

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Honor Thyself  
Danielle Steel

## **About the Book**

A tale of small miracles and big surprises...

Carole Barber, a legend of film and stage, after a lifetime in the spotlight, has come to Paris to work on a novel, and, she hopes, to find herself. But one cool November evening, as her taxi speeds into a tunnel just past the Louvre, a fiery instant of terror shatters hundreds of lives - and leaves Carole alone, unconscious and unidentified in a Paris trauma unit.

At the Ritz, they wonder where their incognito guest has gone. From California to London, Carole's friends and family begin to make inquiries. It is a terrible shock when they realize that Carole is in a hospital far from home, fighting for her life. In the days that follow, the paparazzi swarm. A mysterious stranger quietly visits the hospital to see the woman he once loved and never forgot. Carole's two grown children rush to her bedside, waiting and praying - until the miraculous begins to happen.

For Carole, an extraordinary opportunity has arisen: a second chance to count her blessings, heal wounded hearts, recapture lost love... and to live a life that will truly honour others - beginning with herself.

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About the Author

Also by Danielle Steel

Copyright

DANIELLE  
STEEL

Honor  
Thyself

*To my mother, Norma,  
who never read any of my books,  
but was proud of me anyway, I hope.  
To the challenging relationships  
between some less fortunate  
mothers and daughters, the missed opportunities,  
the good intentions gone awry, and in the end  
the love that carries one through, whatever  
the story looked like, appeared to be, or was.  
In all the ways that mattered to me at the time,  
I lost my mother when I was six,  
when she was no longer there to comb my hair,  
so I wouldn't look silly at school.  
We knew each other better as adults,  
two entirely different women,  
with such different views of life.  
We disappointed each other often,  
understood each other little,  
but I give us both credit for trying and hanging in till the end.  
This book is for the mother I wish I had had,  
the one I hoped for every time we met,  
the one who cooked pancakes and Swedish meatballs  
when I was little, before she left,  
for the one I'm sure she tried to be even after she did,  
and finally with love, compassion, and forgiveness  
for the one she was.  
In her own way, she taught me to be the mother that I am.  
May God smile on you and hold you closely,  
may you find joy and peace.  
I love you, Mom.*

*d.s.*

“If you become whole,  
everything will come to you.”

*-Tao Te Ching*

## Chapter 1

IT WAS A quiet, sunny November morning, as Carole Barber looked up from her computer and stared out into the garden of her Bel-Air home. It was a big, rambling stone mansion that she had lived in for fifteen years. The sunny greenhouse room she used as an office looked out over the rosebushes she had planted, the fountain, and the small pond that reflected the sky. The view was peaceful, and the house silent. Her hands had barely moved over the keyboard for the past hour. It was beyond frustrating. Despite a long and successful career in films, she was trying to write her first novel. Although she had written short stories for years, she had never published any. She had even tried her hand at a screenplay once. During their entire marriage, she and her late husband, Sean, had talked about making a movie together, and never got around to it. They were too busy doing other things, in their primary fields.

Sean was a producer-director, and she was an actress. Not just an actress, Carole Barber was a major star, and had been since she was eighteen. She had just turned fifty, two months before. By her own choice, she hadn't had a part in a movie for three years. At her age, even with her still remarkable beauty, good parts were rare.

Carole stopped working when Sean got sick. And in the two years since he'd died, she had traveled, visiting her children in London and New York. She was involved in a



variety of causes, mostly relating to the rights of women and children, which had taken her to Europe several times, China, and underdeveloped countries around the world. She cared deeply about injustice, poverty, political persecution, and crimes against the innocent and defenseless. She had diligently kept journals of all her trips, and a poignant one of the months before Sean died. She and Sean had talked about her writing a book, in the last days of his life. He thought it was a wonderful idea, and encouraged her to start the project. She had waited until two years after his death to do it. She had been wrestling with writing it for the past year. The book would give her an opportunity to speak out about the things that mattered to her, and delve deep into herself in a way that acting never had. She wanted desperately to complete the book, but she couldn't seem to get it off the ground. Something kept stopping her, and she had no idea what it was. It was a classic case of writer's block, but like a dog with a bone, she refused to give up and let it go. She wanted to go back to acting eventually, but not until she wrote the book. She felt as though she owed that to Sean and herself.

