

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The House

Danielle Steel

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Danielle Steel

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the past into the future.
Dare to be brave.
Be someone new.*

THE HOUSE

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FIVE DAYS IN PARIS	PASSION'S PROMISE
LIGHTNING	GOING HOME

DANIELLE STEEL

THE
HOUSE

To my beloved babies,
Beatie, Trevor, Todd, Nick, Sam, Victoria, Vanessa, Maxx, and Zara.

May your lives and homes be blessed,
May your history be something you cherish,
and may all those who come into your lives treat you
with tenderness, kindness, love and respect.
May you always be loved and blessed.

I love you
Mom/d.s.

Chapter 1

Sarah Anderson left her office at nine-thirty on a Tuesday morning in June for her ten o'clock appointment with Stanley Perlman. She hurried out of the building at One Market Plaza, stepped off the curb, and hailed a cab. It occurred to her, as it always did, that one of these days when she met with him, it would really be for the last time. He always said it was. She had begun to expect him to live forever, despite his protests, and in spite of the realities of time. Her law firm had handled his affairs for more than half a century. She had been his estate and tax attorney for the past three years. At thirty-eight, Sarah had been a partner of the firm for the past two years, and had inherited Stanley as a client when his previous attorney died.

Stanley had outlived them all. He was ninety-eight years old. It was hard to believe sometimes. His mind was as sharp as it had ever been, he read voraciously, and he was well aware of every nuance and change in the current tax laws. He was a challenging and entertaining client. Stanley Perlman had been a genius in business all his life. The only thing that had changed over the years was that his body had betrayed him, but never once his mind. He was bedridden now, and had been for nearly seven years. Five nurses attended to him, three regularly in eight-hour shifts, two as relief. He was comfortable, most of the time, and hadn't left his house in years. Sarah had always liked and admired him, although others thought he was irascible and cantankerous. She thought he was a remarkable man. She

gave the cabdriver Stanley's Scott Street address. They made their way through the downtown traffic in San Francisco's financial district, and headed west uptown, toward Pacific Heights, where he had lived in the same house for seventy-six years.

The sun was shining brightly as they climbed Nob Hill up California Street, and she knew it might be otherwise when they got uptown. The fog often sat heavily on the residential part of the city, even when it was warm and sunny downtown. Tourists were happily hanging off the cable car, smiling as they looked around. Sarah was bringing Stanley some papers to sign, nothing extraordinary. He was always making minor additions and adjustments to his will. He had been prepared to die for all the years she had known him, and long before. But in spite of that, whenever he seemed to take a turn for the worse, or suffered from a brief illness, he always rallied and hung on, much to his chagrin. He had told her only that morning, when she called to confirm her appointment with him, that he had been feeling poorly for the last few weeks, and it wouldn't be long.

"Stop threatening me, Stanley," she had said, putting the last of the papers for him in her briefcase. "You're going to outlive us all."

She was sad for him at times, although there was nothing depressing about him, and he rarely felt sorry for himself. He still barked orders at his nurses, read *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* daily, as well as the local papers, loved pastrami sandwiches and hamburgers, and spoke with fascinating accuracy and historical detail about his years growing up on the Lower East Side of New York. He had come to San Francisco at sixteen, in 1924. He had been remarkably clever at finding jobs, making deals, working for the right people, seizing opportunities, and saving money. He had bought property, always in unusual circumstances, sometimes preying on others' misfortunes, he readily

admitted, and making trades, and using whatever credit was available to him. He had managed to make money while others were losing it during the Depression. He was the epitome of a self-made man.

