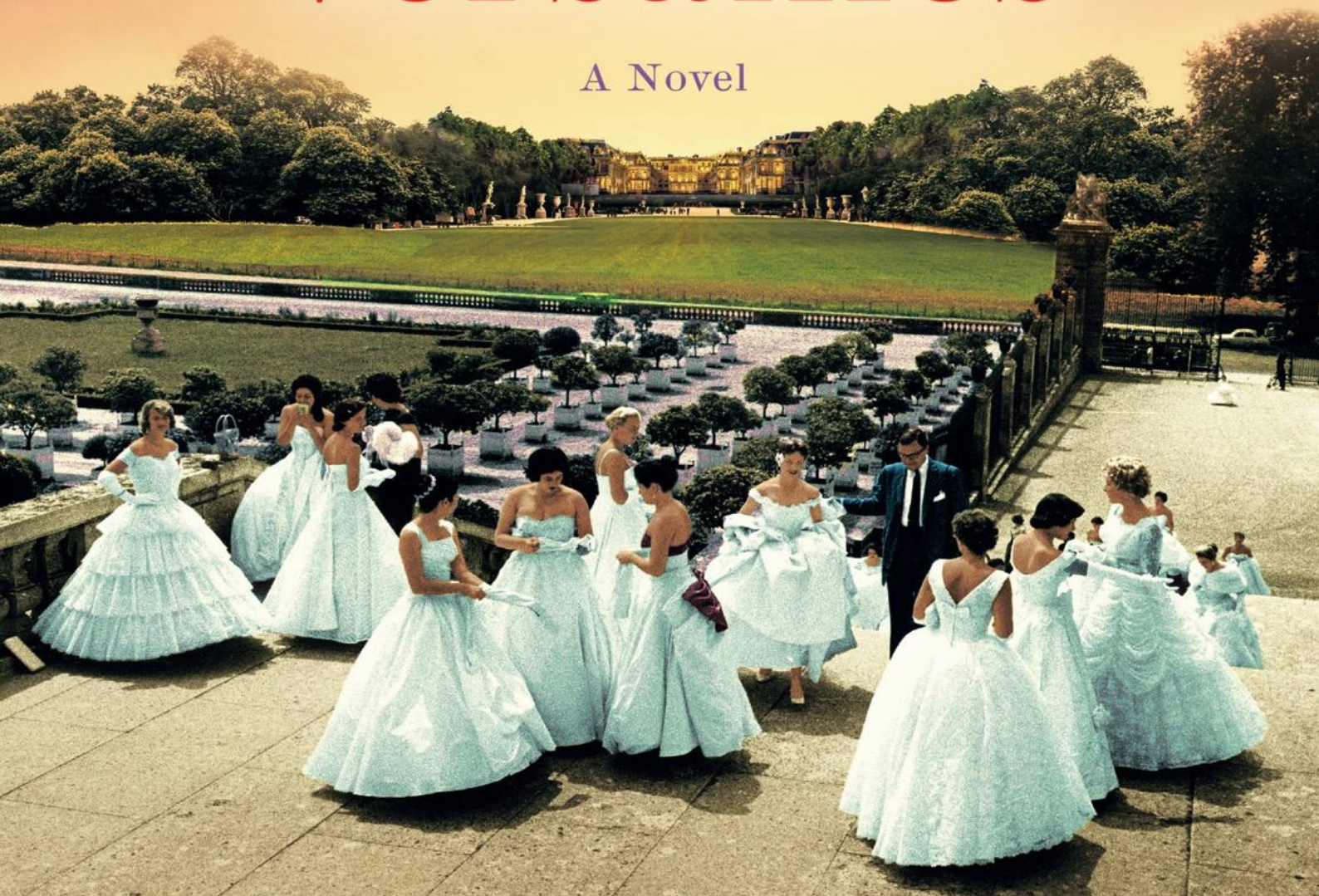


DANIELLE STEEL



The Ball at Versailles

A Novel



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Chapter 1

Jane Fairbanks Alexander saw the creamy white envelope sitting on the silver tray on the table in the entrance hall, where the part-time housekeeper who came three times a week had put it. Gloria was Irish and had worked for them daily when Jane's daughter Amelia was still in school, but now that she was in college, Jane didn't need Gloria as often and she had another part-time job the other two days of the week. She bought the groceries she knew Jane liked, did the laundry, and cleaned the apartment. Amelia only came home now for the occasional weekend. It was her freshman year at Barnard. The apartment seemed strangely quiet without her. It was small, neat, and elegant, and had two bedrooms, in a prewar building in Manhattan on Fifth Avenue and Seventy-sixth Street, with a doorman, which made Jane feel safe. On the days that Gloria was there, it was nice for Jane to come home to a clean, tidy apartment, with her laundry neatly folded on her bed. Having an orderly home was some slight compensation for the fact that Amelia wasn't there anymore. She was uptown in the dorm. Barnard was the female sister school of Columbia University.

Amelia was loving her freshman year. She was an English literature major, which made sense since Jane was the second-in-command of a venerable publishing house in the city. Amelia's father had been in publishing too, and Amelia had clear goals. She wanted to go to law school when she graduated from Barnard, and hoped to get into Columbia, which had been one of the first law schools to accept women. For the past

nine years, Jane had brought Amelia up on her own. She had been nine years old when her father, Alfred, died. She had never known him as her mother had. Jane had warm memories of him before the war, when he was still a whole person, before he had gone to war and everything had changed.

Jane had met him when she was a junior at Vassar. He had been getting a master's in English at Yale. Once they met at a deb ball in New York, he had courted her for a year and a half and traveled from New Haven to visit her in Poughkeepsie as often as he was able. They got engaged during her senior year, and married as soon as she graduated, in 1939. Alfred was twenty-four then, and Jane was twenty-two. He had an entry-level job in publishing at G. P. Putnam's, and he had a bright future ahead of him. He had started as an editorial assistant and was rapidly promoted to junior editor. He loved his job and looked forward to being a senior editor or even editor in chief one day.

