

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



One Day at a Time  
Danielle Steel

## **About the Book**

A legendary Hollywood family - but not your typical family, by any means...

Coco - is a law school dropout and family black sheep.

Jane - her sister - is a top film producer with a long-term partner, Liz.

Their mother, a bestselling author, is embarking on a secret romance with a much-younger man.

When Coco reluctantly agrees to house-sit her sister's luxurious San Francisco home, she finds it comes with an unexpected houseguest... a dashing but down-to-earth British superstar who's fleeing his psycho ex-girlfriend.

Their worlds couldn't be more different. The attraction couldn't be more immediate.

A moving novel of love in all its guises...

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# DANIELLE STEEL

One Day  
at a Time

To my beloved children,  
Beatrix, Trevor, Todd, Nick, Sam,  
Victoria, Vanessa, Maxx, and Zara,  
who are the Hope and Love and Joy in my life!

With all my heart and love,  
Mom/d.s.

Whatever happens, has happened, or will happen,  
I still believe in Love, whatever orthodox,  
unorthodox, ordinary, or extraordinary form it takes.  
Never give up Hope.

d.s.

## Chapter 1

IT WAS AN absolutely perfect June day as the sun came up over the city, and Coco Barrington watched it from her Bolinas deck. She sat looking at pink and orange streak across the sky as she drank a cup of steaming Chinese tea, stretched out on an ancient, faded broken deck chair she had bought at a yard sale. A weatherworn wooden statue of Quan Yin observed the scene peacefully. Quan Yin was the goddess of compassion, and the statue had been a treasured gift. Under the benevolent gaze of Quan Yin, the pretty auburn-haired young woman sat in the golden light of the sunrise, as the early summer sun shot copper lights through her long wavy hair, which hung nearly to her waist. She was wearing an old flannel nightgown with barely discernible hearts on it, and her feet were bare. The house she lived in sat on a plateau in Bolinas, overlooking the ocean and narrow beach below. This was exactly where Coco wanted to be. She had lived here for four years. This tiny forgotten farm and beach community, less than an hour north of San Francisco, suited her perfectly at twenty-eight.

Calling her home a house was generous. It was barely more than a cottage, and her mother and sister referred to it as a hovel or, on better days, a shack. It was incomprehensible to either of them why Coco would want to live there—or how she would even tolerate it. It was their worst nightmare come true, even for her. Her mother had tried wheedling, insulting, criticizing, and even bribing her to come back to what they referred to as “civilization” in L.A. Nothing about her mother’s life, or the way she had



grown up, seemed “civilized” to Coco. In her opinion, everything about it was a fraud. The people, the way they lived, the goals they aspired to, the houses they lived in, and the face-lifts on every woman she knew in L.A. It all seemed artificial to her. Her life in Bolinas was simple and real. It was uncomplicated and sincere, just like Coco herself. She hated anything fake. Not that her mother was “fake.” She was polished and had an image she was careful to maintain. Her mother had been a best-selling romance novelist for the past thirty years. What she wrote wasn’t fraudulent, it simply wasn’t deep, but there was a vast following for her work. She wrote under the name Florence Flowers, a nom de plume from her own mother’s maiden name, and she had enjoyed immense success. She was sixty-two years old and had lived a storybook life, married to Coco’s father, Bernard “Buzz” Barrington, the most important literary and dramatic agent in L.A. until his death four years before. He had been sixteen years older than her mother and was still going strong when he died of a sudden stroke. He had been one of the most powerful men in the business, and had babied and protected his wife through all thirty-six years of their marriage. He had encouraged and shepherded her career. Coco always wondered if her mother would have made it as a writer in the early days without her father’s help. Her mother never asked herself the same question and didn’t for an instant doubt the merit of her work, or her myriad opinions about everything in life. She made no bones about the fact that Coco was a disappointment to her, and didn’t hesitate to call her a dropout, a hippie, and a flake.

Coco’s equally successful sister Jane’s assessment of her was loftier, though not kinder: Jane referred to Coco as a “chronic underachiever.” She pointed out to her younger sister that she had had every possible opportunity growing up, every chance to make a success of her life, and thus far had thrown it all away. She reminded her regularly that it

wasn't too late to turn the boat around, but as long as she continued to live in a shack in Bolinas like a beach bum, her life would be a mess.