He liked to say that he had bought the house he lived in for “pennies” in 1930. And considerably later, he had been among the first to build shopping malls in Southern California. Most of his early money had been made in real estate development, trading one building for another, sometimes buying land no one else wanted, and biding his time to either sell it later or build office buildings or shopping centers on it. He had had the same intuitive knack later on, for investing in oil wells. The fortune he had amassed was literally staggering by now. Stanley had been a genius in business, but had done little else in his life. He had no children, had never married, had no contact with anyone but attorneys and nurses. There was no one who cared about Stanley Perlman, except his young attorney, Sarah Anderson, and no one who would miss him when he died, except the nurses he employed. The nineteen heirs listed in the will that Sarah was once again updating for him (this time to include a series of oil wells he had just purchased in Orange County, after selling off several others, once again at the right time) were great-nieces and -nephews he had never met or corresponded with, and two elderly cousins who were nearly as old as he was, and whom he said he hadn't seen since the late forties but felt some vague attachment to. In truth, he was attached to no one, and made no bones about it. He had had one mission throughout his lifetime, and one only, and that had been making money. He had achieved his goal. He said he had been in love with two women in his younger days, but had never offered to marry either and had lost contact with both of them when they gave up on him and married other men, more than sixty years ago.

The only thing he said he regretted was not having children. He thought of Sarah as the grandchild he had never had, but might have, if he had taken the time to get married. She was the kind of granddaughter he would have liked to have. She was smart, funny, interesting, quick, beautiful, and good at what she did. Sometimes, when she brought papers to him, he loved to sit and look at her and talk to her for hours. He even held her hand, something he never did with his nurses. They got on his nerves and annoyed him, patronized him, and fussed over him in ways he hated. Sarah never did. She sat there looking young and beautiful, while speaking to him of the things that interested him. She always knew her stuff about new tax laws. He loved the fact that she came up with new ideas about how to save him money. He had been wary of her at first, because of her youth, and then progressively came to trust her, in the course of her visits to his small musty room in the attic of the house on Scott Street. She came up the back stairs, carrying her briefcase, entered his room discreetly, sat on a chair next to his bed, and they talked until she could see he was exhausted. Each time she came to see him, she feared it would be the last time. And then he would call her with some new idea, some new plan that had occurred to him, something he wanted to buy, sell, acquire, or dispose of. And whatever he touched always increased his fortune. Even at ninety-eight, Stanley Perlman had a Midas touch when it came to money. And best of all, despite the vast difference in their ages, over the years she'd worked with him, Sarah and Stanley had become friends.

Sarah glanced out the window of the cab as they passed Grace Cathedral, at the top of Nob Hill, and sat back against the seat, thinking about him. She wondered if he really was sick, and if it might be the last time. He had had pneumonia twice the previous spring and each time, miraculously, survived it. Maybe now he wouldn't. His nurses were diligent

in their care of him, but sooner or later, at his age, something was going to get him. It was inevitable, although Sarah dreaded it. She knew she'd miss him terribly when he was gone.

Her long dark hair was pulled neatly back, her eyes were big and almost cornflower blue. He had commented on them the first time he saw her, and asked if she wore colored contact lenses. She had laughed at the question and assured him she didn't. Her usually creamy skin was tan this time, after several weekends in Lake Tahoe. She liked to hike and swim, and ride a mountain bike. Weekends away were always a relief after the long hours she spent in her office. Her partnership in the law firm had been well earned. She had graduated from Stanford law school, magna cum laude, and was a native San Franciscan. She had lived here all her life, except for the four years she spent as an undergraduate at Harvard. Her credentials and hard work had impressed Stanley and her partners. Stanley had grilled her extensively when they met, and had commented that she looked more like a model. She was tall, thin, athletic-looking, and had long legs that he always silently admired. She was wearing a neat navy blue suit, which was the kind of thing she always wore when she visited him. The only jewelry she wore was a pair of small diamond earrings that had been a Christmas gift from Stanley. He had ordered them by phone for her himself from Neiman Marcus. He was not usually generous, he preferred to give his nurses money on holidays, but he had a soft spot for Sarah, just as she had for him. She had given him several cashmere throws to keep him warm. His house always seemed cold and damp. He scolded the nurses soundly whenever they put the heat on. Stanley preferred to use a blanket than be what he thought of as careless with his money.