Jane got a job fresh out of college, working at *Life* magazine as an assistant copy editor. Their interests had always been very similar and they both loved their jobs in publishing. Alfred was assigned to the more literary books, and the manuscripts he worked on were loftier than the work Jane did at *Life*. But her work was lively, fun, and she found it exciting. She got pregnant three months after they married and had an easy pregnancy. She was at the magazine for a year, until she gave birth to Amelia in the summer of 1940, and never went back to work after that. She was happy staying home with their baby daughter and caring for her herself, and Alfred's job, along with the money he had inherited, provided them with a very pleasant life. He didn't expect her to go back to work.

Alfred didn't have a great deal of money, but his grandparents had left him a handsome bequest that provided some luxuries as well as necessities. And later, after his parents died, one of cancer and the other of a stroke, they had left him some more money too. He still had to work, but he and Jane weren't dependent on his job, and it was comforting to know that they had a tiny amount of savings in the bank, invested safely and conservatively. Their backgrounds were very similar. Jane's father was the president of a bank in New York, and her mother was from a distinguished family in Boston. She came from "old money" too. Jane's parents were

from families that had once been more comfortable than they were now. They had lost most of their fortune in the Crash of '29, but there was still enough left to provide their heirs with a comfortable, secure life. Alfred's family were part of the Old Guard of New York. He had several cousins who had more money than he did, but his was among the best-known names of New York Society. He was by no means the richest among them, but he had enough to support his wife and daughter and there was no need for Jane to work. Alfred's father was an investment banker on Wall Street, and like Jane's mother, Alfred's mother had never worked.

The two sets of parents knew each other. Alfred's and Jane's fathers belonged to the same club, where they often met after work, and both their mothers volunteered once a week together as Gray Ladies for the Red Cross. It was work they enjoyed. They liked sharing a granddaughter once Amelia was born and took her to the park together sometimes to see the animals at the zoo or ride on the carousel. Jane and Alfred were only children, so Amelia's arrival was met with wonder and delight by both sets of grandparents.