In August, she had turned down what seemed like a good part in an important movie. The director was excellent, the screenwriter had won several Academy Awards for his earlier work. Her costars would have been interesting to work with. But when she read the script, it did absolutely nothing for her. She felt no pull to it at all. She didn't want to act anymore unless she loved the part. She was haunted by her book, still in its fetal stages, and it was keeping her from going back to work. Somewhere deep in her heart, she knew she had to do the writing first. This novel was the voice of her soul.

When Carole finally started the book, she insisted it wasn't about herself. It was only as she got deeper into it that she realized that in fact it was. The central character

had many facets of Carole in her, and the more Carole got into it, the harder it was to write, as though she couldn't bear facing herself. She had been blocked on it again now for weeks. It was a story about a woman coming of age and examining her life. She realized now that it had everything to do with her, the life she'd led, the men she'd loved, and the decisions she had made in the course of her life. Every time she sat down at her desk to write it, she found herself staring into space, dreaming about the past, and nothing wound up on the screen of her computer. She was haunted by echoes of her earlier life, and until she came to terms with them, she knew she couldn't delve into her novel, nor solve its problems. She needed the key to unlock those doors first, and hadn't found it. Every question and doubt she'd ever had about herself had leaped back into her head with the writing. She was suddenly questioning every move she'd ever made. Why? When? How? Had she been right or wrong? Were the people in her life actually as she'd seen them at the time? Had she been unfair? She kept asking herself the same questions, and wondered why it mattered now, but it did. Immensely. She could go nowhere with the book, until she came up with the answers about her own life. It was driving her insane. It was as though by deciding to write this book, she was being forced to face herself in ways she never had before, ways she had avoided for years. There was no hiding from it now. The people she had known floated through her head at night, as she lay awake, and even in her dreams. And she awoke exhausted in the morning.

The face that came to mind most often was Sean's. He was the only one she was sure about, who he had been, and what he meant to her. Their relationship had been so straightforward and clean. The others weren't, not to that degree. She had questions in her mind about all of them but Sean. And he had been so anxious for her to write the book she had described to him, she felt she owed it to him,

as a kind of final gift. And she wanted to prove to herself that she could do it. She was paralyzed by the fear that she couldn't, and didn't have it in her. She had had the dream for more than three years now, and needed to know if she had a book in her or not.

The word that came to mind when she thought of Sean was *peace*. He was a kind, gentle, wise, loving man, who had been only wonderful to her. He had brought order to her life in the beginning, and together they had built a solid foundation for their life together. He had never tried to own or overwhelm her. Their lives had never seemed intertwined or entangled, instead they had traveled side by side, at a comfortable pace together, right until the end. Because of who he was, even Sean's death from cancer had been a quiet disappearance, a kind of natural evolution into a further dimension where she could no longer see him. But because of his powerful influence on her life, she always felt him near her. He had accepted death as one more step in the journey of his life, a transition he had to make at some point, like a wondrous opportunity. He learned from everything he did, and whatever he encountered on his path, he embraced with grace. In dying, he had taught her yet another intensely valuable lesson about life.

Two years after he had gone, she still missed him, his laughter, the sound of his voice, his brilliant mind, his company, their long quiet walks together along the beach, but she always had the feeling that he was somewhere nearby, doing his own thing, traveling on, and sharing some kind of blessing with her, just as he had when he was alive. Knowing and loving him had been one of her greatest gifts. He had reminded her before he died that she still had much to do, and urged her to go back to work. He wanted her to make movies again, and write the book. He had always loved her short stories and essays, and over the years she had written dozens of poems to him, which he treasured. She had had all of them bound in a leather folder several

months before he died, and he had spent hours reading them over and over again.

She hadn't had time to start the book before he died. She was too busy taking care of him. She had taken a year off to spend time with him, and nurse him herself when he got really sick, particularly after chemo and in the last few months of his illness. He had been valiant till the end. They had gone for a walk together the day before he died. They hadn't been able to walk far, and they had said very little to each other. They had walked side by side, holding hands, sat down frequently when he got tired, and they had both cried as they sat and watched the sunset. They both knew the end was near. He had died the following night, peacefully, in her arms. He had taken one last long look at her, sighed with a gentle smile, closed his eyes, and was gone.

Because of the way he'd died, with such elegant acceptance, afterward it had been impossible to be overwhelmed with grief when she thought about him. As best one could be, she was ready. They both were. What she felt in his absence was an emptiness she still felt now. And she wanted to fill that void with a better understanding of herself. She knew the book would help her do that, if she could ever get a handle on it. She wanted to at least try to measure up to him, and the faith he'd had in her. He had been a constant source of inspiration to her, in her life and her work. He had brought her calm and joy, and a kind of serenity and balance.