Sarah had always been intrigued by the fact that he had never occupied the main part of the house, only the old

servants' rooms in the attic. He said he had bought the place as an investment, had always meant to sell it, and never had. He had kept the house more out of laziness than any deep affection for it. It was a large, beautiful, once-luxurious home that had been built in the twenties. Stanley had told her that the family that had built it had fallen on hard times after the Crash of '29, and he had bought it in 1930. He had moved into one of the old maids' rooms then, with an old brass bed, a chest of drawers the original owners had abandoned there, and a chair whose springs had died so long ago that sitting on it was like resting on concrete. The brass bed had been replaced by a hospital bed a decade before. There was an old photograph of the fire after the earthquake on the wall, and not a single photograph of a person anywhere in his room. There had been no people in his life, only investments, and attorneys. There was nothing personal anywhere in the house. The furniture had all been sold separately at auction by the original owners, also for nearly nothing. And Stanley had never bothered to furnish it when he moved in. He had told her that the house had been stripped bare before he got it. The rooms were large and once elegant, there were curtains hanging in shreds at some of the windows. Others were boarded up, so the curious couldn't look in. And although she'd never seen it, Sarah had been told there was a ballroom. She had never walked around the house, but came in straight from the service door, up the back stairs, to his attic bedroom. Her only purpose in coming here was to see Stanley. She had no reason to tour the house, except that she knew that one day, more than likely, after he was gone, she would have to sell it. All of his heirs were in Florida, New York, or the Midwest, and none of them would have an interest in owning an enormous white elephant of a house in California. No matter how beautiful it had once been, none of them would have any use for it, just as Stanley hadn't. It was hard to believe he had lived in it for

seventy-six years and neither furnished it nor moved from the attic. But that was Stanley. Eccentric perhaps, unassuming, unpretentious, and a devoted and respected client. Sarah Anderson was his only friend. The rest of the world had forgotten he existed. And whatever friends he had once had, he had long since outlived them.

The cab stopped at the address on Scott Street that Sarah had given the driver. She paid the fare, picked up her briefcase, got out of the cab, and rang the back doorbell. As she had expected, it was noticeably colder and foggy out here, and she shivered in her light jacket. She was wearing a thin white sweater under the dark blue suit, and looked businesslike, as she always did, when the nurse opened the door and smiled when she saw her. It took them forever to come downstairs from the attic. There were four floors and a basement, Sarah knew, and the elderly nurses who tended to him moved slowly. The one who opened the door to Sarah was relatively new, but she had seen Sarah before.

"Mr. Perlman is expecting you," she said politely, as she stood aside to let Sarah in, and closed the door behind her.

They only used the service door, as it was more convenient to the back staircase which led up to the attic. The front door hadn't been touched for years, and was kept locked and bolted. The lights in the main part of the house were never turned on. The only lights that had shone in the house for years were those in the attic. They cooked in a small kitchen on the same floor that had once served as a pantry. The main kitchen, a piece of history now, was in the basement. It had old-fashioned iceboxes and a meat locker. In the old days the iceman had come, and brought in huge chunks of ice. The stove was a relic from the twenties, and Stanley hadn't worked it since at least the forties. It was a kitchen that had been meant to be run by a flock of cooks and servants, overseen by a housekeeper and butler. It had nothing to do with Stanley's way of life. For years, he had

come home with sandwiches and take-out food from diners and simple restaurants. He never cooked for himself, and went out every morning for breakfast in previous years before he was bedridden. The house was a place where he slept in the spartan brass bed, showered and shaved in the morning, and then went downtown to the office he had, to make more money. He rarely came home before ten o'clock at night. Sometimes as late as midnight. He had no reason to rush home.

Sarah followed the nurse up the stairs at a solemn pace, carrying her briefcase. The staircase was always dark, lit by a minimal supply of bare bulbs. This had been the staircase the servants had used in the house's long-gone days of grandeur. The steps were made of steel, covered by a narrow strip of ancient threadbare carpet. The doors to each floor remained closed, and Sarah saw daylight only when she reached the attic. His room was at the end of a long hall, most of it taken up by the hospital bed. To accommodate it, his single narrow dresser had been moved into the hall. Only the ancient broken chair and a small bed table stood near the bed. As she walked into the room, he opened his eyes and saw her. He was slow to react this time, which worried her, and then little by little a smile lit his eyes and took a moment to reach his mouth. He looked worn and tired, and she was suddenly afraid that maybe this time he was right. He looked all of his ninety-eight years now, and never had before.

