

DANIELLE STEEL

TRIAL BY FIRE

A NOVEL



By Danielle Steel

TRIAL BY FIRE • JOY • RESURRECTION • ONLY THE BRAVE • NEVER TOO LATE •
UPSIDE DOWN • THE BALL AT VERSAILLES • SECOND ACT • HAPPINESS • PALAZZO •
THE WEDDING PLANNER • WORTHY OPPONENTS • WITHOUT A TRACE • THE
WHITTIER • THE HIGH NOTES • THE CHALLENGE • SUSPECTS • BEAUTIFUL • HIGH
STAKES • INVISIBLE • FLYING ANGELS • THE BUTLER • COMPLICATIONS • NINE
LIVES • FINDING ASHLEY • THE AFFAIR • NEIGHBORS • ALL THAT GLITTERS •
ROYAL • DADDY'S GIRLS • THE WEDDING DRESS • THE NUMBERS GAME • MORAL
COMPASS • SPY • CHILD'S PLAY • THE DARK SIDE • LOST AND FOUND • BLESSING IN
DISGUISE • SILENT NIGHT • TURNING POINT • BEAUCHAMP HALL • IN HIS
FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS • THE GOOD FIGHT • THE CAST • ACCIDENTAL HEROES •
FALL FROM GRACE • PAST PERFECT • FAIRYTALE • THE RIGHT TIME • THE
DUCHESS • AGAINST ALL ODDS • DANGEROUS GAMES • THE MISTRESS • THE
AWARD • RUSHING WATERS • MAGIC • THE APARTMENT • PROPERTY OF A
NOBLEWOMAN • BLUE • PRECIOUS GIFTS • UNDERCOVER • COUNTRY • PRODIGAL
SON • PEGASUS • A PERFECT LIFE • POWER PLAY • WINNERS • FIRST SIGHT • UNTIL
THE END OF TIME • THE SINS OF THE MOTHER • FRIENDS FOREVER • BETRAYAL •
HOTEL VENDÔME • HAPPY BIRTHDAY • 44 CHARLES STREET • LEGACY • FAMILY
TIES • BIG GIRL • SOUTHERN LIGHTS • MATTERS OF THE HEART • ONE DAY AT A
TIME • A GOOD WOMAN • ROGUE • HONOR THYSELF • AMAZING GRACE •
BUNGALOW 2 • SISTERS • H.R.H. • COMING OUT • THE HOUSE • TOXIC BACHELORS •
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PRETTY MINNIE IN PARIS

PRETTY MINNIE IN HOLLYWOOD

DANIELLE STEEL

Trial by Fire

A Novel



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To my beloved children,
Beatrix, Trevor, Todd, Samantha,
Victoria, Vanessa, Maxx, and Zara,

Be happy, be brave, be safe,
and take the right risks.

Make wise choices about who you love,
and when you find the right person,
put all your chips on the table,
winner take all!

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

Maybe love isn't possible unless
you're willing to take a risk.
Maybe that's what makes it
worthwhile.

You can't love someone unless
you put all the cards on the table,
and all the chips,
and you're all in.

–D.S.

Chapter 1

Dahlia Johnson de Beaumont sat in her elegantly designed office in the building she owned on the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris, on a warm day in late June, and consulted her list of appointments and the calls she had to make that morning. She was the CEO of the venerable, highly successful perfume firm she had inherited as an only child. It had been founded by her maternal grandfather, Louis Lambert. Dahlia's mother, Constance Lambert Johnson, also an only child, had inherited it from her father, the founder. Constance had passed away when Dahlia was in college in New York. She had bequeathed the company in its entirety to Dahlia. Dahlia had always known she would inherit the business one day. It was expected. She just didn't know it would happen so soon. She had a normal, happy childhood, except that her career path had been chosen for her, almost like royalty in a way.

They were one of the most important perfume manufacturers in the world. Louis Lambert Perfumes were as well-known as Guerlain, and followed as many of the original traditions of perfume-making as was possible at a time when some natural ingredients were no longer available or legal and had been replaced by synthetics. It was a technical challenge, but as much as was possible, and with great care, their perfumes appeared to be unchanged.

