

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

The Long Road Home
Danielle Steel

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Also by Danielle Steel

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*A story of the dark side of childhood
and one woman's unbreakable spirit*

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THE RING

LOVING

TO LOVE AGAIN

SUMMER'S END

SEASON OF PASSION

THE PROMISE

NOW AND FOREVER

PASSION'S PROMISE

GOING HOME

DANIELLE STEEL

THE
LONG ROAD
HOME

For the children who have died, those we know about, and those we should have. And those who have lived through it, and come from that terrible place of knowing their lives and souls constantly in danger... the children of a war that should make us all cry more than any other.

May we grow wise enough, and brave enough to protect them. Let no child die again for lack of our love, our courage, or our mercy.

And for Tom, who made me brave enough to say it.

With all my heart
and love,

d.s.

Chapter 1

A CLOCK TICKED LOUDLY in the hall as Gabriella Harrison stood silently in the utter darkness of the closet. It was filled with winter coats, and they scratched her face, as she pressed her thin six-year-old frame as far back as she could, deep among them. She stumbled over a pair of her mother's winter boots, as she moved farther back into the closet. She knew that here, no one would find her. She had hidden here before, it had always been a good hiding place for her, a place they never thought to look, especially now, in the heat of a New York summer.

It was stifling where she stood, her eyes wide in the darkness, waiting, barely daring to breathe, as she heard muffled footsteps approaching from the distance. The sharp clicking of her mother's heels clattered past like an express train roaring through town, she could almost feel the air whoosh past her face with relief in the crowded closet. She let herself breathe again, just once, and then held her breath, as though even the sound of it would draw her mother's attention. Even at six, she knew that her mother had supernatural powers. She could find her anywhere, almost as though she could detect her scent, the pull of mother to child inevitable, unavoidable, her mother's deep, inky-brown eyes all-seeing, all-knowing. Gabriella knew that no matter where she hid, eventually her mother would find her. But she hid anyway, had to try at least, to escape her.

Gabriella was small for her age, undersize, underweight, and she had an elfin quality about her, with huge blue eyes, and soft blond curls. People who scarcely knew her said that she looked like a little angel. She looked startled much of the time, like an angel who had fallen to earth, and had not known what to expect here. None of what she had encountered in her six brief years was what they could have promised her in heaven.

Her mother's heels rattled past again, pounding harder on the floor this time. Gabriella knew instinctively that the search had heightened. The closet in her own room would have been torn apart by then, also the equipment closet under the stairs, behind the kitchen, the shed outside the house, in the garden. They lived in a narrow town house on the East Side, with a small, well-kept garden. Her mother hated gardening, but a Japanese man came twice a week to cut things, mow the tiny patch of lawn, and keep it tidy. More than anything, her mother hated disorder, she hated noise, she hated dirt, she hated lies, she hated dogs, and more than all of it, Gabriella had reason to suspect, she hated children. Children told lies, her mother said, made noise, and according to her mother, were continually dirty. Gabriella was always being told to stay clean, to stay in her room, and not disturb anything. She wasn't allowed to listen to the radio, or use colored pencils, because when she did, she always got the colors on everything. She had ruined her best dress once. That had been while her dad had been away, in a place called Korea. He had been gone for two years, and come back the year before. He still had a uniform in the back of a closet somewhere, Gabriella had seen it there once, when she was hiding. It had bright shiny buttons on it, and it was scratchy. She had never seen her father wear it. He was tall and lean, and handsome, with eyes the same color as her own, blond hair, like hers, but his was just a little darker. And when he came home from the war, she

thought he looked like Prince Charming in “Cinderella.” Her mother looked like the queen in some of the storybooks Gabriella read. She was beautiful and elegant, but she was always angry. Little things bothered her a lot, like the way Gabriella ate, especially if she dropped crumbs on anything, or knocked over a glass. She had spilled juice on her mother's dress once. She had done a lot of things over the years that she wasn't supposed to.

She remembered all of them, knew what they were, and she tried hard not to do them again, but she couldn't help it. She didn't want to upset anyone, didn't want her mother to be mad at her. She didn't mean to get dirty or drop things on the floor, or forget her hat in school. They were accidents, she always explained, her huge eyes imploring her mother for mercy. But somehow, no matter how hard she tried, the wrong things always happened.

