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Danielle Steel

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LONE EAGLE

DANIELLE STEEL

IRRESISTIBLE
FORCES

A Dell Book

To my very, very wonderful children,

*Beatrix, Trevor, Todd, Nick, Samantha,
Victoria, Vanessa, Maxx, and Zara.*

*And with special thanks to Tom,
for the red herring and the green shoe,
and our own irresistible forces.*

*With all my love,
d.s.*

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IT WAS A brilliantly sunny day in New York, and the temperature had soared over the hundred mark long before noon. You could have fried an egg on the sidewalk. Kids were screaming, people were sitting on stoops and in doorways, and leaning against walls beneath tattered awnings. Both hydrants on the corner of 125th Street and Second Avenue had been opened and water was cascading from them, as squealing children ran through it. There was an ankle-deep river running through the gutter. At four in the afternoon, it seemed as though half the neighborhood was standing around in the heat, talking and watching the kids. And suddenly at four ten, shots rang out in the noise of the talk and laughter and the sound of rushing water. They weren't an unfamiliar sound in that part of town, and everyone stopped as they heard them. People seemed to pause motionless for a moment, waiting for what would come next. They pulled back into doorways, shrank against walls, and two mothers ran forward into the geyser of water from one of the hydrants and grabbed their children. But before they could regain the safety of the doorway, another burst of shots rang out, this time louder and closer, and three young men ran into the midst of the crowd standing near the hydrant. They knocked over kids as they ran, and hit a young woman so hard she fell sprawling in the water, and suddenly there were screams as two cops appeared, running around the corner, in hot pursuit of the young men, guns drawn, bullets flying into the crowd.

It all happened so fast, no one had time to clear a path for them, or to warn each other, and in the distance there were already sirens. And over the distant wail of police cars approaching the scene, there was another round of gunshots, and this time one of the young men fell to the ground, bleeding from his shoulder, at the same time one of his companions wheeled and shot a police officer cleanly through the head, and suddenly a little girl screamed and fell to the ground in the fierce spray from the hydrant, and everyone nearby was shouting and running in all directions, as her mother ran to her from the doorway where she'd been watching in horror, as the child fell.

And an instant later, the chase was over. Two of the young men were lying facedown on the ground being handcuffed by a flock of policemen, an officer lay dead, and the third suspect was being tended to by paramedics. But only a few feet away, a child lay dying from the bullet that had hit her. It had passed cleanly through her chest, and she was bleeding profusely, as her mother knelt next to her, soaked by the continuing spray from the fire hydrant, and sobbing hysterically as she held her unconscious child in her arms, and the paramedics wrested the five-year-old girl from her. Within less than a minute, she was in an ambulance, and they pulled her mother in with her, still crying and dazed. It was a scene a lot of them had seen dozens of times before, if not hundreds, but one that only meant something when you knew the people at the core of the drama, the perpetrators, or the victims. The ones who got arrested, or those who got injured or killed.

There was a vast tangle of cars at the corner of 125th, as the ambulance tried to disengage from them, with siren screaming and lights flashing. And people stood on the street looking stunned by what had happened. A second ambulance took the injured suspect from the scene, and blue-and-white cars seemed to come from everywhere as they heard on the radio that an officer was down. People in the neighborhood knew what it would mean for them once word

got out that he had been killed. Tempers would flare, and smoldering resentments would burst into flame. Worse yet, in the deadly heat, anything could happen. This was Harlem, it was August, life was tough, and a cop had been murdered.

And in the ambulance, as it sped downtown, Henrietta Washington clung to her child's hand, and watched in silent terror as the paramedics fought for her life. But for the moment it didn't look like they were winning. The little girl was gray and still and her blood was everywhere, the floor, the sheets, her arms, the gurney, her mother's face and dress and hands. It looked like a slaughter. And for what? She was another casualty in the endless war between the cops and the bad guys, gang members, drug dealers, and narcs. She was a pawn in a game she knew nothing about, a tiny sacrifice among warriors whose goal was to destroy each other. Dinella Washington meant nothing to them, only to her friends and neighbors, her sisters, and her mother. She was the oldest of four children her mother had had between sixteen and twenty, but no matter how poor they were, nor how tough life was for them, in the neighborhood in which they fought to survive, her mother loved her.