In many ways, it had been a relief for her not to work in films for the past three years. She had worked so hard for so long that even before Sean got sick she knew she needed a break. And she knew that time off for introspection would eventually bring deeper meaning to her acting as well. She had made some important movies over the years, and had been in some major commercial hits. But she wanted more than that now, she wanted to

bring something to her work that she never had before. The kind of depth that only came with wisdom, seasoning, and time. She wasn't old at fifty, but the years since Sean got sick and died had deepened her in ways she knew she would never have experienced otherwise, and she knew that inevitably that would show on the screen. And if she mastered it, surely in her book as well. This book was a symbol of ultimate adulthood for her, and freedom from the last ghosts of her past. She had spent so many years pretending to be other people through her acting, and appearing to be who the world expected her to be. Now was the time in her life when she wanted to be unfettered by other people's expectations, and finally be herself. She belonged to no one now. She was free to be whoever she wanted to be.

Her years of belonging to a man had been over long before she met Sean. They had been two free souls, living side by side, enjoying each other with love and mutual respect. Their lives had been parallel, and in perfect symmetry and balance, but never enmeshed. It was the one thing she had feared when they got married, that it would get complicated, or he would try to "own" her, that they might somehow stifle or drown each other. That had never happened. He had assured her it wouldn't, and had kept his promise. She knew that her eight years with Sean were something that only occurred once in a lifetime. She didn't expect to find that with anyone else. Sean had been unique.

She couldn't imagine herself falling in love, or wanting to be married again. She had missed him for these past two years, but had not mourned him. His love had sated her so totally that she was comfortable now even without him. There had been no agony or pain in their love for each other, although like all couples, they'd had resounding arguments now and then, and then laughed about them afterward. Neither Sean nor Carole was the kind of person to hold a grudge, and there wasn't a shred of malice in

either of them, or even in their fights. In addition to loving each other, they had been best friends.

They met when Carole was forty, and Sean was thirty-five. Although five years younger than she was, he had set an example for her in many ways, mostly in his views about life. Her career was still going strong, and she was making more movies than she wanted to at the time. For so many years before that, she had been driven to follow the path of an ever-more-demanding career. They met five years after she had moved back to Los Angeles from France, and she'd been trying to spend more time with her children, always pulled between her kids, and increasingly alluring movie roles. She had spent the years after her return from France without a serious involvement with a man. She just didn't have the time, or the desire. There had been men she'd gone out with, usually for a brief time, some of them in her business, mostly directors or writers, others who were in different creative fields, art, architecture, or music. They had been interesting men, but she'd never fallen in love with any of them, and was convinced she never would again. Until Sean.

They had met at a conference they'd both gone to, to discuss the rights of actors in Hollywood, and had been on a panel together about the changing role of women in films. It had never bothered either of them that he was five years younger than she was. It was completely irrelevant to both of them. They were kindred spirits, regardless of age. A month after they met, they had gone to Mexico together for a weekend. He had moved in three months later, and never left. Six months after he moved in, despite Carole's reluctance and misgivings, they were married. Sean had convinced her it was the right thing for both of them. He was absolutely correct, although at first Carole had been adamant about not wanting to get married again. She was convinced that their careers would somehow interfere and cause conflicts between them, and impact their marriage.

As Sean had promised, her fears had been unfounded. Their union seemed blessed.

Her children had been young then, and still at home, which was an added concern for Carole. Sean had none of his own, and they had none together. He was crazy about her two children, and they had both agreed that they were too busy and wouldn't have had time to give to another child. Instead they nurtured each other, and their marriage. Anthony and Chloe were both in high school when she and Sean married, which was part of her decision to marry Sean. She didn't like setting the example of just living together with no further commitment, and her children had cast a strong positive vote for the marriage. They wanted Sean to stick around, and he had proven to be a good friend and stepfather to both of them. And now, much to her chagrin, both her children were grown up and gone.

Chloe was in her first job, after graduating from Stanford. She was the assistant to the assistant accessories editor for a fashion magazine in London. It was mostly prestige and fun, helping with styling, setting up shoots, doing errands, for almost no pay and the thrill of working for *British Vogue*. Chloe loved it. With looks similar to her mother's, she could have been a model, but preferred to be on the editorial end, and she was having a ball in London. She was a bright, outgoing girl and was excited about the people she met through her job. She and Carole talked often on the phone.