Dahlia's mother, Constance, was a gentle, genteel woman. She had never worked in the firm, once she'd inherited it, but she had a deep love for the company her father had founded. It was run by the competent directors, executives, and managers her father had put in place before his death at eighty-seven. Their perfumes were in some way old-fashioned, or traditional, and yet they had been subtly adapted to the modern world and to what women wanted today. Many new scents had been added to the originals, which were popular around the globe. The managing board of directors had run Lambert during Constance's entire ownership. Her husband, Hunter Johnson, had been on the board, was one of the overseers of the company, and had protected Constance's interests and invested the company's assets wisely. He had suggested several times to Constance that they go public, but she had preferred to maintain private ownership. She knew her father would have wanted that, just as the Dumas family kept Hermès private, and the Wertheimer family owned Chanel. Lambert was easily as profitable as Hermès, and had stores where their perfumes were sold around the world.

Hunter, Constance's husband, was American. They had met at a party at the American embassy in Paris, and he had been dazzled by her. He was twenty-five years older than Constance when they met. She was twenty-one, one of the most beautiful young women in Paris, and he was a childless widower of forty-six. He was one of the early founders of venture capital. They married within the year they met, and Dahlia was born in New York a year later. Hunter advised Constance brilliantly on the company's investments during her ownership of Lambert. Her death while Dahlia was in college in the States was a heartbreaking blow to Dahlia and her father. He adored his wife, and Dahlia and her mother were very close.

Constance and Hunter had lived in New York in the early days of their marriage, and Dahlia attended private school there. They remained in New York until Dahlia went to college, Hunter retired, and he and Constance moved to Paris. They had gone back and forth to Paris frequently before that, and Dahlia was equally comfortable in Paris or New York, in English or in French while she was growing up. She had strong family ties to France, and

had spent her early years in New York, with summers spent in their summer home in Saint-Paul-de-Vence in the south of France, and once she was in college, she worked at the Lambert offices in Paris for a month every summer and loved it.

Two years after they moved to Paris, Constance had died of breast cancer at forty-two. It had gone undetected until too late. Her mother had died of it at an early age too. Dahlia had inherited the Lambert empire at twenty, finished college at Columbia, attended the Wharton business school, moved to her parents' house in Paris, and entered the company she owned at twenty-four. The people who had run it until then taught her what she needed to know. They had been grooming her to run the company for years. Her grandfather had begun talking to her about the business since she was a child. She was fascinated by it. She benefited from his managers' experience and her father's wise financial advice for a year, as she was assigned to lower-level jobs where she could learn the business from the bottom up, just as she had expected to.

Hunter Johnson died suddenly at seventy-two, less than a year after Dahlia came home to France, five years after his wife had died. He had never recovered from the loss of Constance. Even his deep love for his daughter didn't raise his spirits once his beloved Constance died. He had developed a heart condition which killed him in the end.

Dahlia was an orphan, and the sole owner of one of the most profitable businesses in the world, just before her twenty-fifth birthday. Slim, graceful, blond, green-eyed, she had been taught everything she needed to know about the business by experts, and she had strong support from the managers and the Board, but nothing had prepared her for losing her parents' world. They had been the source of joy and emotional support, wisdom and love, for her entire life, and without them she felt lost. Her father had died of a heart attack with no warning. She stood alone at his funeral with the church of Sainte-Clothilde full to the rafters. She continued to live in her parents' house in Paris, and felt like a lost soul.

Her father had died a year after she had graduated from business school at Wharton and gone to live in Paris. At the same time, she ran into Jean-Luc de Beaumont a month after her return from graduate school. He was a childhood friend. His family had spent their summers in Saint-Paul-de-Vence too. They saw each other every summer in the south of France and had known each other all their lives. He was comfortable and familiar.

Dahlia was a perfect hybrid, a combination of two cultures, two countries, and two worlds. Her look and style and attitudes were more French than American because of her mother's influence, but she had grown up in New York, been educated in the U.S., and had an American perspective about business, based on what her American father had taught her. It was an ideal combination. She had the romance and femininity of a Frenchwoman, and the education of an American businesswoman, which she brought back to France with her. She was a dual national, and felt at home in both countries, although she privately admitted that her heart was more French, and she felt stronger ties to France once she lived and worked in her business there. France was home to her now, and with her father's death, her ties to the United States evaporated. Since he'd been much older than her mother, he had no living relatives during her lifetime. And once he was gone, she had no adult family members to protect and guide her, but she was a sensible young woman with a fine mind, and her parents had taught her values that served her well. She was a woman of integrity, substance, and power at a young age.