"Hello, Sarah," he said quietly, taking in the freshness of her youth and beauty. To him, thirty-eight was like the first blush of her childhood. He laughed whenever Sarah told him she felt old. "Still working too hard?" he asked, as she approached the bed, and stood near him. Seeing her always restored him. She was like air and light to him, or spring rain on a bed of flowers.

“Of course.” She smiled at him, as he reached up a hand for hers and held it. He loved the feel of her skin, her touch, her warmth.

“Don't I always tell you not to do that? You work too hard. You'll end up like me one day. Alone, with a bunch of pesky nurses around you, living in an attic.” He had told her several times that she needed to get married and have babies. He had scolded her soundly when she said that she wanted to do neither. The only sorrow of his life was not having children. He often told her not to make the same mistakes he had. Stock certificates, bonds, shopping centers, and oil wells were no substitute for children. He had learned that lesson too late. The only joy and comfort he had in his life now was Sarah. He loved adding codicils to his will, and did it often. It gave him an excuse to see her.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, looking like a concerned relative and not an attorney. She worried about him and often found excuses to send him books or articles, mostly about new tax laws or other topics she thought might be of interest to him. He always sent her handwritten notes afterward, thanking her, and making comments. He was as sharp as ever.

“I'm tired,” Stanley said honestly, keeping a grip on her hand with his frail fingers. “I can't expect to feel better than that at my age. My body's been gone for years. All that's left is my brain.” Which was as clear as it had ever been. But she saw that his eyes looked dull this time. Usually, there was still a spark in them, but like a lamp beginning to dim, she could see that something had changed. She always wished that there were some way to get him out in the air, but other than occasional trips by ambulance to the hospital, he hadn't left the house in years. The attic of the house on Scott Street had become the womb where he was condemned to finish his days. “Sit down,” he said to her finally. “You look good, Sarah. You always do.” She looked so

fresh and alive to him, so beautiful, as she stood there looking tall and young and slim. "I'm glad you came." He said it a little more fervently than usual, which made her heart ache for him.

"Me too. I've been busy. I've been meaning to come for a couple of weeks," she said apologetically.

"You look like you've been away somewhere. Where did you get the tan?" He thought she looked prettier than ever.

"Just Tahoe for the weekends. It's nice up there." She smiled as she sat down on the uncomfortable chair and set down her briefcase.

"I never went away on weekends, or for vacations for that matter. I think I took two vacations in my whole life. Once to Wyoming, on a ranch, the other time to Mexico. I hated both. I felt like I was wasting time, sitting around worrying about what was happening in my office and what I was missing." She could just imagine him fidgeting as he waited for news from his office, and probably went home sooner than planned. She had done her share of that herself, when she had too much work to do, or brought files with her from the office. She hated leaving anything unfinished. He wasn't entirely wrong about her. In her own way, she was as compulsive about work as he was. The apartment where she lived looked scarcely better than his attic room, just bigger. She was nearly as uninterested in her surroundings as he was. She was just younger and less extreme. The demons that drove them both were very much the same, as he had surmised long since.

They chatted for a few minutes, and she handed him the papers she had brought him. He looked them over, but they were already familiar to him. She had sent several drafts over by messenger, for his approval. He had no fax machine or computer. Stanley liked to see original documents, and

had no patience with modern inventions. He had never owned a cell phone and didn't need one.

There was a small sitting room next to him set up for his nurses. They never ventured far from him, and were either in their tiny sitting room, his room in the uncomfortable chair, watching him, or in the kitchen, preparing his simple meals. Farther down the hall, on the top floor, there were several more small maids' rooms, where the nurses could sleep, if they chose, when they went off duty, or rest, when there was another nurse around. None of them lived in, they just worked there in shifts. The only full-time resident of the house was Stanley. His existence and shrunken world were a tiny microcosm on the top floor of the once-grand house that was crumbling and falling into disrepair as silently and steadily as he was.