Her life didn't feel like a mess to Coco. She supported herself, was respectable, she didn't do drugs and never had, other than the occasional joint with friends in college, and even that had been rare, which was remarkable at that age. She wasn't a burden on her family, had never been evicted, promiscuous, pregnant, or in jail. She didn't criticize her sister's lifestyle, and had no desire to; nor did she tell her mother that the clothes she wore were ridiculously young, or that her last face-lift still looked too tight. All Coco wanted was to be her own person and lead her own life, in the way she chose. She had always been uncomfortable with their luxurious Bel-Air lifestyle, hated being singled out as the child of two famous people, and more recently the much younger sister of one. She didn't want to lead their life, only her own. Her battles with them had begun in earnest after she had graduated with honors from Princeton, went to Stanford Law School a year later, and subsequently dropped out in her second year. It had been three years since then.

She had promised her father she would try law, and he assured her there was a place for her in his agency. He said it helped to have a law degree if you were going to be a successful agent. The trouble was she didn't want to be one, especially working for her father. She had absolutely no desire whatsoever to represent best-selling authors, scriptwriters, or badly behaved movie stars, which were her father's passion, bread and butter, and only interest in life. Every famous name in Hollywood had come through their house when she was a child. She couldn't imagine spending the rest of her life with them, as her father had. She secretly believed all the stress of representing and indulging spoiled, unreasonable, insanely demanding

people for nearly fifty years had killed him. It sounded like a death sentence to her.

He had died during her first year in law school, and she stuck it out for another year and then dropped out. Her mother had cried over it for months, still berated her for it, and told her she lived like a homeless person in the shack in Bolinas. She had only seen it once, and had ranted about it ever since. Coco had decided to stay in the San Francisco area after dropping out of Stanford. Northern California suited her better. Her sister Jane had moved there years before, but commuted to L.A. frequently to work. Their mother was still upset that both her children had moved north and fled L.A., although Jane was there a lot. Coco rarely went home.

Coco's sister Jane was thirty-nine years old. By the time she was thirty, she had become one of the most important film producers in Hollywood. She'd had a dazzling career so far, and eleven record-breaking box-office hits. She was a huge success, which only made Coco look worse. Her mother never stopped telling Coco how proud their father had been of Jane, and then she'd burst into tears again, thinking about her younger daughter's wasted life. Tears had always worked well for her, and got her everything she wanted from Coco's father. Buzz had thoroughly indulged his wife and adored his daughters. Coco liked to believe at times that she could have explained her choices, and the reasons for them to him, but in truth she knew she couldn't have. He wouldn't have understood them any better than her mother or sister did, and he would have been both baffled and disappointed by her current life. He'd been thrilled when she got into law school at Stanford, and hoped it would put an end to her previously extremely liberal ideas. In his opinion it was all right to be kind-hearted and concerned about the planet and your fellow man, as long as you didn't carry it too far. In her college days and before, Buzz thought she had, but he had assured

her mother that law school would get her head on straight. Apparently it hadn't, since she dropped out.

Her father had left her more than enough money to live on, but Coco never touched it, she preferred to spend only what she earned, and often gave money away to causes that were important to her, most of them involved in ecology, the preservation of animal life on the planet, or to assist indigent children in Third World countries. Her sister Jane called her a bleeding heart. They had a thousand unflattering adjectives for her, all of which hurt. Coco readily admitted that she was a "bleeding heart," however, which was why she loved the statue of Quan Yin so much. The goddess of compassion touched her very soul. Coco's integrity was impeccable, and her heart was huge and constantly focused on kindness to others, which didn't seem like a bad thing to her, nor a crime.

Jane had caused her own ripples in the family in her late teens. At seventeen, she had told her parents that she was gay. Coco had been six at the time, and unaware of the stir it made. Jane announced that she was gay in her senior year in high school and became a militant activist for lesbian rights at UCLA, where she studied film. Her mother was heartbroken when she asked her to be a debutante, and Jane refused. She said she'd rather die. But in spite of her different sexual preferences, and early militancy, essentially she had the same material goals as her parents. Her father forgave her once he watched her set her sights on fame. And as soon as she achieved it, all was well again. For the past ten years Jane had lived with a well-known screenwriter who was a gentle person and famous in her own right. They had moved to San Francisco because of the large gay community there. Everyone in the universe had seen their films and loved them. Jane had been nominated for four Oscars but hadn't won one yet. Her mother had no problem now with Jane and Elizabeth living as partners for the past decade. It was Coco who upset them all deeply,

who worried the hell out of them, annoyed them with her ridiculous choices, her hippie life, her indifference to what they thought was important, and it made her mother cry.