Jane and Alfred's lives rolled along smoothly from the moment they married for two and a half years, until Amelia was eighteen months old. At night they talked about Alfred's job, his progress and latest promotions, and the manuscripts he was assigned to work on. But when Pearl Harbor was hit, Alfred enlisted within days afterwards. It was a few months before he shipped out, first to England and from there to Italy. He and Jane corresponded faithfully, and it was only once he was in Italy that she noticed that his tone had changed. He sounded discouraged, and alternated between fear and rage, and he couldn't tell her what he'd seen, so she could only guess how hard the war was for him. Both his parents died in the first year he was away, which upset him deeply too. There were long periods when she didn't hear from him at all, depending on where he was and if there was mail service. Then he would surface again. After he'd been in Italy for a few months, she noticed the tremor in his handwriting. The letters no longer sounded like him, and when he returned from the war in the summer of 1945, she could see why. He was a changed man. Amelia was five years old, didn't remember him, and cried each time she saw him

or he tried to pick her up, which either made him cry, or storm out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

The doctors said he was suffering from shellshock and battle fatigue and it would heal in time, but it never did. He was thirty years old, and the death of his parents in a relatively short time after he left had added to his trauma. Once he came back, he no longer saw his old friends or went to his club. His job at the publishing house had been filled by a woman, who was doing an excellent job, for a lower salary than they'd paid him. She was a war widow now and they didn't want to upset her and let her go. The job market was flooded with young, healthy men looking for work, and Alfred was turned down for every job he applied for. It was clear that he hadn't recovered yet. He either flew into a rage over something they asked him, or, as at one interview, broke down in tears when they asked him about his war experience. Eventually he stopped going to interviews, and sat at home, brooding and drinking all day, while Jane struggled to find ways to cheer him up. His preference was gin, but he would drink anything he could lay his hands on. Jane would throw away the bottles when she found where he concealed them, but he always had more hidden somewhere. Without a job and drinking heavily, and Jane not working either, Alfred went through much of the money his parents and grandparents had left him very quickly. He did some gambling at a private poker club, and a lot of drinking, and sat in a chair in a haze all day, lost in thought, staring into space. At night he usually fell asleep listening to the radio. His return was nothing like Jane had imagined it would be, with two kindred spirits finding each other again and picking up where they left off. Alfred never found his way back to that place. He was lost, never to be found again.

At thirty-four, four years after he returned from the war, he was driving to Connecticut to visit a friend from his army days that Jane had never heard of before when he drove off a cliff into a ravine and was killed. He didn't leave a note, so she was never sure if it was suicide or an accident because he was drunk. She suspected the former but could never prove it. He had been profoundly depressed for four years, with night sweats and nightmares almost every night, and he refused to get treatment for it. He insisted he was fine, but they both knew he wasn't.

Jane found herself a heartbroken widow at thirty-two. Her own parents had died by then, so she had no one to turn to for help when she discovered that Alfred had gone through almost all his money and had no life insurance. What he had left she put in an investment account with his military benefits, for Amelia's education and emergencies that might come up. Fortunately, he had purchased their apartment from his inheritance from his grandparents before the war, so she and Amelia had a roof over their heads, but very little more than that.

Amelia was nine when her father died, and attended the Chapin School, an exclusive private girls' school on the East Side. Jane had attended Chapin too, and Amelia never suspected her mother's terror when she discovered Alfred's circumstances. They barely had enough to live on with the little that was left. Jane tried to get another magazine job and couldn't find one. She hadn't worked in nine years, and only had had a year's experience before that.