"I like the changes that you made," he complimented her. "They make more sense than the draft you sent me last week. This is cleaner, it leaves less room to maneuver."

He always worried about what his heirs would do with his various holdings. Since he had never met most of them, and those he had were now so ancient, it was hard to know how they would treat his estate. He had to assume they'd sell everything, which in some cases would be foolish. But the pie had to be cut nineteen ways. It was a very big pie, and each of them would get an impressive slice, far more than they knew. But he felt strongly about leaving what he had to relatives and not to charity. He had given his share to philanthropic organizations over the years, but he was a firm believer that blood was thicker than water. And since he had no direct heirs, he was leaving it all to his cousins, and great-nieces and -nephews, whoever they were. He had researched their whereabouts carefully, but had met only a few. He hoped that what he left them would make a difference in quality of life to some of them, when they received this unexpected windfall. It was beginning to look

like it would be coming to them soon. Sooner than Sarah wanted to think about as she looked at him.

"I'm glad you like it," Sarah said, looking pleased, trying not to notice or acknowledge the lackluster look in his eyes, which made her want to cry. The last bout of pneumonia had left him drained and looking his age. "Is there anything you want me to add to it?" she asked, and he shook his head in answer. She was sitting in the broken chair, quietly watching him.

"What are you going to do this summer, Sarah?" he asked, changing the subject.

"A few more weekends in Tahoe. I don't have anything special planned." She thought he was afraid that she'd be away, and wanted to reassure him.

"Then plan something. You can't be a slave forever, Sarah. You'll wind up an old maid." She laughed. She had admitted to him before that she dated someone, but had always said it wasn't serious or permanent, and it still wasn't. It had been a casual relationship for four years, which he had also told her was foolish. He had told her that you don't do "casual" for four years. Her mother told her the same thing. But it was all she wanted. She told herself and everyone else that she was too involved in her work at the law firm to want more than casual for the moment. Her work was her first priority, and always had been. Just like him.

"There are no 'old maids' anymore, Stanley. There are independent women, who have careers and different priorities and needs than women had years ago," she said, convincing no one but herself. Stanley didn't buy it. He knew her better, and was wiser about life than she.

"That's hogwash and you know it," he said sternly. "People haven't changed in two thousand years. The smart ones still settle down, get married, and have kids. Or they wind up like me." He had wound up a very, very rich man, which

didn't seem like such a bad thing to her. She was sorry that he had no children, and had no relatives nearby, but living as long as he had, most people wound up alone. He had outlived everyone he had ever known. He might even have lost all his children by then, if he'd had any, and would have only had grandchildren or great-grandchildren to comfort him. In the end, she told herself, no matter who we think we have, we leave this world alone. Just as Stanley would. It was just more obvious, in his case. But she knew, from the life her mother had shared with her father, that you can be just as alone, even if you have a spouse and children. She was in no hurry to saddle herself with either. The married people she knew didn't look all that happy to her, and if she ever married and it didn't work out, she didn't need an ex-husband to hate and torment her. She knew too many of those, too. She was much happier like this, working, on her own, with a part-time boyfriend who met her needs for the moment. The thought of marrying him never crossed her mind, or his. They had both agreed from the beginning that a simple relationship was all they wanted from each other. Simple, and easy. Especially since they were both busy with jobs they loved.

Sarah could see then that Stanley was truly exhausted, and she decided to cut the visit short this time. He had signed the papers, which was all she needed. He looked like he was about ready to fall asleep.

"I'll come back and see you soon, Stanley. Let me know if you need anything. I'll come over whenever you like," she said gently, patting the frail hand again after she stood up and took the papers from him. She slipped them into her briefcase as he watched her with a wistful smile. He loved watching her, just the easy grace of her movements as she chatted with him, or did ordinary things.