Anthony was following in his father's footsteps on Wall Street, in the world of finance, after getting an MBA from Harvard. He was a serious, responsible young man, and had always made them proud. He was as handsome as Chloe was pretty, but had always been a little shy. He went out with lots of bright, attractive girls, but no one important to him so far. His social life interested him less than his work at the office. He was diligent about his career in finance, and always kept his goals in mind. In fact, very

little deterred him, and more often than not when Carole called him on his cell phone late at night, he was still working at his desk.

Both children had been deeply attached to Sean, and to their mother. They had always been wholesome, sensible, and loving, despite the occasional mother-daughter skirmish between Chloe and Carole. Chloe had always needed her mother's time and attention more than her brother, and complained bitterly when her mother went on location for a movie, particularly during high school, when she wanted Carole around, like the other mothers. Her complaints had made Carole feel guilty, even though she had the kids fly out to visit on the set whenever possible, or came home during breaks in filming to be with them. Anthony had been easy, Chloe always a little less so, at least for Carole. Chloe thought her father walked on water, and was more than willing to point out her mother's faults. Carole told herself it was the nature of relationships between mother and daughter. It was easier to be the mother of an adoring son.

And now, on her own, with her kids grown and gone, and happy in their own lives, Carole was determined to tackle the novel she had promised herself to write for so long. In the past few weeks, she had gotten seriously discouraged, and had begun to doubt it was ever going to happen. She was beginning to wonder if she had been wrong to turn down the part she had declined in August. Maybe she had to give up writing, and go back to making movies. Mike Appelsohn, her agent, was getting annoyed with her. He was upset about the parts she kept turning down, and fed up with hearing about the book she didn't write.

The story line was eluding her, the characters still seemed vague, the outcome and development seemed to be tied in a knot somewhere in her head. It was all a giant tangle, like a ball of yarn after the cat played with it. And no matter what she did, or how intently she thought about



it, she couldn't seem to sort out the mess. It was frustrating her beyond belief.

There were two Oscars sitting on a shelf above her desk, and a Golden Globe she'd won just before the year she'd taken off when Sean got sick. Hollywood still hadn't forgotten her, but Mike Appelsohn assured her they'd give up on her eventually, if she didn't go back to work. She had run out of excuses for him, and given herself till the end of the year to start the book. She had two months left, and was getting nowhere. She was beginning to feel panicked about it every time she sat down at her desk.

She heard a door open gently behind her, and turned with an anxious look. She didn't mind the interruption, in fact she welcomed it. The day before, she had reorganized her bathroom closets instead of working on the book. When she turned, she saw Stephanie Morrow, her assistant, standing hesitantly in the doorway of her office. She was beautiful, a schoolteacher by profession, whom Carole had hired for the summer, fifteen years before, when she first came back from Paris. Carole had bought the house in Bel-Air, accepted parts in two films that first year, and signed on for a year in a Broadway play. She got deeply involved in women's rights, had publicity to do for her movies, and needed help organizing her kids and staff. Stephanie had come to help her out for two months, and stayed forever. Fifteen years later, she was thirty-nine years old. She lived with a man, but had never married. He was understanding about her work and traveled a lot himself. Stephanie still wasn't sure if she ever wanted to marry, and was clear she didn't want children. She teased Carole and said she was her baby. Carole reciprocated by saying Stephanie was her nanny. She was a fabulous assistant, handled the press brilliantly, and could talk her way in or out of any situation. There was nothing she couldn't manage.

When Sean was sick, she had done everything she could for Carole. She was there for the kids, for Sean, and for

her. She even helped Carole plan the funeral and pick the casket. Over the years, Stephanie had become more than just an employee. Despite the eleven years that separated them, the two women had become close friends, with deep affection and respect for each other. There wasn't an ounce of jealousy in Stevie, as Carole called her. She was happy for Carole's victories, mourned her tragedies, loved her job, and faced each day with patience and humor.

Carole was deeply attached to her, and readily admitted that she would have been lost without her. She was the perfect assistant, and as people did in jobs like hers, it meant putting Carole's life first and her own second, or sometimes not having a life at all. Stevie loved Carole and her job, and didn't mind. Carole's life was far more exciting than her own.

Stevie stood six feet tall, with straight black hair and big brown eyes, and was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, as she stood in Carole's office doorway. "Tea?" she whispered.

"No. Arsenic," Carole said with a groan, as she swiveled in her chair. "I can't write this goddamn book. Something's stopping me, and I don't know what it is. Maybe it's just terror. Maybe I know I can't do it. I don't know why I thought I could." She looked at Stevie, frowning in despair.