She finally found a job as a junior editor in a well-known publishing house, similar to Alfred's first job when she married him. She found she had a talent for editing, and young writers liked working with her, and she enjoyed encouraging them. Beyond that, she had a keen eye for manuscripts that were submitted that she was sure would be commercial successes, and she was often proven right. She had an uncanny knack for finding the proverbial needle in the haystack, discovering unknown authors whose novels became bestsellers. She rose quickly in the ranks of the publishing house she worked for, Axelrod and Baker. Phillip Parker, her boss, was impressed by her abilities, and she got regular promotions and raises. She learned to live frugally and provided everything Amelia needed. Within six years, she became the assistant publisher, and since her boss was nearing retirement, she had an eye on his position, and he hinted to her regularly that she was almost sure to get it. In fact, she had been doing his job more than he was for the past three years. He had frail health and he told her it was only a matter of time before she'd get his position as publisher. She worked hard in order to be worthy of it and took work home at night. She was doing the work of two people, his job and her own.

She was proud of the work she did and loved working with the authors. She knew many of them personally, made a point of getting to know the

new ones, and continued encouraging young writers. It was rewarding work, and she made a decent salary. She'd had several offers from literary agencies to become an agent, which might have been more lucrative, but she was loyal to the house she worked for, and they paid her well. She was able to provide all the things Alfred would have if he hadn't blown most of his money before drinking himself to death. The autopsy had shown that he was drunk when he drove over the cliff. She had been angry at him for a long time afterwards but had finally made her peace with it. Alfred's death was due to the war. It wasn't his fault.

Neither Alfred nor Jane had grown up with extreme luxury. Their families' fortunes had dwindled, as had the fortunes of many aristocratic families after the Great Depression. But both their families were still comfortable before the war and had provided for their children. Jane and Alfred came from blue-blooded lineage, had been educated at the best schools and colleges, knew the right people, and lived on the edge of New York Society, among people of their own kind. They had never been deprived growing up, and Jane was determined to see to it that her daughter lacked for nothing. She had sent her to one of the best private schools in the city too. Amelia had pretty dresses when she went to birthday parties. They were invited to the finest homes, and Amelia to the best parties. Jane was a member of the Colony Club, one of the most exclusive women's clubs in New York. And she saw to it that the girls Amelia met and made friends with were from the "right" families. The New York Social Register was Jane's bible, and she made sure that the people they socialized with were in it. Given her background, people who didn't know her well assumed she was a snob, but she wasn't. She was kind to everyone at work, but where Amelia was concerned, she wanted her to have the best opportunities, and tried to be sure that she grew up among the same kind of people her parents had grown up with. Jane never strayed far from that safe, familiar world, and didn't allow Amelia to do so either. When the time came, she wanted Amelia to marry someone from that world.

Giving Amelia the best of everything had been a fierce struggle for Jane. Her existence since Alfred's death had been a life-and-death battle to

make ends meet, and she never wanted Amelia to go through that when she grew up.

Amelia never knew how often Jane deprived herself of a new coat or dress or hat or shoes, or even a new skirt for work, for her daughter's benefit. Jane was a pretty woman and she dressed up what she had with a bright scarf, or her mother's jewelry. She always wore her mother's pearls to work. She looked and sounded like what she was, a beautiful, ladylike, distinguished, aristocratic woman from an upper-class background, with an excellent education. She had been grooming Amelia all her life to appeal to the right man one day and to marry someone who would care for her and protect her and support her, so she would never have to make the sacrifices her mother had after Alfred's death. Jane was willing to sacrifice everything for her daughter.

Only a month before, on Christmas, Amelia had made her debut at the Infirmary Ball, one of the most exclusive debutante cotillions in New York, where Astors and Vanderbilts had made their debuts before her. Many of the girls Amelia had gone to school with had come out with her. She had worn a beautiful dress that they had picked out at Bergdorf Goodman. It was a simple heavy white satin gown by Pauline Trigère with a tiny waist that showed off Amelia's slim figure and a skirt shaped like a bell. Amelia was a beautiful girl, with a perfect body, long blond hair, and big blue eyes. She was a younger, almost exact replica of her mother. Jane was beautiful at forty-one, and they looked like sisters.