"I might not be here," he said simply, without self-pity. It was a simple statement of fact that they both knew was

possible but that she didn't like to hear.

"Don't be silly," she chided him. "You'll be here. I'm counting on you to outlive me."

"I'd better not," he said sternly. "And next time I see you, I want to hear all about some vacation you took. Take a cruise. Go lie on a beach somewhere. Pick up a guy, get drunk, go dancing, cut loose. Mark my words, Sarah, you'll be sorry one day if you don't do it." She laughed at his suggestions, visualizing herself picking up strangers on a beach. "I mean it!"

"I know you do. I think you're trying to get me arrested and disbarred." She smiled broadly at him, and kissed his cheek. It was an uncharacteristically unprofessional gesture, but he was dear to her, and she to him.

"Screw getting disbarred. It might do you good. Get a life, Sarah. Stop working so hard." He always said the same things to her, and she took them with a grain of salt. She enjoyed what she did. Her work was like a drug she was addicted to. She had no desire to give up the addiction, and maybe not for years, although she knew his warnings were heartfelt and well intended.

"I'll try," she lied, smiling at him. He really was like a grandfather to her.

"Try harder." He scowled at her, and then smiled at the kiss on his cheek. He loved the feel of her velvet skin on his face, the softness of her breath so close to him. It made him feel young again, although he knew that in his youth he would have been too foolish and intent on his work to pay any attention to her, no matter how beautiful she was. The two women he had lost, due to his own stupidity at the time, he realized now, had been just as beautiful and sensual as she. He hadn't acknowledged that to himself until recently. "Take care of yourself," he said as she stood in the doorway, holding her briefcase and turned back to look at him.

"You too. Behave yourself. Don't chase your nurses around the room, they might quit." He chuckled at the suggestion.

"Have you looked at them?" He laughed out loud this time, and so did she. "I'm not getting out of bed for that," he said, grinning, "not with these old knees. I may be stuck in bed, my dear, but I'm not blind, you know. Send me some new ones, and I might give them a run for their money."

"I'll bet you would," she said, and with a wave at him, finally forced herself to leave. He was still smiling as she left, and told the nurse she could find her way downstairs on her own.

She clattered down the steel stairs again, her steps resonating on the iron staircase, as the sound reverberated in the narrow hall. The threadbare carpet did little to muffle the din. And it was a relief when she stepped out of the service door into the noon sunshine that had finally come uptown. She walked slowly down to Union Street, thinking of him, and found a cab there. She gave the driver the address of her office building, and thought of Stanley all the way downtown. She was afraid he wouldn't last much longer. He seemed to be finally sliding slowly downhill. Her visit had perked him up, but even Sarah knew it wouldn't be much longer. It was almost too much to hope that he would reach his ninety-ninth birthday in October. And why? He had so little to live for, and he was so alone. His life was so confined by the tiny room he lived in, and the four walls of the cell where he was trapped for the remainder of his days. He had lived a good life, or at least a productive one, and the lives of his nineteen heirs would be forever changed when he died. It depressed Sarah to think about it. She knew she would miss Stanley when he was gone. She tried not to think about the many warnings he gave her about her own life. She had years to think about babies and marriage. For now, she had a career that meant the world to her, and a desk full of work waiting for her at the office, although she

appreciated his concern. She had exactly the life she wanted.

It was shortly after noon as she hurried back to her office. She had a partners' meeting at one o'clock, meetings scheduled with three clients that afternoon, and fifty pages of new tax laws to read that night, all or some of which would be pertinent to her clients. She had a stack of messages waiting on her desk, and she managed to return all but two of them before the meeting with her partners. She would return the other two, and whatever new ones she had, between client meetings later that afternoon. She had no time for lunch ... any more than she did for babies or marriage. Stanley had made his choices and mistakes in life. She had a right to make her own.