Eventually, they blamed Coco's attitudes on the man she was living with when she dropped out of law school, rather than their effect on her for years before. He had lived with her during her second and final year of law school, and had left law school himself without graduating several years before. Ian White was everything her parents didn't want for her. Although smart, capable, and well educated, as Jane put it, he was an "underachiever" just like her. After leaving school in Australia, Ian had come to San Francisco, and opened a diving and surfing school. He had been bright, loving, funny, easygoing, and wonderful to her. He was a rough diamond and an independent sort who did whatever he wanted, and Coco knew she had found her soul mate the day they met. They moved in together two months later, when she was twenty-four. He died two years later. They were the best years of her life, and she had no regrets, except that he was gone, and had been for two years. He died in a hang-gliding accident, when a gust of wind crashed him into the rocks, and he fell to his death below. It was over in an instant, and their dreams went with him. They had bought the shack in Bolinas together, and he left it to her. His wet suits and diving gear were still at the cottage. She'd had a hard time for the first year after he died, and her mother and sister had been sympathetic in the beginning, but since then their sympathy had run out. As far as they were concerned, he was gone, and she should get over it, get a life, grow up. She had, but not the way they chose. That was a capital offense to them.

Coco herself knew that she had to let go of Ian's memory and move on. She had been out on a few dates in the last year, but no one came close to Ian. She had never met a man with as much life, energy, warmth, and charm. He was a tough act to follow, but she hoped that someday someone

would come along. They just hadn't yet. Even Ian wouldn't have wanted her to be alone. But she was in no hurry. Coco was happy living in Bolinas, waking up every day, facing each day as it came. She was on no career path. She didn't want or need fame to validate herself, as the rest of her family did. She didn't want to live in a big house in Bel-Air. She didn't want anything more than she'd had with Ian, beautiful days and happy times, and loving nights, all of which she knew she would carry with her forever. She didn't need to know where her next steps would lead, or with whom. Each day was a blessing unto itself. Her life with Ian had been absolutely perfect and exactly what they wanted, but in the last two years since his death, she had made her peace with being on her own. She missed him, but had finally accepted that he'd gone on. She wasn't frantic to get married, have children, or meet another man. At twenty-eight, none of that seemed pressing, and just rolling along in Bolinas was more than enough for her.

At first, living there had seemed odd to her and Ian as well. It was a funny little community. The local residents had chosen years before not only to be inconspicuous but to virtually disappear, like Brigadoon. There were no road signs to indicate how to get to Bolinas, or even to admit that it was there. You had to find it on your own. It was a time warp that they had both laughed at and loved. In the sixties it had been full of hippies and flower children, many of whom were still there. Only now they were weather-beaten and wrinkled and had gray hair. Men in their fifties or even sixties, headed for the beach with their surfboards under their arms. The only shops in town were a clothing store, which still sold flowered muumuus and everything tie-dyed, a restaurant full of grizzled old surfers, a grocery store with mostly organic food, and a head shop that sold every possible kind of paraphernalia and bongs in all colors, shapes, and sizes. The town itself sat on a plateau that hung over a narrow beach, and an inlet separated it

from the long expanse of Stinson Beach and the expensive houses there. There were a few beautiful homes tucked away in Bolinas, but mostly there were families, dropouts, older surfers, and people who, for whatever reason, had chosen to get away and disappear. It was an elitist community in its own way, and the antithesis of everything she had grown up with, and the high-powered family Ian had fled in Sydney, Australia. They had been perfectly matched that way. He was gone now, but she was still there, and she had no intention of leaving anytime soon, or maybe ever, no matter what her mother and sister said. The therapist she had seen after Ian died, until recently, had told her that she was still rebelling at twenty-eight. Maybe so, but as far as Coco was concerned, it worked for her. She was happy in the life she had chosen, and the place where she lived. And the one thing she knew for sure was that she was never, ever going back to live in L.A.

As the sun rose in the sky, and Coco went back inside for another cup of tea, Ian's Australian shepherd, Sallie, sauntered slowly out of the house, fresh from Coco's bed. She gave a faint wave of her tail, and headed off on her own for a morning stroll on the beach. She was extremely independent, and helped Coco in her work. Ian had told her Australian shepherds made great rescue dogs, and were herders by instinct, but Sallie marched to her own tune. She was attached to Coco, but only to the extent she chose to be, and had her own plans and ideas at all times. She had been impeccably trained by Ian, and answered to voice commands.

She bounded off as Coco poured herself a second cup of tea and glanced at the clock. It was just after seven, and she had to shower and get to work. She liked to be on the Golden Gate Bridge by eight, and at her first stop by eight-thirty. She was always on time, and supremely responsible to her clients. Everything she had learned by association about hard work and success had served her. She had a

crazy little business, but it paid surprisingly well. Her services were in high demand, and had been for three years, since Ian helped her set it up. And it had grown immeasurably in the two years since he died, although Coco diligently limited her clients, and would only take so many. She liked to be home by four o'clock every day, which gave her time for a walk on the beach with Sallie before dusk.