"Yes, you can," Stephanie said calmly. "Give it time. They say the hardest part is the beginning. You just have to sit there long enough to do it." For the past week, Stevie had helped her reorganize all her closets, then redesign the garden, and clean out the garage. And decide to redo the kitchen. Carole had come up with every possible distraction and excuse to avoid starting the book, again. She had been doing it for months. "Maybe you need to take a break," Stevie suggested, and Carole groaned.

"My whole life is a break these days. Sooner or later, I have to go back to work, either on a movie, or writing this book. Mike is going to kill me if I turn down another script."

Mike Appelsohn was a producer, and had acted as her agent for thirty-two years, since he discovered her at eighteen, light-years before. A million years ago, she had been just a farm girl from Mississippi, with long blond hair and huge green eyes, who came to Hollywood more out of curiosity than real ambition. Mike Appelsohn had made her what she was today. That, and the fact that she had real talent. Her first screen test at eighteen had blown everyone away. The rest was history. Her history. Now she was one of the most famous actresses in the world, and successful beyond her wildest dreams. So what was she doing trying to write a book? She couldn't help but ask herself the same question over and over again. She knew the answer, just as Stevie did. She was looking for a piece of herself, a piece she had hidden in a drawer somewhere, a part of her she wanted and needed to find, in order for the rest of her life to make sense.

Her last birthday had affected her deeply. Turning fifty had been an important landmark for her, particularly now that she was alone. It couldn't be ignored. She had decided that she wanted to weave all the pieces of her together, in ways she never had before, to solder them into a whole, instead of having bits and pieces of herself drifting in space. She wanted her life to make sense, to herself if no one else. She wanted to go back to the beginning and figure it all out.

So much had happened to her by accident, in her early years particularly, or at least it seemed that way. Good luck and bad, though mostly good, in her career anyway, and with her kids. But she didn't want her life to seem like an accident, fortuitous or otherwise. So many things she'd done had been reactions to circumstances or other people, rather than decisions she'd actively made. It seemed important now to know if the choices she'd made had been the right ones. And then what? She kept asking herself what difference it would make. It wouldn't change the past.

But it might alter the course of her life for her remaining years. That was the difference she wanted to make. With Sean gone, it seemed more important to her now to make choices and decisions, and not just wait for things to happen to her. What did *she* want? She wanted to write a book. That was all she knew. And maybe after that, the rest would come. Maybe then she'd have a better sense of what parts she wanted to play in movies, what impact she wanted to have on the world, what causes she wanted to support, and who she wanted to be for the rest of her life. Her kids had grown up. Now it was her turn.

Stevie disappeared and reappeared with a cup of tea. Decaffeinated vanilla tea. Stevie ordered it for her from Mariage Frères in Paris. Carole had become addicted to it while she lived there, and it was still her favorite. She was always grateful for the steaming mugs of it Stevie handed her. It was comforting for her. Carole looked pensive as she put the mug to her lips and took a sip. "Maybe you're right," Carole said thoughtfully, glancing at the woman who had been her companion for years. They traveled together, since Carole took her on the set when she was making a movie. Stevie was a one-man band who made Carole's life smooth as silk, and enjoyed doing it for her. She adored her job, and coming to work every day. Each day was different, and a challenge. And it still excited her after all these years that she worked for Carole Barber.

"What am I right about?" Stevie asked, letting down her long limbs into the room's comfortable leather easy chair. They spent a lot of hours together in that room, planning things, talking things out. Carole was always willing to listen to Stevie's opinions, even if she did something different in the end. Although most of the time, she found her assistant's advice to be solid, and valuable to her. And to Stevie, Carole was not only an employer, but something of a wise aunt. The two women shared opinions on life, and often saw things the same way, particularly about men.

“Maybe I need to take a trip.” Not to avoid the book, but maybe in this case to crack it, like a hard shell that resisted and wouldn’t open any other way.

“You could go visit the kids,” Stevie suggested. Carole loved visiting her son and daughter, since they seldom came home anymore. It was hard for Anthony to get away from the office, although he always made time to see her in the evening when she was in New York, no matter how busy he was. He loved his mother. As did Chloe, who would drop everything to run around London with her mother to play and shop. She soaked up her mother’s love and time, like a flower in rain.

“I just did that a few weeks ago. I don’t know ... maybe I need to do something completely different ... go somewhere I’ve never been before... like Prague or something... or Romania ... Sweden ...” There weren’t a lot of places left on the planet where she hadn’t been. She had spoken at women’s conferences in India, Pakistan, and Beijing. She had met heads of state around the world, worked with UNICEF, and addressed the U.S. Senate.