When they reconnected, Jean-Luc de Beaumont added an element of joy and levity to her life. He had a lighthearted attitude about most things. He had studied in France, but never seriously. He preferred the outdoors and extreme athletic challenges to intellectual or academic pursuits. His passions were ski racing, driving fast cars, mountain climbing, and anything dangerous and exciting that gave him an adrenaline rush. He was as handsome and dashing as Dahlia was beautiful, and an only child like her. They were the same age, and his family's fortune allowed him the luxury of not having to work, and Dahlia was financially independent. Being with him counterbalanced her awesome responsibilities and the strong sense of duty

that had been part of what she'd inherited along with Louis Lambert Perfumes. She was serious about her obligations to the family name, which was a heavy burden at times.

Being with Jean-Luc made everything seem brighter and more exciting, and his parents always welcomed her warmly. He became her first serious love. They married six months after her father's death. He moved into her large family house in Paris with her, which she had inherited too and wanted to keep. They were children playing at marriage with youthful innocence. They had fun together and were in constant evidence on the Parisian social scene, with doors open to them everywhere. They were the golden couple of the hour. By day, Dahlia went to work to learn more about the business her mother had left her, and her father had felt confident she would run with great competence one day. She had a good head for business and a flawless instinct for perfume, like her grandfather. She hired some of the great perfume makers in the business.

She learned her job well while adoring Jean-Luc and encouraging and celebrating his adventures. She loved how fearless he was. They opened their hearts to each other without reserve, and their first child, Charles, was born on their first anniversary. They were both twenty-six when he was born. Their life was full, with the vast empire Dahlia was learning to run by day, and the fun they had at night, going to parties, seeing friends, and holding balls in their splendid home on the rue de Grenelle. It was one of the most distinguished, beautiful homes in Paris. Dahlia had spent a great deal of time there as a child, so she knew it well. It was familiar and home to her. And she traveled often for business to their stores around the world, to better understand their customers.

When they brought Charles home from the hospital in Paris, they put him in the nursery that had once been hers as a visitor, and her mother's as an infant. Dahlia and Jean-Luc filled the house rapidly, despite the demands of her job. Dahlia gave birth to a baby every year for the first four years of their marriage. Alexandra arrived less than a year after Charles, Delphine thirteen months later, and Emma fourteen months after that. And all the while, Jean-

Luc continued his mountain climbing, ski races, and car racing. Even marriage, fatherhood, and four babies couldn't slow him down. He was the consummate aristocrat going to shoots in Spain, hunts in England, and balls in Venice. He learned to fly his own plane. They were the golden years of the 1990s when everything was about having fun, and there was plenty of money to do it. Dahlia's business was booming, although Jean-Luc took no interest in it. Dahlia loved working, and Jean-Luc admired her for it. It didn't bother him that she did. It gave him more free time to pursue his passions. She made her work seem effortless at night when she came home, and what she was learning energized her. Emma was born on her mother's twenty-ninth birthday, and by then Dahlia was CEO of the company, the youngest CEO in France, while Jean-Luc roamed around Europe, visiting his equally aristocratic friends and having fun. Dahlia never objected to his carefree life. She loved him as he was, beautiful and brave and wild, while she had all the responsibility for them both, which suited her. No one in his family had ever worked, so they thought him normal and Dahlia unusual.

He was staying with friends in Courchevel in the French Alps when they decided to ski the Three Valleys, enjoying the trails that were familiar to him and that he knew well, when disaster struck. He and his two friends went out early one morning before the mountains had been cleared with dynamite, to shake loose the excess snow and provoke avalanches so no one would get hurt later. They went out ahead of the dynamite squads and were buried by an avalanche. Dahlia was in Paris, working, but had promised to come that weekend, bringing the children and a nanny with her. The ski patrol found Jean-Luc and his friends three hours later. His friends survived, but Jean-Luc was dead from suffocation under the deep snow and his neck was broken. Dahlia became a widow at thirty after five years of marriage and with four young children under five.