Chapter 2

Sarah continued to send books and relevant articles to Stanley, as she always did, through July and August. He had a brief bout of flu in September, which didn't require a hospital stay this time. And he was in remarkably good spirits when she visited him on his ninety-ninth birthday in October. There was a sense of victory to it. It was a remarkable achievement to reach ninety-nine years of age. She brought him a cheesecake and put a candle in it. She knew it was his favorite, and reminded him of his childhood in New York. For once, he didn't scold her about how hard she was working. They talked at length about a new tax law that was being proposed, which could prove advantageous to his estate. He had the same concerns about it she did, and they both enjoyed batting theories back and forth with each other, about how current tax laws might be affected. He was as clear and sharp as ever and didn't seem quite as frail as he had on her previous visit. He had a new nurse who was making a real effort to make him eat, and Sarah thought he had even gained a little weight. She kissed him on the cheek, as she always did, when she left, and told him that they'd be celebrating his hundredth birthday the following October.

"Christ, I hope not," he said, laughing at her. "Whoever thought I'd make it this far," he said as they celebrated together.

She left him a stack of new books, some music to listen to, and a pair of black satin pajamas that seemed to amuse

him. She'd never seen him in better spirits, which made the call she got two weeks later, on the first of November, more shocking somehow. It shouldn't have been. She had always known it would come. But it caught her off guard anyway. After more than three years of doing legal work for him, and enjoying their resulting friendship, she really had begun to expect him to live forever. The nurse told her that Stanley had died peacefully in his sleep the night before, listening to the music she had given him and wearing the black satin pajamas. He had eaten a good dinner, drifted off to sleep and out of this world, without a gasp or a whimper, or a final word to anyone. The nurse had found him when she went to check on him an hour later. She said the look on his face was completely peaceful.

Tears sprang to Sarah's eyes as she heard it. She'd had a hard morning at the office, after a heated debate with two of her partners over something they'd done that she didn't agree with, and she felt they'd ganged up on her. And the night before, she'd had a fight with the man she dated, which wasn't all that unusual, but upset her anyway. In the past year, they had begun to disagree more. They both had busy days, and stressful lives. They confined their time together to weekends. But sometimes she and Phil got on each other's nerves over minor irritations. Hearing about Stanley dying in the night was the topper. She felt suddenly bereft, reminded of when her father had died when she was sixteen, twenty-two years before.

In an odd way, Stanley was the only father figure she'd had since then, even though he was a client. He was always telling her not to work too hard, and to learn from his mistakes. No other man she knew had ever said that to her, and she knew how much she was going to miss him. But this was what they had prepared for, why she had come into his life, to plan his estate, and how it would be dispersed to his heirs. It was time for her to do her job. All the groundwork

had been laid over the past three years. Sarah was organized and ready. Everything was in order.

“Will you make the arrangements?” the nurse asked her. She had already notified the other nurses, and Sarah said she'd call the funeral parlor. He had long since selected the one he wanted, although he had been emphatic that there be no funeral. He wanted to be cremated and buried, without fuss or fanfare. There would be no mourners. All his friends and business associates were long dead, and his family didn't know him. There was only Sarah to make the arrangements.

She made the appropriate phone calls after speaking to the nurse. She was surprised to see that her hand shook as she made the calls. He was to be cremated the next morning, and buried at Cypress Lawn, in a spot he had purchased in the mausoleum a dozen years before. They asked if there would be a service, and she said no. The funeral home picked him up within the hour, and she felt somber all day, particularly as she dictated the letter to his unsuspecting heirs. She offered a reading of the will in her offices in San Francisco, which Stanley had requested, should they wish to come out, at which time they might like to inspect the house they had inherited, and decide how they wished to dispose of it. There was always the remote possibility that one of them would want to keep it, and buy out the others' shares, although she and Stanley had always considered that unlikely. None of them lived in San Francisco, and wouldn't want a house there. There were a multitude of details to attend to. And she had been advised by the cemetery that Stanley would be interred at nine o'clock the next morning.

She knew it would be several days, or longer, before she began hearing from his heirs. For those who didn't wish to come out, or couldn't, she would send them copies of the will, as soon as it had been read. And his estate had to be