, and the time they spent in bed nearly drove him out of his mind. He had never felt that way about any woman in his life, not even Paris. Their sex life had been satisfying and respectable, and he had cherished it for all the years he shared with her, but what he shared with Rachel was a passion he had never even believed could exist, and now he knew it did. She was magic.

"She's fifteen years younger than I am," Paris said, starting to sob uncontrollably, and then she looked up at him again, wanting to know every hideous detail to torture herself with. "How old are her boys?"

"Five and seven, they're very young. She got married in law school, and managed the boys and her studies, even after her husband left. She's had a lot on her plate for a

long time." He cared so much about her, wanted to help her with everything. He had even taken the boys to the park on Saturday afternoons several times, when he told Paris he was going back into town to see clients. He was absolutely driven to be with her, and share her life with her, and she was just as much in love with him. She had been distraught over whether or not to see him, or if he would leave his wife eventually. She didn't think he would, knowing how important his family was to him, and he always said what a good woman Paris was and didn't deserve to be hurt. But after the last time Rachel had broken it off with him, he had finally made up his mind, and asked Rachel to marry him. And now he had no choice but to divorce his wife. Divorcing her was the price of entry into the life he wanted. And it was all he wanted now, at any price. He had to sacrifice Paris to have Rachel, and he was willing.

"Will you go to counseling with me?" Paris asked in a small voice, and he hesitated. He didn't want to mislead her, or give her false hope. In his mind, there was none.

"I will," he said finally, "if it will make this easier for you to accept. But I want you to understand that I'm not going to change my mind. It took me a long time to make this decision, and nothing is going to sway me."

"Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you at least give me a chance? How could I not have known?" she asked miserably, feeling stupid, and broken and small and abandoned, even before he left.

"Paris, I've hardly been home for the last nine months. I come home late every night. I go back into town every weekend. I kept thinking that you would figure it out. I'm amazed you didn't."

"I trusted you," she said, sounding angry for the first time. "I thought you were busy at the office. I never realized you'd do something like this." And after that, she just sat there and cried. He wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her, but he thought he shouldn't. So instead he

got up, and stood at the window, looking down at the garden, wondering what would happen to her now. She was still young and beautiful, she would find someone. But he couldn't help worrying about her after all this time. He had been worried about her for months, but not enough to want to stay with her, or stop seeing Rachel. For the first time in his life, he wasn't thinking of her or his family, but only of himself. "What are we going to tell the children?" She looked up at him finally. It had just occurred to her. This really was like a death, and she had to think of everything now, how to survive it, how to tell people, what to say to their children. And the final irony was that she was not only about to be out of a job as a mother, but she had just been fired as a wife as well. She had no idea what she was going to do with the rest of her life, and couldn't even think of it now.

"I don't know what we'll tell the children," Peter said softly. "The truth, I guess. I still love them. This doesn't change anything. They're not little kids anymore. They're both going to be out of the house when Wim leaves for Berkeley. It's not going to have that much effect on them," he said naïvely, and she shook her head at his stupidity. He had no idea how they would feel. Very likely as betrayed as she did, or very close.

"Don't be so sure it won't have an effect on them. I think they'll be devastated. This is going to be a huge shock to them. How could it not be? Their whole family just got blown to bits. What do you think?"

"It all depends on how we explain it to them. It will make a big difference how you handle it." It made her furious to realize that he was expecting her to clean it up for him, and she wasn't going to do it. Her duties to him as a wife were over. In the blink of an eye, she had been dispensed with, and her responsibilities to him no longer existed. All she had to think of now was herself, and she didn't even know how. More than half her life had been spent taking care of

him, and their children. "I want you to keep the house," he said suddenly, although he'd already decided that after he asked Rachel to marry him. They were going to buy a co-op in New York, and he had already looked at several with her.

"Where are you going to live?" she asked, sounding as frantic as she felt.

"I don't know yet," he said, avoiding her eyes again. "We'll have plenty of time to figure that out. I'll move to a hotel tomorrow," he said quietly, and it suddenly occurred to her that not only was this happening, but it was happening now, not at some distant date in the future. He was going to move out in the morning. "I'll sleep in the guest room tonight," he said, moving toward the bathroom to gather up his things, and instinctively she reached out and grabbed his arm.

"I don't want you to," she said loudly. "I don't want Wim to know what's happening if he sees you in there." And there was more to it than that. She wanted him next to her, for one last night. It had never dawned on her that night when she dressed for their dinner party that this was going to be the last day and night of their marriage. She wondered if he knew he was going to tell her that night. She felt like a fool now remembering how worried she had been about him when he looked tired as he came in. This was obviously what had been eating at him, not the merger.

"Are you sure you don't mind my sleeping here?" he asked, looking worried. He wondered if she was going to do something insane, like try to kill herself or him, but he could see in her eyes that she wouldn't. She was heartbroken, but not unbalanced. "I can go back to the city now, if you prefer." To Rachel. To his new life. Away from her forever. It was the last thing she wanted, as Paris looked at him and shook her head.

"I want you to stay." *Forever. For better or worse, until death do us part, just like you promised twenty-four years ago.* She couldn't help but wonder how he could throw