The thin high heels walked past the closet again, more slowly this time, and Gabriella knew what that meant. The search was ending. She had narrowed it down to the last of the hiding places, and it was only a matter of time before her mother found her. The child with the huge eyes thought of turning herself in, sometimes her mother told her that she wouldn't have been punished if she had been brave enough to do that. But most of the time, she wasn't. She had tried it once or twice, but it was always too late, by then, her mother said, if only she had confessed earlier, it would have been different. It would all have been different if Gabriella behaved properly, if she answered when she was spoken to, or didn't when she wasn't, if she kept her room clean, if she didn't push her food “around on her plate, and let the peas fall over the edge until they left grease spots on the table. If only Gabriella could learn to behave, speak only when spoken to, and not scuff her shoes in the garden. The list of Gabriella's failings and transgressions was endless. She knew only too well how terrible she was, how bad she

had been all her life, how much they would love her if she could only do what they told her to, and how much they couldn't because of the constant grief she caused them. She was a bad child, she knew, a sad disappointment to both of her parents, and that pained her greatly. Knowing that was the crushing burden she had carried throughout her short existence. She would have done anything to change that, to win love and approval from them, but so far she had done nothing but fail them. Her mother made that clear to her constantly. And the price Gabriella paid for it was the constant reminder of her failings.

The footsteps stopped outside the closet door this time, and for a brief moment, there was an interminable silence before the door was suddenly yanked open. Light filtered back into the bowels of the closet where Gabriella hid, and she closed her eyes as though to shield herself from it. It was the merest crack of light reaching toward her through the coats, but to Gabriella it felt like the bright sunlight of exposure. She could smell her mother's perfume heavy in the air, and sense her closeness. The rustle of the petticoats her mother wore were like a warning sound to Gabriella, and then slowly the coats were pushed apart, creating a deep canyon leading straight into the back of the closet. And for a long, silent moment Gabriella met the eyes of her mother. There was no sound, no word, no exchange between them, Gabriella knew better than to explain, to apologize, or even to cry. Her already too-big eyes seemed to outgrow her face as she watched the inevitable rage grow in her mother's eyes, and with a single superhuman gesture, her mother's arm lunged toward her, grabbed her by one arm, yanked her off the ground, and pulled her forward with such speed that the air seemed to leave Gabriella's lungs with a small whooshing sound as she landed unsteadily on her feet next to her mother. And within an instant the first blow fell, dropping her to the ground with such force it left the small

child breathless. There was no whimper of pain, no sound at all, as her mother slapped her hard across the top of her head, and then pulled her to her feet again with one hand, and hit her as hard as she could across the face with the other. To Gabriella, the sound of the blow was deafening.

"You're hiding again," the tall, spare woman shrieked at her. She was almost beautiful, and might have been, had there been something different in her eyes, something other than rage running rampant across her face. Her long, dark hair was woven into a loose bun. She was elegant and graceful and had a lovely figure. The dress she wore was well cut, an expensive navy silk. And on her hands she wore two heavy sapphire rings. They left their mark on Gabriella's face now, as they had done before. There was a small cut on her head, and bright red marks where she had been slapped, a welt from one of the rings already visible on her cheek. Eloise Harrison slapped the child across her right ear, and then shook her, holding her by both arms, shouting into the tiny, devastated face. "You're always hiding! Always giving us problems! What are you afraid of now, you little brat? What have you done? You did something, didn't you? Of course you did... why else would you hide in the closet?"

"I didn't do anything... I promise..." The words were barely more than a whisper as Gabriella gasped for air. The beating seemed to take all the wind out of her, all the life out of her soul, as she looked up imploringly with tear-filled eyes at her mother. "I'm sorry, Mommy... I'm sorry..."

"No, you're not... you never are... you're never sorry, are you? You drive me crazy all the time, doing stupid things like hiding... What do you expect from us... miserable child... My God, I can't believe what your father and I have to put up with..." She flung the child away from her then, as Gabriella slid across the well-waxed floor, a few feet away from her, never far enough, as a blue suede high-heeled shoe kicked her with blinding venom in the small thin thigh that

trembled. The biggest bruises were always on her legs and arms, her body, where they were unseen by others. The damage to her face always subsided in a few hours. It was as though her mother knew instinctively where to place the blows. She'd had plenty of practice at it. She'd been doing this for years. Nearly all of Gabriella's life now.