Amelia was exquisite coming down the stairs with her escort, to curtsy as she was presented, under the crossed swords of the West Point cadets. Teddy Van Horn, a childhood friend, had been Amelia's escort, and he looked handsome in white tie and tails and was a year older than Amelia. She had no romantic interest in him whatsoever. They were just friends, which made the evening easier than if there had been romantic sparks between them. Jane had made her debut at the same ball twenty-three years before. And even now, at forty-one, she remembered how excited she had been. It had been the high point of her life until she married Alfred.

The beautiful dress had put a strain on Jane's budget, which she never discussed with Amelia. Alfred's remaining money, which she'd saved and

invested, paid for college. Amelia's dorm room, everything that went with it, and her expenses were a stretch on Jane's current salary, but as soon as her boss retired and she got the position she'd been waiting for as publisher, her finances wouldn't be quite so tight. She was looking forward to it and knew it would be soon.

Jane could manage in the meantime, just as she had for the past nine years. Amelia was eighteen now, and once she finished college and got through law school in seven years, Jane could heave a sigh of relief. They had made it this far, and she knew that she could hang on for another seven years of keeping a hawk eye on their budget, without Amelia ever feeling the pinch of it or being deprived. Jane would die before she would ever shortchange Amelia and make her aware of her mother's struggle. She wanted Amelia to make a brilliant marriage, so she would never have to worry about anything. She wanted her to marry for love of course, but it was as easy to love a rich man as a poor one. Amelia was well behaved, so Jane wasn't worried about who she'd meet in college. She was always in the library working to keep her grades up, and she had done well so far. Jane was proud of her. Amelia was a serious student with good morals and values, and a kind heart. She would have been devastated if she had known of her mother's struggles to support her.

Jane had worn a plain black velvet evening gown to Amelia's debut just before Christmas. She had found it in a secondhand shop where wealthy women often sold their cast-off clothes. It was by Charles James, and she'd found a handsome short mink Galanos jacket to go with it. She looked just as elegant as all the other mothers at the cotillion and was prettier than most of them. Amelia and Jane were both beautiful women and looked well in whatever they wore. Amelia's dress was one of the most beautiful there.

Amelia had been pleased to be invited to the cotillion and had expected to be. She and her friends had talked about it with anticipation all through high school. It didn't have deep meaning for her the way it did for her mother and some of the other girls, but she knew it would be fun. It was a rite of passage into adulthood. She had chafed for a while about the origins and purpose of the cotillion in the past. Debutante balls were originally meant to introduce young women of good families to Society, with the

intention of finding husbands for them. It had always been the case in the United States and Europe. But few young girls married at eighteen anymore, “fresh out of the schoolroom,” as they used to say. Many or even most went to college now, and a number of them met their husbands there, as Jane pointed out when Amelia complained briefly about the cotillion being archaic. She was bothered too that anyone who was not from their white upper-class milieu was excluded. It seemed wrong to her.

“It’s a cattle market, Mom,” Amelia had grumbled briefly, “and all the cattle are just like us. Why is that okay?”

“It is *not* a cattle market. It’s a night designed to make you feel like Cinderella, and if you meet your Prince Charming, then that’s wonderful. It’s a rite of passage for people like us, like a club, to show off our daughters we’re so proud of. And you know all the girls coming out with you. You went to school with many of them.” The others went to schools like Spence and Brearley, the rival schools to Chapin. Amelia had given up her reservations. She couldn’t change the rules, even if she disapproved that all of the debutantes were white and Christian. The year before, Amelia had been deeply moved by the nine brave students who had been the first students to desegregate Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas. She had followed it closely on the news and took their situation very much to heart.

“It’s not right, Mom, that they’re not included too.”

“No, it’s not right,” Jane agreed with her, “but history moves slowly. It will change one day, but most people in this country aren’t ready for that to happen yet. One day integration will be the norm. The whole country isn’t there yet.”

“They need to hurry up. We’re no better than they are.”

“It will happen in your lifetime,” Jane reassured her. “Probably by the time you’re my age. Little Rock was a first big step toward that. But we can’t fight everyone’s battles, we can only fight our own, and that’s not our battle to fight.” Jane’s struggle every day was to do the best she could for her daughter and support them both.