Coco's neighbors on either side of her shack were an aromatherapist and an acupuncturist, both of whom worked in the city. The acupuncturist was married to a teacher at the local school, and the aromatherapist lived with a fireman from the firehouse at Stinson Beach. They were all decent, sincere people who worked hard, and helped each other out. Her neighbors had been incredibly kind to her when Ian died. And she had gone out with a friend of the teacher's once or twice, but nothing had clicked for her. They had wound up friends, which she enjoyed too. Predictably, her family dismissed them all as "hippies." Her mother called them deadbeats, which none of them were, even if they seemed that way to her. Coco didn't mind her own company, and was alone most of the time.

At seven-thirty after a steaming hot shower, Coco headed out to her ancient van. Ian had found it for her at a lot in Inverness, and it got her to the city every day. The battered old van was exactly what she needed, despite a hundred thousand miles on it. It ran fine, even if it was ugly as sin. Most of the paint was long gone. But it was still going strong. Ian had had a motorcycle they rode over the hills on weekends, when they weren't out on his boat. He had taught her to dive. She hadn't driven the motorcycle since he was gone. It was still sitting in the garage behind their shack. She couldn't bring herself to part with it, although she had sold his boat, and the diving school had closed



since there was no one else to run it. Coco couldn't have, and she had a business of her own.

Coco slid open the back door of the van and Sallie jumped in with a look of excitement. Her run on the beach had woken her up and she was ready for work, as was Coco. She smiled at the big, friendly black and white dog. To those who didn't recognize the breed, she looked like a mutt, but she was a purebred Australian shepherd, with serious blue eyes. Coco closed the door, got in behind the wheel, and took off with a wave at her neighbor, who was coming back from his shift at the firehouse. It was a sleepy community, and almost no one bothered to lock their doors at night.

She followed the winding road at the edge of the cliff overlooking the ocean as she headed to the city, with downtown shimmering in the morning sunlight in the distance. It was going to be a perfect day, which made work easier for her. And just as she liked to be, she was on the bridge by eight. She would be right on time for her first client, not that it really mattered. They would have forgiven her if she was late, but she almost never was. She wasn't the flake her family made her out to be, just different from them all her life.

She took the turnoff into Pacific Heights, and headed south up the steep hill on Divisadero. She was just cresting it at Broadway when her cell phone rang. It was her sister, Jane.

"Where are you?" Jane said tersely. She always sounded as though there were a national emergency, and terrorists had just attacked her house. She lived in a constant state of stress, which was the nature of her business and suited her personality to perfection. Her partner, Elizabeth, was far more relaxed, and tempered her considerably. Coco liked Liz a lot. Liz was forty-three years old and every bit as talented and bright as Jane, just quieter about it. Liz had graduated summa from Harvard with a master's in English

literature. She had written an obscure but interesting novel before going to Hollywood to write scripts. She had written many since then and won two Oscars over the years. She and Jane had met working on a picture ten years before, and had been together ever since. Their relationship was solid, and the alliance worked well for both of them. They considered themselves partners for life.

"I'm on Divisadero. Why?" Coco asked, sounding tired. She hated the way Jane never asked her how she was, she just told her what she needed. It had been the nature of their relationship since Coco was a child. She had been Jane's errand girl all her life, and had spent a lot of time talking to her therapist about it, while she was still seeing her. It was hard turning that around, although she was trying. Sallie was sitting in the passenger seat next to Coco and watched her face with interest, as though sensing Coco's tension and wondering why that was.

"Good. I need you right away," Jane said, sounding both relieved and harried. Coco knew they were going to New York soon, on location for a film she and Liz were coproducing.

"What do you need me for?" Coco sounded wary, as the dog cocked her head to one side.

"I'm screwed. My house-sitter just canceled on me. I'm leaving in an hour." Desperation had crept into her voice.

"I thought you weren't leaving till next week," Coco said, sounding suspicious, as she drove past Broadway, where her sister lived only a few blocks away in a spectacular house overlooking the bay. It was on what was referred to as the Gold Coast, where the most impressive houses were. And there was no denying that Jane's was one of the prettiest of all, although it wasn't Coco's style, any more than the Bolinas shack was Jane's. The two sisters seemed to have been born on separate planets.