There was no remorse, no words of comfort to Gabriella lying at her feet. No effort to apologize or soothe her. She knew that if she got up too soon, it could start her mother's fury all over, so she waited there for a long time, head bowed, cheeks drenched in silent tears, still wincing from the blows delivered by her mother. Gabriella knew that looking up at her with her tear-stained face would only make her mother angrier, so she kept her eyes focused on the floor, as though she might disappear if she lay there forever.

"Get up... what are you waiting for?" The biting words, followed by another yank on the arm, and one last blow on the side of her head. "My God, Gabriella... I hate you... pathetic child... look how disgusting you are... you're all dirty... look at your face!" Suddenly, from nowhere, two smudges had appeared mixed with tears on the angelic face.

Anyone even minimally human would have been in agony seeing her, but not her mother. Eloise Harrison was a creature from another world, and anything but a mother. Abandoned by her parents as a small child, sent to live with an aunt in Minnesota, she had lived in a cold, lonely world with a maiden aunt who had rarely spoken to her, and most of the time had her carrying firewood or shoveling snow in the freezing winters. It was the Depression then, her parents had lost most of their money, and had gone to Europe to live on the little they had left. There was no room for Eloise in their world, or their hearts. They had lost their son, Eloise's brother, to diphtheria, and neither of them had ever had great affection for their daughter. Eloise had stayed

with her aunt in Minnesota until she was eighteen, and then returned to New York, to stay with cousins. She had met John Harrison at twenty, and married him two years later. She had known him as a child, he'd been a friend of her brothers. And his parents had been more fortunate than hers had been. Their fortune had remained intact during the Depression. Well born, well bred, well educated, though without great ambition or strength of character, John had gotten a job in a bank, and met Eloise again shortly thereafter. He was instantly dazzled by her beauty.

Eloise had been pretty then, and young, something of a beauty, and there was a coolness about her that drove him into a frenzy. He begged, he pleaded, he courted, he wanted desperately to marry her, and the more he pursued her, the more aloof she was. It took him almost two years to convince her to become his wife. He had wanted children almost immediately, had bought her a lovely house, and he was so proud of her he almost crowed every time he introduced her. But it took him nearly another two years to convince her to have a baby. She always said she needed more time. And although she never said it openly, having children wasn't really what she wanted. Her own childhood had been so unpleasant, she wasn't particularly attracted to the idea of having children. But it meant so much to John, that eventually she relented. And regretted it almost immediately after. She had a difficult pregnancy, was violently ill almost to the very end, and the delivery was a horror she knew she would never repeat and always remember. In Eloise's mind, despite the adorable pink bundle they placed in her arms the next day, it simply wasn't worth it. And it annoyed her right from the first to see how much attention John lavished on the baby. It was the kind of passion he had once had for her, and suddenly all he seemed to think about was Gabriella... was she warm enough... was she cold... had she eaten... had someone just

changed her diaper... had Eloise seen how sweet she looked when she smiled... He thought it was remarkable how much she looked like his mother. Just listening to him, Eloise wanted to scream every time she saw her daughter.

She went back to her own activities rapidly, shopping, going to tea parties in the afternoon, and having lunch with friends. And more than ever, she wanted to go out every evening. She had absolutely no interest in the baby. She admitted to several of the women she played bridge with on Wednesday afternoons, that she found the child incredibly boring and quite repulsive. And the way she said it always amused them. She was so outspoken they thought it was funny. If anything, she was less maternal than she had ever been. But John was convinced she would come to it slowly. Some people just weren't good with babies, he told himself, each time he saw her with Gabriella. She was still very young, she was twenty-four, and very beautiful. He was sure that when the baby started doing more interesting things, she would rapidly conquer her mother. But that day never came, not for Eloise, or for Gabriella. In fact, when Gabriella started crawling everywhere, pulling at things, standing up next to the cocktail table and throwing ashtrays on the floor, she nearly drove her mother crazy.

"My God... look at the mess that child makes ... she's constantly knocking things down and breaking things, and some part of her is always dirty..."

"She's just a baby, El..." he said gently, scooping Gabriella up into his arms and hugging her, and then blowing raspberries on her belly.