Stevie hesitated to state the obvious. Paris. She knew how much the city meant to her. Carole had lived in Paris for two and a half years, and had only been back twice in the last fifteen. Carole said there was nothing for her there anymore. She had taken Sean to Paris shortly after they were married, but he hated the French, and always preferred going to London instead. Stevie knew she hadn’t been back now in about ten years. And she’d only been there once in the five years before Sean, when she sold the house on the rue Jacob, or actually in a small alley behind it. Stevie had gone with her to close the house, and loved it. But by then Carole’s life had shifted back to L.A., and she said it made no sense to keep a house in Paris. It had been hard for her when she closed it, and she never went back again, till her only trip there with Sean. They stayed at the

Ritz, and he complained the entire time. He loved Italy and England, but not France.

"Maybe it's time for you to go back to Paris," Stevie said cautiously. She knew that ghosts lingered there for her, but after fifteen years, she couldn't imagine that they would still affect Carole. Not after eight years with Sean. Whatever had happened to Carole in Paris had long since healed, and she still spoke of the city fondly from time to time.

"I don't know," Carole said, thinking about it. "It rains a lot in November. The weather is so good here."

"The weather doesn't seem to be helping you write the book. Somewhere else then. Vienna ... Milan... Venice... Buenos Aires... Mexico City... Hawaii. Maybe you need a little time on the beach, if you're looking for good weather." They both knew the weather wasn't the issue.

"I'll see," Carole said with a sigh, getting out of her desk chair. "I'll think about it."

Carole was tall, though not as tall as her assistant. She was slim, lithe, with a still-beautiful figure. She worked out, but not enough to justify the way she looked. She had great genes, good bone structure, a body that defied her years, and a face that willingly lied about her age, and she had had no surgery to help it.

Carole Barber was just a beautiful woman. Her hair was still blond, she wore it long and straight, often tied back in a ponytail or in a bun. Hairdressers on the set had been having a ball with her silky blond hair since she was eighteen. Her eyes were enormous and green, her cheekbones high, her features delicate and perfect. She had the face and figure of a model, not just a star. And the way she carried herself spoke of confidence, poise, and grace. She wasn't arrogant, she was just comfortable in her own skin, and she moved with the elegance of a dancer. The studio that had signed her first had made her take ballet. She still moved like a dancer today, with perfect

posture. She was a spectacular-looking woman, and rarely wore makeup. She had a simplicity of style that made her even more striking. Stevie had been in awe of her when she first came to work. Carole had only been thirty-five then, and now she was fifty, hard as that was to believe. She looked easily ten years younger than she was. Even though he'd been five years younger, Sean had always looked older than she did. He was handsome, but bald, and tended to put on weight. Carole still had the same figure she'd had at twenty. She was careful about what she ate, but mostly she was just lucky. She had been blessed by the gods at birth.

"I'm going to run some errands," she told Stevie a few minutes later. She had put a white cashmere sweater around her shoulders, and was carrying a beige alligator bag she'd bought at Hermès. She had a fondness for simple but good clothes, especially if they were French. At fifty, there was something about Carole that reminded one of Grace Kelly at twenty. She had that same kind of elegant, aristocratic ease, although Carole seemed warmer. There was nothing austere about Carole, and considering who she was, and the fame she'd enjoyed for all of her adult life, she was surprisingly humble. Like everyone else, Stevie loved that about her. Carole was never full of herself.

"Anything you want me to do for you?" Stevie offered.

"Yeah, write the book while I'm out. I'll send it to my agent tomorrow." She had lined up a literary agent, but had nothing to send her.

"Done." Stevie grinned at her. "I'll man the fort here. You hit Rodeo."

"I am *not* going to Rodeo," Carole said primly. "I want to look at some new dining room chairs. I think the dining room needs a face-lift. Come to think of it, so do I, but I'm too chicken to get one. I don't want to wake up in the morning looking like someone else. It's taken me fifty years to get used to the face I have. I'd hate to turn it in."

"You don't need one," Stevie reassured her.

"Thanks, but I've seen the ravages of time in the mirror."

"I have more wrinkles than you do," Stevie said, and it was true. She had fine Irish skin that wasn't wearing as well as her employer's, much to her chagrin.