"We have a strike on the set, sound technicians. Liz left last night. I've got to get there by tonight for a meeting

with the union, and I have no one for Jack. My house-sitter's mother died, and she's got to stay in Seattle with her sick father indefinitely. She just called and bagged on me, and my flight's in two hours." Coco frowned as she listened. She had no desire to connect the dots of what her sister had just said. This wasn't the first time it had happened. Coco somehow always became the backup for everything that fell through the cracks in her sister's life. Since Jane believed Coco had no life, she always expected her to step up to the plate and fill in. Coco could never say no to the sister she had been daunted by for her entire lifetime. Jane had no problem saying no to anyone, which was part of her success. It was a word Coco had trouble finding in her own vocabulary, a fact that Jane knew well and took full advantage of, at every chance.

"I'll come in to walk Jack if you want," Coco said cautiously.

"You know that won't work," Jane said, sounding annoyed. "He gets depressed if no one comes home at night. He'll howl all night and drive the neighbors nuts. And I need someone to keep an eye on the house." The dog was almost as big as Coco's Bolinas house, but if need be, Coco knew she could take him there.

"Do you want him to stay with me until you find someone else?"

"No," Jane said firmly, "I need you to stay here." *I need you to*, Coco heard for the ten millionth time in her life. *Not would you please...could you...would you mind...please, please, pretty please. I need you to.* Shit. This was yet another opportunity to say no. Coco opened her mouth to say the word and not a single sound came out. She glanced over at Sallie, who seemed to be staring at her in disbelief.

"Don't look at me like that," Coco said to the dog.

"What? Who are you talking to?" Jane asked in a rush.

"Never mind. Why can't he stay with me?"

"He likes to be at home in his own bed," Jane said firmly, as Coco rolled her eyes. She was a block away from her client's house and didn't want to be late, but something told her she was about to be. Her sister had a magnetic pull on her like the tides, a force Coco could never seem to resist.

"So do I like to be in my own bed," Coco said, trying to sound decisive, but she wasn't kidding anyone, least of all Jane. She and Elizabeth were going to be on location in New York for five months. "I'm not house-sitting for you for five months," Coco said, sounding stubborn. And films ran longer sometimes. It could be six or seven in the end.

"Fine. I'll find someone else," Jane said, sounding disapproving, as though Coco were a naughty child. That always got to her, no matter how often she reminded herself that she was grown up. "But I can't do that in an hour before I leave. I'll take care of it from New York. For God's sake, you'd think I was asking you to stay in the Tenderloin in a crack house. You could do a lot worse than stay here for five or six months. It might do you good, and you wouldn't have to commute." Jane was selling hard, but Coco didn't want to buy. She hated her sister's house—it was beautiful, impeccable, and cold. It had been photographed for every decorating magazine, and Coco always felt uncomfortable there. There was no place to curl up, to feel cozy at night. And it was so immaculate, Coco was always afraid to breathe, or even eat. She wasn't the housekeeper her sister was, or even Liz. They were neat freaks in the extreme. Coco liked a friendly mess, and didn't mind a reasonable amount of disorder in her life. It drove Jane wild.

"I'll cover it for a few days, at most a week. But you have to line up someone else. I don't want to live at your house for months," Coco said adamantly, trying to set boundaries with her.

"I get it. I'll do what I can. Just cover me for right now, please. How fast can you pick up the keys? And I want to show you the alarm system again, we've added some new features and they're complicated. I don't want you setting off the alarm. You can pick Jack's meals up at Canine Cuisine, they prepare them for him twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays. And don't forget, we've switched vets to Dr. Hajimoto on Sacramento Street. Jack's due for a booster shot next week."

"It's a good thing you don't have kids," Coco commented drily as she turned the van around. She was going to be late, but she might as well get it over with. Her sister would drive her insane if she didn't. "You'd never be able to leave town." Their bull mastiff had become a child substitute for them, and lived better than most people, with specially prepared meals, a trainer, a groomer who came to the house to bathe him, and more attention than many parents gave to their kids.

Coco drove up to her sister's house, and there was already a town car waiting outside to take Jane to the airport. Coco turned off the ignition and hopped out, leaving Sallie in the car, watching out the window with interest. She was going to have a good time with Jack for the next several days. The bull mastiff was three times her size, and they'd probably break everything in the house as they chased each other around. Maybe she'd let them use her sister's pool. The only thing Coco loved about the house was the enormous projection screen in the bedroom, where she could watch movies. The bedroom was huge and the screen covered one entire wall.