"Stop that, that's disgusting!" Eloise said sternly, looking at him in revulsion. Unlike John, Eloise hardly ever touched her. A nurse they had early on had figured it all out easily and shared her thoughts with the baby's father. She said that Eloise was jealous of the baby. It sounded ridiculous to John, but in time even he began to wonder. Every time he

talked to the child, or picked her up, Eloise got angry. And by the time Gabriella was two years old, Eloise slapped her hands every time she reached out to touch something in their living room or their bedroom. She thought Gabriella should be confined to the nursery, and said so.

"We can't lock her up in there," John objected when he found her in her room, whenever he came home from the office.

"She destroys everything," Eloise would answer, as usual looking angry. But she was even more so when John commented on what pretty hair Gabriella had, what lovely curls. It was the next day that Gabriella got her first haircut. Eloise took her to Best and Co. with the nurse, and when they returned, the curls had vanished. And when John expressed surprise, Eloise explained that having her hair cut was healthy for her.

The rivalry began in earnest when Gabriella spoke in sentences and would run down the hall squealing to see her father. Sensing danger near at hand, she generally steered a wide berth around her mother. Eloise could barely contain herself while she watched John play with her, and when he finally began criticizing Eloise for how little time she spent with the child, a chasm began to grow between Eloise and her husband. She was sick of hearing him whine at her about the baby. She thought it was unmanly, and frankly disgusting.

Gabriella's first beating occurred when she was three, on a morning when she accidentally knocked a plate off the breakfast table and broke it. Eloise had been sitting uneasily beside her, drinking her morning coffee. And without hesitating, the instant the plate fell, she reached over and slapped her.

"Don't ever do that again... do you understand?" Gabriella had simply stared at her, her eyes filled with tears, her face

a mask of shock and sorrow. "Did you hear me?" she shouted at the child again. Her curls had reappeared by then, and the huge blue eyes stared back in confusion at her mother. "Answer me!"

"I sorry, Mommy..." John had just entered the room and saw what was happening with disbelief, but he was so shocked, he did nothing to stop it. He was afraid to interfere and make things worse. He had never seen Eloise so angry. Three years of anger, jealousy, and frustration were erupting from within, like a long-overdue volcano.

"If you ever do that again, Gabriella, I'll spank you!" Eloise said ominously, shaking the child by both arms until her teeth shook. "You're a very, very naughty girl, and no one likes naughty children." Gabriella glanced from her mother's face suffused with rage, to her father standing in the doorway, but he said nothing. He was afraid to. And as soon as Eloise was aware of him, she scooped the child up in her arms, and took her back to her room, and left her there, without her breakfast. She gave her a sharp slap on her bottom before she left. Gabriella was lying on her bed, whimpering, when her mother left her to go back to breakfast.

"You didn't have to do that," John said quietly when Eloise came back to the breakfast table for another cup of coffee. He could see that her hands were shaking, and she still looked angry.

"If I don't, you'll wind up with a juvenile delinquent on your hands one day. Discipline is good for children." His own parents had been kind to him, and he was still startled by Eloise's reaction. But he was also well aware that their daughter made her extremely nervous. Eloise had never been quite the same since Gabriella was born, and nowadays she was always angry at him about something. His hopes for a large, happy family had long since vanished.

"I don't know what she did to upset you, but it couldn't have been that awful," he said calmly.

"She threw a plate on the floor intentionally, and broke it. I'm not going to put up with tantrums!" Eloise said sharply.

"Maybe it was an accident," he said, trying to mollify her, and succeeding only in making the situation worse. There was nothing he could ever say to defend their daughter. Eloise simply did not want to hear it.

"Disciplining Gabriella is up to me," Eloise said through clenched teeth. "I don't tell you how to run your office," she said, and then left the table.

Within six months, "disciplining" Gabriella became a full-time job for her mother. There was always some fresh crime she had committed that required a slap, a spanking, or a beating. Playing in the garden and getting grass stains on her knees, playing with the neighbors' cat and getting her arm scratched, or her dress dirty, falling on the street and scraping her knees and getting blood all over her dress and socks was a particularly heinous offense that cost her her most serious beating to date, just before her fourth birthday. John knew of the beatings, and saw it happen many times, but he thought there was nothing he could do to stop Eloise, and even comforting the child afterward made it worse, and it became simpler to accept Eloise's explanations of why she had to beat, slap, or spank her. In the end, he decided it was best to say nothing, and he tried not to think about what was happening to their daughter. He tried to tell himself that maybe Eloise was right. He didn't know. Maybe discipline was good for children, if she said so.