“Maybe it should be our fight too,” Amelia had said earnestly, only a month before. The inequities of segregation had upset her since she was a young child. She hated the idea that some people were treated differently.

And there was no question that events like debutante balls excluded many people and were only open to a select few. It was a very exclusive club. The purpose of deb balls and presentations of marriageable young women hadn't changed for centuries. It was an antiquated tradition, and a thinly veiled effort to find husbands for young girls as they came of age.

In the end, despite her reservations, Amelia had had fun, particularly since so many of her friends from school were there, and she had stopped complaining about it. She had fun with Teddy and the many girls that were debs with her. She didn't consider it an earth-shattering event that would change her life, but it was a fun party, and she loved her dress.

As Jane sat down at her desk with the thick cream-colored envelope with her name on it in elegant calligraphy, and a French stamp, indicating it had been sent from Paris, a new door opened to Amelia, beyond her mother's deepest hopes for her. Jane read it carefully and smiled. In the presence of the President of France and Ambassador Hervé Alphand, the French Ambassador to the United States, with the Duchesse de Maillé and the Duc de Brissac, as co-chairmen of the event, two hundred and fifty French debutantes were to be presented to Paris Society at a ball held for the first time at the Palace of Versailles, and Miss Amelia Whitney Alexander was on the list of forty American young women who were included in the number of invitees. It specified that the Americans had to have been presented as debutantes in the U.S. in 1956 and '57, which was Amelia's case, having just come out in December 1957 a month before, and debutantes who would be presented later in the year in December 1958 were acceptable. Debutantes from earlier or later years were not included. And more specifically the girls had to be from seventeen to nineteen years of age. Jane's smile widened as she read down the list of the Honorary committee and the ball committee, which included several Bourbons, among them the pretender to the throne of France, if there were still a king. On the list were a number of royals, and Miss Mary Stuart Montague Price was General Chairman on the American side. And one could assume that almost all on the list of debutantes were from aristocratic families. The American debutantes whose names Jane recognized were from the most distinguished families in the country. It was not a list which reflected

wealth or fame, but bloodlines and ancestry. And it was a great honor and compliment for Amelia to be invited.

Jane's mind raced immediately to what the event might cost her, in terms of plane tickets, the hotel, expenses while they were in Paris, and possibly another lighter, more summery dress than the heavy satin one Amelia had just worn to the cotillion. But there was no way that Jane would deprive her daughter of the experience if Amelia wanted to go. Jane intended to do everything she could to convince her if Amelia hesitated. She didn't speak French and might feel shy about it. But it was a fantastic opportunity for any girl her age, to be presented at the Palace of Versailles, formerly the Court of Louis XIV. It would be an unforgettable event for her to experience, and an amazing opportunity for her to meet young men far beyond her usual circle of friends. She might marry a French prince, or an English duke, Jane fantasized. Her mind raced at the thought of all the advantages for Amelia that might come of it.

She vaguely remembered that the young Queen Elizabeth had recently stopped the presentation of debutantes at the Court of Saint James and declared it an antiquated tradition, so the French had risen to the occasion, and this would be the first Debutante Presentation at the Palace of Versailles. The ball was to be held on the twelfth of July. Jane carefully set the invitation down on her desk, to show Amelia when she got home. She was coming to spend the weekend with her mother, so the timing of the arrival of the invitation was perfect. The favor of a reply was requested by February first, from those who wished to participate. She hoped that Amelia would be as excited as she was. It was an honor to be chosen as one of the forty Americans being invited.

Jane read through the rest of her mail, made some notes of things she had to do, and looked out the window at Central Park in the dark. There was still snow on the ground, and she stood thinking about the ball as she heard Amelia's key turn in the lock. She bounded into the room in saddle shoes and a plaid skirt, a navy twin set, a pea coat with a white wool cap and mittens, and a face red from the cold. Her long blond hair hanging down her back made her look like Alice in Wonderland, as she walked into the living room and smiled at her mother. The two women looked strikingly alike. Jane went to hug her daughter and smiled happily to see

her. It was the first week of school after the Christmas holidays, and Jane had missed Amelia once she went back to the dorm. They had spoken several times that week. They usually spoke every day. They were very close, enjoyed each other's company, and got on well.