Coco rang the doorbell, and Jane yanked open the door with a cell phone pressed to her ear. She was giving someone hell about the unions, and hung up as she stared at Coco. The two women looked surprisingly alike. They both had tall, spare frames and beautiful faces. Both had modeled in their teens. The most noticeable difference

between them was that Jane was all sharp edges, with long straight blond hair pulled back in a ponytail. Coco's long, loose auburn hair and slightly gentler curves made her look warmer, and there was a smile in her eyes. Everything about Jane screamed stress. There had always been a sharp edge to her, even as a kid, but those that knew her intimately, knew that despite the razor tongue, she was a decent person and had a good heart. But there was no denying she was tough. Coco knew it well.

She was wearing black jeans, a black T-shirt, and a black leather jacket, and diamond studs in her ears. Coco was wearing a white T-shirt, jeans that showed off her long, graceful legs, and running shoes that she needed for work, and she had a faded sweatshirt tied around her neck. And Coco looked noticeably younger. Jane's more sophisticated style aged her a little, but both were striking women and looked noticeably like their famous father. Their mother was smaller and rounder, although she was blond like Jane. Coco's coppery mane was a throwback to another generation, since Buzz Barrington had had jet black hair.

"Thank God!" Jane said as her enormous bull mastiff came running up to them and stood up on his back legs to put his paws on Coco's shoulders. He knew what having her around meant, forbidden table scraps he would never get otherwise, and sleeping in the king-size bed in the master suite, which Jane would never have allowed. Although she adored her dog, she was a firm believer in rules. Even Jack knew that Coco was a pushover and would let him sleep on the bed at night. He wagged his tail and licked her face, which was a far friendlier greeting than she got from Jane. Liz was by far the warmer of the pair, but she was already in New York. And the relationship between the two sisters was always tense. However good her intentions, and her love for her younger sister, Jane never minced words.

Jane handed Coco a set of keys, and an information sheet about the new alarm. She repeated the information about the vet, the booster shot, and Jack's designer meals, and about fourteen other instructions, all delivered like machine-gun fire at her younger sister.

"And call us right away if Jack has any kind of a problem," she finished.

Coco wanted to ask her "What about if I do?" but Jane wouldn't have found it funny. "We'll try to come back for a weekend sometime to give you a break, but I don't know when we can get away, particularly if we're having trouble with the unions." She sounded harried and exhausted before she even got there. Coco knew she managed the most minute details and was brilliant at what she did.

"Wait a minute," Coco said, feeling weak, "I'm only doing this for a few days, right? Maybe a week. I'm not staying here the whole time," she repeated so they understood each other. She wanted no confusion about that.

"I know, I know. You'd think you'd be happy to stay in a decent house." Her sister glared at her instead of thanking her profusely.

"It's *your* 'decent' house," Coco pointed out. "Bolas is my home," she said with quiet dignity, which Jane ignored.

"Let's not get into that," Jane said with a meaningful look, and then grudgingly, she looked at her sister and smiled. "Thanks for bailing me out, kiddo. I really appreciate it. You're a great baby sister to have." She gave Coco one of her rare smiles of approval, which had kept Coco trying to please her all her life. But you had to do what Jane wanted to get those smiles.

Coco wanted to ask her why she was a great baby sister. Because she had no life? But she didn't ask the question and just nodded, hating herself for agreeing so quickly to house-sit for them. As always, Coco had given in without a fight. What was the point? Jane always won anyway. She would always be the big sister that Coco couldn't beat at

any game, couldn't say no to, and who loomed larger than life, sometimes even larger than their parents.

"Just don't leave me stuck here forever," Coco said in a pleading tone.

"I'll call you and let you know," Jane said cryptically, and then rushed into the next room to answer two phone lines that were ringing at once, and as she headed for them, her cell phone rang. "Thanks again," she called over her shoulder, as Coco sighed, patted the dog, and headed back to her van. By then she was twenty minutes late for her first client.

"See you later, Jack," Coco said softly, and closed the door behind her. And as she drove away, Coco had the sinking feeling that Jane was going to leave her stuck there for months on end. She knew her sister too well.

Coco was at her first client's house five minutes later. She took out a lockbox that she kept in the glove compartment of the van, twirled the combination, and extracted a set of keys with a tag on them with a numbered code. She had the keys to all of her clients' houses. They trusted her completely to come and go. The house she stopped at was a large brick house that was almost as big as Jane's, with neatly trimmed hedges outside. Coco let herself in the back door, turned off the alarm, and whistled loudly. Within seconds, a giant silvery blue Great Dane appeared and wagged his tail in frantic delight the moment he saw her.