His parents had died in an auto accident and there was no one he could talk to, no one he would have dared tell what Eloise did to Gabriella.

Gabriella was certainly a model child, she barely spoke, cleared the table carefully, folded her clothes neatly in her

room, did everything she was told, and never answered back to her mother. Maybe Eloise was right. The results were certainly impressive. And when she sat at dinner with them, her eyes were huge in her face, and she remained completely silent. It was only unfortunate that her father came to mistake terror for good manners.

But in Eloise's less generous eyes, Gabriella always fell far short of perfection. There was always something more to scold her about, punish her for, or a new reason to give her a "spanking." Eventually the spankings became longer and more frequent, the slaps seemed to punctuate every exchange between them, the shakings, the sharp blows, the resounding slaps to every part of her body. There were times when John feared that Eloise might seriously hurt Gabriella, but he kept his comments to himself about the way his wife was bringing up their daughter. To him, it appeared that discretion was the better part of valor, and he did his best to convince himself that what she was doing wasn't wrong, and he was careful never to see the bruises. According to Eloise, the child fell constantly, and was so awkward they couldn't let her ride a bike or learn to roller-skate. The deprivations her mother inflicted on her were clearly for her own protection, the bruises a sign that she was as clumsy as Eloise declared her.

And by her sixth birthday, Gabriella's beatings had become a habit, for all of them. John avoided them, Gabriella expected them, and Eloise clearly enjoyed them. If anyone had said as much to her, she would have been outraged. They were for the child's own good, she claimed. They were "necessary." They kept her from becoming more of a spoiled brat than she was, Eloise would have explained. And Gabriella herself knew how truly bad she was. If she weren't, her mother wouldn't have had to hit her... if she weren't, her father would have stopped her mother from beating her... if she weren't, they might have loved her. But

she knew better than anyone how unworthy she was, how truly terrible were her crimes. She knew all of it, because her mother told her.

And as she lay on the floor that summer afternoon, and her mother dragged her off the floor by one arm, and slapped her one more time before sending her to her room, she saw her father watching them from the doorway. She knew he had seen the beating and done nothing about it, just as always. His eyes looked mournful as Gabriella crept past him, and he said nothing. He didn't reach out to comfort her, he didn't try to touch her, he simply looked away, refusing to see the look in her eyes, unable to bear it any longer.

"Go to your room and stay there!" Gabriella's mother's words rang in her ears as she walked softly down the hall, feeling her cheek with tiny trembling fingers. She knew she was a big girl now, she knew that the things she did that made her mother so angry were really awful, and as she crept into her room and closed the door, a sob escaped her, and she ran to the bed and clutched her dolly. It was the only toy she was allowed to have, her grandmother had given it to her before she died, her father's mother. It had big blue eyes and eyelashes and pretty blond hair, and Gabriella genuinely loved her. The doll's name was Meredith and she was Gabriella's only ally. Gabriella clutched her now, rocking back and forth, sitting on her bed, wondering why her mother hit her so hard... why she herself was so awful... and all she could remember now was the look in her father's eyes as she walked past him. He seemed so disappointed, as though he had hoped that she'd be better than she was, instead of the little monster her mother accused her of being. And Gabriella believed her. She did everything wrong, and she knew it. She tried so hard, but there was no pleasing them... no way to stop the inevitable... no way to escape it. And as she sat there,

holding her doll, she knew deep in her soul that it would never stop. She would never be good enough, she would never win them over. She had known all her life that they didn't love her, and was long since convinced that she didn't deserve love. She didn't deserve anything more than the pain her mother inflicted on her. She knew that, but she wondered still why it had to hurt so much... why her mother was always so angry at her... what she had done to make them hate her... And as she lay crying silently on her bed, the one thing she knew was that there were no answers, and no one could save her from this. Not even her father. All she had in the world was Meredith, her only friend, her dolly. She had no grandparents, no aunts or uncles, no friends or cousins. She was never allowed to play with other children. Probably because she was so naughty. They probably wouldn't like her anyway. No one would. Who could possibly like her if her parents didn't, if she was so bad?... She knew she couldn't tell anyone what they did to her, because it only proved how bad she was, and when they asked her in school what had happened to her, she always told them she fell down the stairs, or over the dog, even though they didn't have one. But she knew this was a secret she had to keep, because if she didn't, people would know how truly terrible she was, and she didn't want anyone to know that.