"How was school?" Jane asked her as they sat down on the couch in the living room. The room wasn't large, but it was elegantly arranged, with antiques Jane had inherited from her family and Alfred's, and it had a warm, welcoming feeling to it. Amelia loved their apartment. It was just big enough for the two of them and felt cozy and inviting.

"Long," Amelia answered. "I already have three papers due. It feels like they're punishing us for having had a vacation." The cotillion already felt light-years away. "I have to work all weekend," she said, looking disappointed. She wanted to see her friends and go to a movie with her mother. They had promised to go on Sunday before Amelia went back to school. And there was a movie theater that was playing *Funny Face* with Audrey Hepburn and Fred Astaire again, and they both wanted to see it.

"That's fine. I have some things to do too. This week was crazy in the office. We have several important books coming out in the next few months." Amelia had grown up with only her mother, so they were friends now as well as mother and daughter, and allies in most things. They rarely argued and both had easygoing personalities.

They chatted for a few minutes, and Jane couldn't hold back any longer. She walked to her leather-covered antique English desk that had been her father's, picked up the invitation, and walked back to the couch and handed it to Amelia.

"Look what came in the mail today," she said, unable to conceal her excitement. Amelia took it from her, read down the lists of all the names, and the explanatory cover letter, and looked up at her mother.

"Are they kidding? They're all princesses and countesses. Why would they want me there?"

"Because you have distinguished ancestors, and maybe they got the list from the Infirmary Ball. It sounds incredible. The first debutante presentation at the Palace of Versailles. That's so exciting." Amelia looked considerably less enthused than her mother.

“It sounds too fancy to me, and I don’t speak French. I knew most of the girls I came out with. I wouldn’t know anyone there.”

“You don’t need to speak French. It’s not a speaking part. You walk down the aisle or a staircase on the arm of your escort, you curtsy just like you did at the Infirmary Ball, and that’s it, and you’ve made your debut in France too. At Versailles.”

“I don’t know any boys there to be my escort,” Amelia said, trying to back out. It sounded intimidating to her. Most of the French debutantes had titles. Some were even princesses.

“Read the letter. They will supply a suitable escort for the debutantes coming from abroad. There will be five hundred escorts for two hundred and ninety girls. Amelia, you have to do it. You can’t miss an opportunity like that. You’ll have the memory of it forever.”

“I already did it here, Mom. How many times do I have to be presented? It’ll be the same thing all over again, with French subtitles.” Amelia shrugged and handed the invitation back to her mother, unimpressed and unenthused about going.

“It’s at Versailles. Nothing you’ve ever done will equal that,” Jane insisted. She could already envision it, with Amelia looking like a princess too.

“Why do you want me to, Mom?” Amelia looked discouraged.

“Because when life gives you an opportunity like that, I think you have to embrace it. And I’ll be there with you. You won’t be alone.”

“It sounds scary to me.”

“It’s a chance to make friends in another country.”

“And marry a duke or a prince, right?” Amelia teased her, but she knew she wasn’t far from the truth. “I don’t want to be Cinderella, Mom. I did the cotillion, that was enough. I didn’t meet a handsome prince. I had fun. The whole concept is out of another century. I don’t need to come out twice. Once was enough and I don’t want a husband for about another ten years. I want to finish college and go to law school.”

“You’ll be too old to be a deb at Versailles by then. This is the year you’re supposed to do it. After that you’ll be a post-deb and they won’t want you.”

“This is 1958, Mom, not 1850. It’s ridiculous.”

“No, it’s not. Consider it a fabulous costume party. You’ll even meet some American girls, you can speak English to them.”

“And what do I say to my escort after ‘Bonn-joor,’ when I have no idea what he’s saying to me?”

“You give him that killer smile of yours and he’ll melt at your feet.” Amelia smiled at her mother’s romantic illusions and faith in her, and then looked worried.