Five minutes later, Carole drove off in her station wagon. She had driven the same car for the last six years. Unlike other Hollywood stars, she had no need to be seen in a Rolls or a Bentley. Her station wagon was fine with her. The only jewelry she wore was a pair of diamond stud earrings and, when Sean was alive, her plain gold wedding band, which she had finally taken off that summer. Any thing more than that she considered unnecessary, and the producers borrowed for her when she had to appear to promote a film. In her private life, the most exotic piece of jewelry Carole wore was a simple gold watch. The most dazzling thing about Carole was herself.

She was back two hours later, while Stevie was eating a sandwich in the kitchen. There was an office nook for her, where she worked, and her main complaint was that it was much too close to the fridge, which she visited too often. She worked out at the gym every night to compensate for what she ate at work.

"Did you finish the book yet?" Carole asked as she walked in. She looked in much better spirits than when she left.

"Almost. I'm on the last chapter. Give me another half-hour, and I'll be all set. How were the chairs?"

"They were the wrong look for the table. The scale wasn't right. Unless I get a new table too." She was looking for projects, and they both knew that she needed to go back to work, or write the book. Indolence wasn't her style. After a lifetime of working constantly, and now that Sean was gone, Carole needed something to do. "I decided to take your advice," Carole said, sitting down at the kitchen table across from Stevie with a solemn look.

"What advice?" Stevie could no longer remember what she'd said.



"About taking a trip. I need to get out of here. I'll take my computer with me. Maybe sitting in a hotel room, I can get a fresh start on the book. I don't even like what I've got so far."

"I do. The first two chapters are good. You just need to build on that and keep going. Like climbing a mountain. Don't look down or stop until you reach the top." It was good advice.

"Maybe. I'll see. Anyway, I need to clear my head," she said with a sigh. "Book me a flight to Paris for the day after tomorrow. I don't have anything to do here, and Thanksgiving isn't for another three and a half weeks. I might as well get my ass out of here before the kids come home for that. It's the perfect time." She had thought about it all the way home and made up her mind. She felt better now.

Stevie nodded and refrained from further comment. She was convinced it would do her good to get away, particularly to a place she loved.

"I think I'm ready to go back," Carole said softly, with a pensive look. "You can get me a room at the Ritz. Sean hated it, but I love it."

"How long do you want to stay?"

"I don't know. Why don't you book the room for two weeks, so I have it. I thought I'd use Paris as a base. I actually do want to go to Prague, and I've never been to Budapest either. I want to wander around a little, and see how I feel when I'm there. I'm free as a bird, I might as well take advantage of it. Maybe I'll get inspired if I see something new. If I want to come home earlier, I can. And I'll stop in London and see Chloe for a couple of days on the way home. If it's close enough to Thanksgiving, maybe she'll want to fly back with me. That might be fun. And Anthony's coming out for Thanksgiving too, so I don't need to stop in New York on the way back." She always tried to

see her kids when she went anywhere, if they had the time and she did. But this trip was for her.

Stevie smiled at her, as she jotted down a note to herself with the details. "It'll be fun to go to Paris. I haven't been since you closed the house. That was fourteen years ago." Carole looked slightly embarrassed then. She hadn't made herself clear.

"I hate to be a shit. I love it when we travel together. But I want to do this one on my own. I don't know why, but I just think I need to get into my own head. If I take you with me, I'd rather talk to you than dig into myself. I'm looking for something, and I'm not even sure what it is. Me, I think." She had a deep conviction that the answers to her future, and the book, were buried in the past. She wanted to go back now to dig up everything she had left behind and tried to forget long ago.

Stevie looked surprised, but smiled at her employer. "That's fine. I just worry about you when you travel alone." Carole didn't do that often and Stevie didn't love the idea.

"I worry too," Carole confessed, "and I'm lazy as hell. You've spoiled me. I hate dealing with porters and ordering my own tea. But maybe it'll do me good. And how hard can life be at the Ritz?"

"What if you go to Eastern Europe? Do you want someone with you there? I could hire someone for you in Paris, through security at the Ritz." There had been threats over the years, though nothing recent. People recognized her in almost every country. And even if they didn't, she was a beautiful woman traveling alone. And what if she got sick? Carole brought out the mother in Stevie every time. She loved taking care of her and shielding her from real life. It was her mission in life and her job.

"I don't need security. I'll be fine. And even if they recognize me, so what? As Katharine Hepburn used to say, I'll just keep my head down, and avoid eye contact." They were both still surprised at how often that worked. When

Carole didn't make eye contact with people on the street, they recognized her far less. It was an old Hollywood trick, although it didn't always work. But more often than not it did.