She was devastated when the police called her in the office to tell her. She was in shock when the company's driver took her to Courchevel to identify her husband's body and they followed the hearse home to Paris a day later. Jean-Luc was the love of her life, and the only family she had, other than

their children. It brought back all the painful memories of her mother's death ten years before, and her father's five years later. Dahlia had thought that she and Jean-Luc would grow old together. She had imagined them with their grown children around them, and their children's children. And now that wasn't going to happen. They had talked of having two more children, or even four. Jean-Luc never balked at the size of their family because Dahlia made it so easy for him, with nannies taking care of the children while she worked, and she loved taking care of them herself on the weekends. Like everything else she did, she made it look effortless.

Jean-Luc was the joy in their lives, the magic. She was the responsibility and made things run smoothly. She had never expected him to leave them at thirty.

She managed to organize his funeral, and barely remembered it later. She was traumatized to the depths of her soul. She couldn't eat, she couldn't sleep, she couldn't think. She felt like a ghost in her own home, while trying to be present for the children. Charlie and Alexandra were barely old enough to understand that their exciting, happy, fun father wasn't coming home again, and Delphine and Emma were too young to tell. Dahlia had to bear her soul-wrenching grief alone, and be strong for them.

Jean-Luc had been an only child, and his parents were devastated. Having had him late in life, after many stillbirths and miscarriages, he was their miracle. His mother was in her seventies, his father in his eighties now, and they turned into very old people overnight, as though someone had turned out the light in them. They had always been kind and welcoming to Dahlia, but she and the children were a painful reminder of their lost son. They took to traveling to escape the memories for what remained of their lives. Neither of them lived long after the tragic loss of their only child.

It was up to Dahlia to keep the family going, to keep them together, comfort them, give them strength even while she felt empty and broken herself.

Three weeks after Jean-Luc died, she went back to work, still in terrible pain and trying to create a new normal for the children without him. It was a

very long time before she felt even remotely normal herself, and even laughed at something Charlie said.

She knew that she would never be the same again. The loss was too enormous, and she felt as though he had taken a part of her with him, the fun part. What was left was duty. She was the single mother of four children who needed her, and the CEO of her own business, which needed her too. It seemed like a long time before she could concentrate on anything again. She just worked doubly hard to compensate for it.

Jean-Luc had died without a will, since he was so young. Death hadn't crossed his mind at thirty, despite the dangerous sports he pursued. According to French law, what money he had was divided in five equal parts for her and the children, and she had her part reapportioned to the children. She wanted them to have it, and she didn't need it. Although he had played well on it, his fortune was much smaller than Dahlia's, which was enormous due to the lucrative business she owned.

She brought the children up alone, enjoying their company, cherishing the time she spent with them and shepherding them gently toward the business she hoped the four of them would run one day. As they grew up, she taught them about Lambert's history, and all about how fine, high-quality perfumes were made and marketed.

Dahlia couldn't imagine ever loving a man again as she had Jean-Luc, so she embraced her children instead. She turned down all social invitations for a year after he died. She had no desire to go to parties, or any kind of social gathering, once he was gone. For years, her days were occupied by Lambert Perfumes, her evenings, weekends, and holidays by her children. Taking care of her children when she had time allowed her to hide from the fact that the years were passing. The children met all her emotional needs, as she met theirs, and she never felt alone as long as she was with them. Motherhood was an easy place to hide by night, and business by day. The children became a substitute for the husband she had lost. She never had to go home to an empty house, as they were always waiting for her with open arms. There was no sweeter moment in her life than being with them. The memories of her

passion for Jean-Luc faded with time, and he became a hero to all of them, more than he had been in life. His parents had died by then, so her children had no grandparents. They only had her, as she had only them as family.

She occasionally had dinners with men, but none of them ever measured up to her glamorous idolized memories of Jean-Luc. He was the biggest and bravest of men, and had suited her when they were young, though he might not have later, as she grew into her business and the demanding role of CEO of an enormous international enterprise.

She was nearly forty, ten years after his death, when romance entered her life again, with a man she took seriously for a short time. The romance faded quickly, when she realized that he was more interested in what she could do for him than who she was as a person. She saw it within a few months and ended the relationship. He also had no desire to share her with another man's children and made it clear. Her family was her priority, and then her work.