“Are you going to *make* me, Mom?” Amelia looked stubborn for a minute, and Jane could see that this wasn’t going to be as easy as she’d thought. Amelia was sounding obstinate.

“I’m not going to *make* you do anything, but I am going to try to convince you. I think it’s a fantastic opportunity, and I don’t want you to miss it. I think you’ll regret it forever if you don’t go.”

“No, *you* will,” Amelia said pointedly. She knew her mother. She wanted the best of everything for her daughter, sometimes too much so.

“It’s one night out of your life. How terrible could it be?” Jane wheedled, trying to sway her.

“It sounds boring, and pompous. They’re probably all snobs. And it’s expensive. The letter said there’s a five-hundred-dollar fee if I do it. I’d rather have the money for new ski equipment. We have a long weekend coming up. I want to go to Vermont with friends from school.” Amelia was athletic, which was often costly.

“You can rent the equipment, and five hundred dollars isn’t a lot for an opportunity like this,” but the rest of the expenses would be, Jane knew. She didn’t care, she wanted Amelia to have the experience.

“I’ll think about it.” Amelia didn’t want to argue with her mother about it, and she could see that Jane was determined. Jane nodded. She knew how rigid Amelia could be if she dug her heels in, and she didn’t want her to refuse.

“We’ll talk about it on Sunday,” Jane said, with a determination Amelia knew only too well. When her mother wanted something badly enough, she was relentless, especially if it was for Amelia.

“I’ll probably have my promotion by then, and a nice big fat raise,” she reassured her, “and we can go on a little trip afterwards, in Provence or somewhere, just the two of us. It’ll be fun.” Amelia smiled. She could see

a ball at the Palace of Versailles in her future, with a lot of stuck-up French people who didn't speak English and would probably snub her and be rude to her and consider her some kind of hick and treat her like a tourist, but once her mother got that look in her eye, wild horses would be easier to deal with. "Come on, let's go have dinner. Gloria left us a roast chicken. I'm starving," Jane said, and gave her daughter a hug.

"Me too," Amelia said. She put an arm around her mother's waist, and they walked to the kitchen together. Jane gave her a quick kiss, and started to organize dinner, and not another word was said about the ball at Versailles that night, but Amelia knew her mother wasn't going to forget it. It was beginning to seem unavoidable, and she would have to be presented as a deb, again. She felt like she was about to be auctioned off to the highest bidder, or a handsome prince, according to her mother.

The plan sounded stupid to Amelia, and she didn't want a husband, especially not a French one. It was all just too weird. She forgot about it after that and spent the weekend working on her papers.

Jane didn't mention it again until shortly before Amelia had to leave to go back to the dorm on Sunday. She wanted to go to the library after dinner.

Jane picked the invitation up from her desk and waved it at her. "And the ball at Versailles?" Amelia let out a terrifying groan.

"Oh God, why do I have to? Stop trying to marry me off, Mom."

"I'm not. I just want you to have fun." Jane looked determined, and Amelia knew she wouldn't win, so she might as well give in.

"Do I have a choice?" Amelia said, with a glance of resignation at her mother. She'd been hoping she would forget or give up.

"Actually," Jane smiled at her, "no, you don't. Trust me. It will be fabulous. You'll be glad you went. And we'll do something fun afterwards, a little trip in France."

"Okay, I give up," Amelia said, rolling her eyes, and went to get her bag. She was wearing jeans and saddle shoes, a heavy Irish sweater, and the pea coat.

"I'm sure you won't regret it," her mother promised.

"Argghkkk. You are the stubbornest person I know," Amelia said, exasperated.

“Thank you.” Her mother smiled at her. “I love you too. And you’ll thank me when you’re a duchess with your own château.”

“I think I hate you,” Amelia said with a grin, kissed her, and hurried out the door to go back to her dorm. July was so far away, it didn’t seem real anyway.

Jane filled out the form that night, wrote the check, and mailed it from her office in the morning. She was absolutely certain that the ball at Versailles was going to be amazing, and Amelia was going to love it.