It wasn't her parents' fault, she knew that as well. It was her fault for being so bad, for making so many mistakes, for making her mother so angry. It was all her fault. And as she lay on her bed and thought about it, she could hear her parents' voices. As they often did, they were shouting, and she knew that was her fault too. Sometimes after her mother punished her, she could hear her father shouting at her, as he did now. She couldn't make out the words, but it was probably about her... probably her fault... she was even worse than they said. She made them fight. She made them

angry at each other. She made everyone so unhappy, almost as unhappy as she was.

She cried herself to sleep, at dusk, without dinner, and as she drifted off to sleep, feeling her cheek ache and her thigh throb where her mother had kicked her, she tried to think of other places, other things... a garden... or a park... with happy people in it... and children laughing as they played... everyone was playing, and they wanted her to play with them... a tall, beautiful woman came toward her and held her arms out to her and told her that she loved her... It was the most wonderful feeling in the world, and as she thought of it, everything else in her life faded away, and she drifted off to sleep, holding her dolly.

"Aren't you afraid you're going to kill her one of these days?" John said pointedly to his wife, and she looked at him in contemptuous amusement. He'd had more than a few drinks as he stood looking at her, gently reeling. The drinking had started at about the same time as the beatings. It was easier than trying to stop the beatings, or explaining Eloise's behavior. The drinking took the edge off and made an intolerable situation nearly bearable for him, if not for Gabriella. "Maybe she won't end up a drunk like you, if I beat a little sense into her now. It might save her a lot of heartache later." Eloise sat calmly on the couch looking at him with disdain, as he made himself another martini.

"The sickest thing is, I think you believe that."

"Are you suggesting I'm too hard on her?" Eloise said, visibly furious at being challenged.

"Too hard? *Too hard?* Have you ever taken a good look at her bruises? How do you think she gets them?"

"Don't be ridiculous, if you're trying to blame me for that. She falls on her face every time she puts her shoes on." She lit a cigarette, and leaned back to watch him drink his martini.

"Eloise, this is me you're talking to. Who are you kidding here? I know how you feel about her... so does she... poor kid, she doesn't deserve this."

"Neither do I. Do you have any idea what I have to put up with? She's a little monster underneath those curls, with those big innocent blue eyes you're so in love with."

He looked at her as though a veil had been lifted from his eyes, swept away by the force of the alcohol in his system. "You're jealous of her, aren't you, El? That's what this is all about, isn't it? Just plain jealousy. You're jealous of your own daughter."

"You're drunk." She dismissed him with a wave of the cigarette, unwilling to listen to what he was saying.

"I'm right, and you know it. You're sick. I'm just sorry for her that we ever had her. She doesn't deserve a life like the one we give her... you give her..." He took no responsibility for his wife's cruelty and took great pride in the fact that he had never laid a hand on Gabriella. But he had never done anything to protect her either.

"If you're trying to make me feel guilty about her, don't bother. I don't. I know what I'm doing."

"Do you? You beat her senseless practically every day. Is that what you had intended for her?" He looked horrified as he drained his glass, and felt the effect of his fourth martini. Sometimes it took more than that to drown the things that he remembered her doing.

"She's not an easy child, John. She needs to be taught a lesson."

"Well, you've done that, El. I'm sure she'll always remember the lessons we taught her." His eyes began to glaze as he said it.

"I hope so. Children don't need a lot of fussing over. It's not good for them. She knows I'm right too. She never

argues with me when I punish her. She knows she deserves it."

"She's too afraid to argue with you, and you know it. She's probably afraid you'll kill her if she says anything, or tries to resist you."

"You make me sound like an ax-murderer, for God's sake." She crossed one shapely leg over the other, but for several years now he was no longer moved by her. Seeing what she was doing to their child had made him begin to hate her, but not enough to try and stop her, nor leave her. He didn't have the guts to do that, and was slowly beginning to hate himself for it.