"I can always fly over if you change your mind," Stevie offered, and Carole smiled. She knew that her assistant wasn't angling for a trip. Stevie was just concerned about her, which touched Carole's heart. Stevie was the perfect personal assistant in every way, always striving to make Carole's life easier and anticipate problems before they could occur.

"I promise I'll call if I run into trouble, get lonely, or feel weird," Carole assured her. "Who knows, I may decide to come home after a few days. It's kind of fun to just go, and not have any set plans." She had been on a million trips to promote movies, or on location when she made them. It was rare for her to just take off like this, but Stevie thought it was a good idea, even if it was unusual for her.

"I'll keep my cell phone on so you can call me, even at night or at the gym. I can always hop the next plane," Stevie promised, although Carole was conscientious about not calling her at night. She had kept firm boundaries over the years, which went both ways. She respected Stevie's private life, and when Carole had one, Stevie respected hers. It had made working together that much better over the years. "I'll call the airline and the Ritz," Stevie said, finishing her sandwich, and going to put the plate in the dishwasher. Carole had long since reduced her housekeeping staff to one woman, who came in the mornings five days a week. With Sean and the kids gone, she didn't need or want much help. She rummaged in the refrigerator herself and no longer had a cook. And she preferred driving herself. She enjoyed living like a normal person without all the trappings of a star.

"I'll start packing," Carole said as she left the kitchen. Two hours later she was finished. She was taking very

little. Some slacks, some jeans, one skirt, sweaters, comfortable shoes to walk in, and one pair of high heels. She packed one jacket and a raincoat, and took out a warm hooded wool coat to wear on the plane. The most important thing she was taking was her laptop. She needed very little else, and maybe she wouldn't even use that, if nothing came to her while on the trip.

She had just finished closing her suitcase, when Stevie walked into her bedroom to tell her that the reservations had been made. She was on a flight to Paris in two days, and the Ritz had a suite for her on the Vendôme side of the building. Stevie said she would drive her to the airport. Carole was all set for her odyssey to find herself, in Paris, or wherever else she went. Whatever other cities she decided to travel to, she could make the reservations once she was in Europe. Carole was excited now at the thought of going. It was going to be wonderful being in Paris after all these years.

She wanted to walk past her old house near the rue Jacob, on the Left Bank, and pay homage to the two and a half years she had spent there. It seemed like a lifetime ago. She had been younger than Stevie when she left Paris. Her son, Anthony, who was eleven then, had been delighted to come back to the States. Chloe had been seven and was sad to leave Paris and her friends there. She had spoken perfect French. They had been eight and four when they first went there, when Carole was making a movie in Paris. The film had taken eight months, and they had stayed on for two years after that. It seemed like a big chunk of time then, especially in young lives, and even to her. And now she was going back, on a pilgrimage of sorts. She had no idea what she'd find there, or how she'd feel. But she was ready. She could hardly wait to leave. She realized now that it was an important step in writing the book. Maybe going back would free her, and open the doors that were sealed so tightly. Sitting at her computer in Bel-Air, she couldn't

pry them open. But maybe there the doors would swing wide open on their own. It was what she hoped.

Just knowing that she was going to Paris, Carole was able to write that night. She sat at her computer for hours after Stevie left, and was back at it the next morning when she arrived.

She dictated some letters, paid her bills, and did a last few errands. By the time she left for the airport the next day, Carole was ready. She chatted animatedly with Stevie on the way to the airport, remembering last details, of what to tell the gardener, some things she'd ordered that would arrive while she was away.

"What do I tell the kids, if they call?" Stevie asked as they reached the airport, and she took Carole's bag out of the station wagon. She was traveling light, so she could manage more easily on her own.

"Just tell them I'm away," Carole said easily.

"In Paris?" Stevie was ever discreet, and only told people, even her children, what Carole told her she could say.

"That's fine. It's not a secret. I'll probably call them at some point myself. I'll call Chloe before I go to London at the end. I want to see what I decide to do first." She loved the feeling of freedom she had, traveling on her own, and making decisions about her destinations day by day. It was rare for her to be that spontaneous, and do whatever she wished. It seemed like a real gift.

"Don't forget to tell me what you're doing," Stevie chided. "I worry about you." Probably more than her kids did, who were sometimes less aware, although they loved her. Stevie was almost maternal toward her at times. She knew the vulnerable side of Carole that others didn't see, the frail side, the one that hurt. To others, Carole showed tranquillity and strength, which wasn't always the case underneath.

"I'll e-mail you when I get to the Ritz. Don't worry if you don't hear from me after that. If I go to Prague or Vienna or