"Hi, Henry, how're you doing, boy?" She clipped his leash on his collar, set the alarm again, locked the door, and led him out to the van, where Sallie was pleased to see her friend. The two dogs barked a greeting at each other, and jostled each other good-naturedly in the back of the van.

Coco stopped at four other houses nearby, and picked up a surprisingly gentle Doberman, a Rhodesian ridgeback, an Irish wolfhound, and a Dalmatian, all from similarly opulent homes. Her first run of the day was always with the biggest dogs. They needed the exercise most. She headed out to



Ocean Beach, where she and the dogs could run for miles. Sometimes she took them to Golden Gate Park. And when necessary, Sallie helped her herd them back into a pack. She had been dog-walking for the rich and elite of Pacific Heights for three years, and had never had an accident, a mishap, or lost a dog. Her reputation was golden in the business, and even though her family thought it was a pathetic waste of her education and time, it kept her outdoors, she liked the dogs, and she made a very decent living at it. It wasn't what she wanted to do for the rest of her life, but for now it suited her just fine.

Her cell phone rang as she was dropping the last of the big dogs back at his home. She had a group of medium-size dogs to pick up next, and always took the small dogs out just before lunchtime, since most of their owners walked them before they went to work. And she did a last run of big dogs at midafternoon before she went back to Marin. It was Jane calling her. She was already on the plane, speaking quickly before they told her to turn off her phone.

"I checked my records before I left, and Jack's not due for that booster for two weeks, not one." Sometimes Coco wondered why her head didn't explode from all the minutiae she tried to keep track of. No detail was too small for Jane's attention, she micromanaged everything and everyone in her life, even the dog.

"Don't worry about it. We'll be fine," Coco reassured her, sounding relaxed. The run on the beach had mellowed her as well as the dogs. "Have fun in New York."

"Not with a strike going on." Jane sounded like a wire about to snap. But Coco knew that once she was with Liz again, she'd calm down. Her partner always had a soothing influence on her. They were a perfect match and complemented each other.

"Try to enjoy yourself anyway. Just don't forget to find another house-sitter when you can," Coco reminded her again, and she meant it, whether Jane cared or not.

"I know, I know," Jane said, and sighed. "And thanks for bailing me out. It means a lot to me to know that the house and Jack are in good hands." Her voice sounded gentler than it had all morning. They had an odd relationship, but they were sisters after all.

"Thanks," Coco said with a slow smile, wondering why it always meant so much to her to have her sister's approval, and hurt so much when she didn't. She knew that one of these days, she'd have to unhook from that and have the guts to turn her down. But she wasn't there yet.

Coco knew that as far as Jane and their mother were concerned, being a dog-walker didn't count. In the scheme of life, and compared to their achievements as a best-selling author and an Oscar-nominated producer, Coco's business was an embarrassment to them. In their eyes, it was as though she didn't have a job at all. And even Coco was aware that on the Richter scale of accomplishments she had been taught to demand of herself, as a dog-walker she didn't move the needle at all. But still, whether they approved of it or not, it was an easy, simple, pleasant life. And as far as Coco was concerned, that was enough for now.

## Chapter 2

IT WAS SIX o'clock as Coco headed back into the city again. She had gone home to pack a bag with sweatshirts, jeans, a spare pair of running shoes, clean underwear, and a stack of her favorite DVDs to watch on her sister's giant screen. She had just passed through the toll plaza when her cell phone rang. It was Jane, she had just gotten to the apartment she and Liz had rented in New York for six months.

"Is everything okay?" Jane asked, sounding worried.

"I'm on my way back to your place now," Coco reassured her. "Jack and I will have a candlelight dinner, while Sallie watches her favorite show on TV." Coco didn't let herself think back to the time, more than two years ago now, when she and Ian would cook dinner together, walk on the beach at night, or fish off his boat on the weekends. The time when she still had a life, and wasn't preparing designer meals for her sister's dog. But there was no point thinking of that now. Those days were gone.

They had been planning to be married the summer he died, and had wanted a simple ceremony on the beach, with a barbecue afterward for their friends. She hadn't yet told her mother, who would have had a fit over it. And they'd been planning to go back to Australia eventually and open a diving school there. Ian had been a surfboard champion in his youth. Thinking about it made her wistful now.

Liz got on the phone while Coco was talking to Jane and thanked her profusely for staying at the house and

babysitting their dog. Her tone and style were infinitely warmer than Jane's.

"It's okay, I'm happy to help out, as long as it's not for too long." Coco wanted her to hear it as well.

"We'll find someone, I promise," Liz said, sounding genuinely grateful for Coco's help. She never took her for granted, unlike Jane.