"We should send her to school somewhere in a few years, just to get her out of here, away from both of us. She deserves that."

"She deserves a proper education from us before that."

"Is that what you call this? 'Education'? Did you see the bruise on her cheek when she went to her room tonight?"

"It will be gone by morning," Eloise said calmly.

He knew it was probably true, but hated to admit it. Eloise always seemed to know just how much force to use so that the bruises never showed on the exposed areas of Gabriella's body. The marks on her upper arms and legs were usually a different story. She was an expert at it.

"You're one sick bitch," was all he said to his wife as he left the room and walked unsteadily to their bedroom. She was, but there seemed to be nothing he could do about it. He stopped in the open doorway of his daughter's room on the way, and stared into the darkness. There was no sign of life there, no sound, and the bed appeared to be empty, but when he walked softly into the room and looked more closely, he saw a small lump at the bottom of the bed and knew it was Gabriella. She always slept that way, hidden way down in the bed, so that her mother wouldn't think she

was there if she came to find her. Tears filled his eyes as he looked at the small, barely visible lump of battered terror that was his daughter. He didn't even dare pull her back up to the empty pillow. It would only expose her to Eloise's anger again, if she came in to see her. He left her there, lonely and alone and seemingly forgotten, and turned and walked on to his own room, wondering at the injustices of life, the inhumanity that had befallen his child, and yet he knew as he walked away from her, he knew that there was nothing he could do to save her. In his own way, he was as powerless against his wife as Gabriella. And he hated himself for it.

Chapter 2

THE GUESTS BEGAN arriving shortly after eight o'clock at the town house on East Sixty-ninth Street. A handful of well-known socialites were there, a Russian prince with an English girl, and all of the women Eloise normally played bridge with. The head of the bank where John Harrison worked had come with his wife, and waiters in dinner jackets were serving champagne on silver trays as the guests arrived, as Gabriella sat hidden at the top of the stairs, watching them. She liked watching the guests when her parents gave parties.

Her mother looked beautiful in a black satin gown, and her father looked handsome and elegant in a well-cut tuxedo. The women's dresses shimmered as they came into the hall, and their jewels sparkled in the candlelight as they took their glasses of champagne, and seemed to drift away toward the voices and the music. Eloise and John loved giving parties. They did it less often now, but they still entertained lavishly from time to time, and Gabriella loved watching the guests as they arrived, and lying in her room afterward listening to the music.

It was September, the opening of the New York social season. And Gabriella had just turned seven. There was no special occasion for the party that night, just a gathering of their friends, some of whom Gabriella recognized as she watched them. There were a few she had always liked, and

who were nice to her on the rare instances when they saw her, which wasn't often. She was rarely introduced to their friends, seldom seen, never made much fuss of. She was simply there, hidden away upstairs, mostly forgotten. Eloise didn't think children should be seen in social situations, and Gabriella's existence in their lives was anything but important to her. Now and then one of her friends asked about the child, mostly at her bridge club, and she dismissed their inquiries with a graceful hand, like an annoying insect that had crossed her path and could be brushed away just as quickly. There were no photographs of Gabriella in the house, although there were many of Eloise and John, in silver frames. There were never any photographs taken of Gabriella. Recording her childhood was of no particular interest to them.

Gabriella smiled as she saw a pretty blond woman walk into the hall downstairs. Marianne Marks was wearing a white chiffon dress that seemed to float as she moved, talking to her husband. She was one of her parents' closest friends, and her husband worked with Gabriella's father. There was a diamond necklace glittering on her neck, and her hands moved gracefully as she took a glass of champagne from one of the waiters. And then, as though sensing something, she glanced upstairs, and stopped when she saw Gabriella. The woman's face seemed to be suffused with light, and from the glow of the candles in the chandelier, she almost seemed to be wearing a halo, and then Gabriella realized that the sparkle she saw there was from a tiny diamond tiara. She looked like a fairy queen to Gabriella.

"Gabriella! What are you doing up there?" Her voice was gentle and warm, as she smiled broadly, and waved to the child hiding on the top step in her pink flannel nightgown.

"Shhh..." Gabriella put a finger to her lips with a worried frown. If they knew she was sitting there, she would get in