After that, Dahlia never introduced her children to the men she went out with. She didn't care enough about the men, or she would have. She always kept herself aloof and guarded her heart. There was no room for passion or a misstep in her life. She had her massive business to run, her children to love and to love her. She needed nothing else.

She was more excited by her business every year. In a major decision to expand, she had added cosmetics to the perfumes, which proved to be an immensely profitable decision. Dahlia made few mistakes in business, and when she did, she corrected them quickly. She did the same with men. She never got too attached, and when she sensed she was starting to care too much, she retreated. She let nothing interfere with her family or her dedication to the empire she had inherited and that had grown exponentially due to her hard work.

There were men on the fringes of her life, but no one she cared about intensely, and her brief affairs were discreet, remained below the radar, and attracted no attention. She went to most events alone and preferred it. She

could leave whenever she wanted if she had a heavy workload in the office the next day.

On Dahlia's fiftieth birthday, friends gave a dinner for her at a discreet, elite club. Like the Dumas family of Hermès, and the Wertheimers of Chanel, she kept a low profile and preferred to stay out of sight, although she was still beautiful, professionally powerful, and didn't look her age. She didn't enjoy public attention and stayed out of the press whenever possible. She had no desire to be famous or even personally known to the public. Her privacy meant more to her.

There was a man at the dinner whom she'd never met before. Philippe Vernier was the CEO of a major French corporation that did a great deal of business in Asia, a major market for her as well, and they talked about it at dinner, and found that they had a lot in common, and even some mutual friends in Paris and Hong Kong. He was the head of a major luxury brand of clothing, which wasn't entirely unrelated to her world, and his company dabbled in cosmetics too, though not on the scale that Dahlia did. He was obviously impressed by her talents. He knew who she was and had read about her. She was a legend in the business world. They had a pleasant evening talking to each other, mostly about their work, and he invited her to dinner the following week. He wore no wedding band, and never mentioned a family on that evening or the several others that followed. She had to discreetly call a friend who knew him to find out if he was married. She got no clues from him.

Dahlia was disappointed to discover that in fact he was married, which in her mind made him ineligible for a romance. Until then, she had found him very attractive, but considerably less so once she knew his marital status. He was not unique in Paris society, or the French business milieu. He was one of many men who didn't want to go through a costly divorce but had long since abandoned the pretense of a marriage that still worked. These men no longer shared their lives with the women they were married to. Philippe Vernier was a prime example of the breed. Distinguished, well educated at the best French academic institutions, successful, charming, cultured, vital and

powerful, and still handsome at fifty-eight, he gave off the vibes of a single man during his evenings with her, but he wasn't. On the fourth or fifth evening they spent together, he explained simply and directly that he and his wife Jacqueline had married at an early age. It had been a union that had pleased their families, but a romance that had evaporated quickly, and a mistake that had left them each with a partner they had no lasting attraction to, and nothing in common with.

He had an only son, Julien, whom he said he wasn't close to, and who was a spoiled boy with no real ambition and a weakness for Russian gold diggers. Philippe admitted that he spent little time with his son and hadn't been an attentive father. His wife spent most of her time traveling, preferred London to Paris, and was more interested in the horse shows, hunts, and house parties she attended in England than she was in life at home. They had long since agreed to lead separate, independent lives, while officially living at the same address, and being in the same city and sleeping under the same roof as seldom as possible. Philippe said the arrangement worked well. The only time they spent together was on their summer holiday in the south of France with their son at Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat. The rest of the time Philippe was free to do as he wanted.

Dahlia was leery of what he said at first, but in the next few months of dining with him more and more frequently, she found it to be true. She had never dated a married man before, and didn't like the idea, but the reality was simpler than she had feared. He was always good company. In the past six years, he and Dahlia had been seen together often at important social events. They were not an official couple but were an accepted unofficial one. It wasn't a passionate love affair, but their relationship had grown into a comfortable, compatible alliance for both of them. They lived in their own homes, spent weekends together regularly, when they wanted to, spent the evening together twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays, and took vacations together once or twice a year, if they had the time and both liked the destination. Philippe and Jacqueline had never discussed his