"Thank you," Coco said gratefully. "How's New York?"

"It'll be better if we avoid the strike. I think we may come to some agreement tonight." She sounded hopeful. She was a peacemaker at heart. Jane was the warrior of the pair.

Coco wished them luck as she pulled up in front of their house. She envied them their relationship sometimes. They got along the way married couples should and often didn't. Coco had grown up knowing that her older sister was gay, and accepted her lifestyle without question, although she knew that sometimes others were surprised. What bothered Coco about Jane was the way she steam-rolled everyone to get what she wanted. Only Liz seemed able to humanize her, and even she couldn't manage it at times. Spoiled by their parents early on, and accustomed to adulation for her accomplishments, Jane was used to getting everything she wanted. And Coco had always felt second best, in her shadow. Nothing about that had changed. The only time it had felt different to her was when she lived with Ian. Maybe because she didn't care as much about what her sister thought then, or maybe because his presence protected her in some mystical unseen way. She had loved the idea of moving to Australia with him. And now, here she was, staying at her sister's house, and babysitting for her dog again. And what would have happened if Ian were still alive, and she had her own life? Jane would have had to find someone else, instead of using her baby sister like some sort of Cinderella to rush to her aid in every crisis. But what would it feel like not being there for her? Would it make her a grown-up in her own

right, or the bad little girl Jane always told her she was when they were younger, and Coco didn't want to do what Jane said? It was an interesting question, to which she had not yet found the answer. Maybe because she didn't want to. It was easier to just do what she was asked, especially without Ian to protect her anymore.

Coco fed both dogs and turned on the TV. She lay back against the white mohair couch and put her feet on the white lacquered coffee table. The carpeting was white too, and made from the hair of some rare beast in South America, Coco vaguely remembered. They had used a famous architect from Mexico City, and the house was beautiful, but made to live in with perfectly combed hair, clean hands, and brand-new shoes. Coco felt sometimes as though if she breathed, she would leave a mark on something, which her sister would then see. It was a lot of pressure living there, and infinitely less cozy and comfortable than being in Bolinas in her "shack."

She went out to the kitchen eventually to find something to eat. Since they had left earlier than planned, neither Elizabeth nor Jane had had time to stock the refrigerator for the house-sitter. All she found in it were a head of lettuce, two lemons, and a bottle of white wine. There was pasta and olive oil in the cupboard, and Coco made herself a bowl of plain pasta and a salad, and poured herself a glass of white wine while she was cooking. Both dogs started barking insanely, standing at the windows, while she was tossing the salad, and when she went to see what was happening, she saw two raccoons strolling across the garden. It was another fifteen minutes before the raccoons finally disappeared as she tried to calm the dogs, and by then Coco could smell something burning. It smelled like an electrical fire somewhere in the house, and she ran all over, upstairs and down, trying to find it, and saw nothing. Her nose finally led her back to the kitchen, where the water in the pasta pot had burned away, with the pasta in a

thick black crust at the bottom of the pan, and the handle of the pot partially melted, hence the evil odor.

"Shit!" Coco muttered, as she got the pot into the sink and poured cold water on it, and an alarm sounded somewhere. The smoke alarm had gone off, and before she could call the alarm company, she could hear sirens, and two fire trucks were at the front door. She was explaining what had happened, somewhat sheepishly, as her cell phone rang, and both dogs were barking at the firemen. When she answered, it was Jane.

"What's happening? The alarm company just called me. Is there a fire in the house?" She sounded panicked.

"It's nothing," Coco said, thanking the firemen as they got back on the truck and she closed the front door. She had to reset the alarm and wasn't sure she remembered how to do it, but didn't want to admit that to Jane. "It's no big deal. I burned the pasta. There were two raccoons in the garden and the dogs went crazy. I forgot I was cooking."

"Christ, you could have burned the house down." It was after midnight in New York, and the strike had been averted, but Jane sounded exhausted.

"I can always go back to Bolinas," Coco volunteered.

"Never mind. Just try not to kill yourself, or set the house on fire." She reminded Coco how to reset the alarm, and a minute later, Coco sat down at the island in the center of the pristine black granite kitchen and ate the salad. She was hungry, tired, and homesick for her own house.

She put the bowl in the dishwasher, threw away the pot with the melted handle, turned off the lights, and only when she got upstairs to the bedroom with both dogs following her did she notice that one of the lettuce leaves had stuck to the bottom of her running shoe. She lay on the floor of her sister's bedroom, feeling like a bull in a china shop, just as she did every time she came here, as inept as she always had whenever she was in her sister's orbit. She