"Is she gonna die?" Henrietta asked in a strangled voice, her huge eyes looking into those of a paramedic, and he didn't answer. He didn't know.

"We're doing what we can, ma'am." Henrietta Washington was twenty-one years old. She was a stereotype, a number, a statistic, but she was so much more than that. She was a woman, a girl, a mother. She wanted more than this for her kids. She wanted a job, wanted to work, wanted to be married to a good man one day, who loved and took care of her and her children. But she had never met a man like that. Her kids were all she had for the moment, and she had nothing to give them but her love.

She had a boyfriend who took her to dinner once in a while, with three kids of his own for support. He hadn't been able to find a job in six months, and drank too much when he took her out. There were no easy solutions for either of them, just welfare, an odd job from time to time, and a hand-to-mouth existence. Neither of them had finished high school, and they lived in a war zone. And the life they led, and where they lived it, was a death sentence for their children.

The ambulance screeched to a stop outside the hospital, and the paramedics raced out with Dinella on the gurney. She had an IV in her arm, an oxygen mask over her face, and Henrietta knew was that she was still breathing, but barely. She ran into the emergency room after her, in her bloodstained dress, and she couldn't even get near her little girl. A dozen nurses and residents had closed around the child and were running down the hall with her to the trauma unit, as Henrietta followed, wanting to ask someone what was happening, what they were going to do. She wanted to know if Dinella would be all right. A thousand questions raced through her head as someone stuck a clipboard and pen in front of her face.

"Sign this!" the nurse said bluntly.

"What is it?" Henrietta looked panicked.

"We have to operate—fast—sign it!" Henrietta did as she was told, and a second later, she was standing alone in the hallway, watching other gurneys rush past, and nurses and doctors in hospital scrubs hurry toward operating rooms and other patients. She felt completely lost and terrified as she stood there and began to sob in total panic. And a nurse in green hospital

pajamas came toward her and put an arm around her. She led her to a little cluster of chairs, sat her down, and crouched beside her to reassure her in a gentle voice.

“They’re going to do everything they can for your daughter.” But the nurse had already heard that the child was in very critical condition and not likely to survive.

“What are they going to do to her?”

“They’re going to try and repair the wound and stop the bleeding. She lost a lot of blood before she got here.” It was a massive understatement. Just looking at the condition the child’s mother was in, they both knew how dire the situation was. Henrietta was covered with blood.

“They shot her ... they just shot her....” She didn’t even know if it was the police or the men they’d been chasing who had done it. It didn’t matter now. If Dinella died, what did it matter who had killed her? Good guys or bad.

As the two women held hands and Henrietta cried quietly with a look of despair, the nurse could hear the PA system paging Dr. Steven Whitman. He was second in command in the trauma unit, and one of the best men in trauma in New York, and she said as much to Henrietta. “If anyone can save her, he will. He’s the best there is. You’re lucky he’s on call.” But Henrietta didn’t feel lucky. She had never felt lucky in her entire life. Her father had died when she was a child, gunned down in a street fight just like this one. Her mother had brought her and her sisters and brothers to New York, but their life here was no different. They had just taken their troubles from one place to another. But nothing much had changed. If anything, their life in New York was worse. They had moved to New York so their mother could find better work, but she hadn’t. All they had found was the tough life they lived in Harlem, a life of poverty and no hope for a better tomorrow.

The nurse offered Henrietta some water or a cup of coffee, but she just shook her head and sat miserably in her chair, still crying and looking as terrified as she felt, as a huge wall clock ticked away the minutes. It was five minutes to five by then.

And at five o’clock sharp, Dr. Steven Whitman exploded into the operating room, and was rapidly filled in by the resident who’d been in charge until he arrived. Steve Whitman was tall and powerful and intense, with short dark hair and eyes that looked like two black rocks in an angry face. It was his second gunshot wound of the afternoon, the previous one having died at two o’clock, a fifteen-year-old boy who had managed to shoot three rival gang members before they shot and eventually killed him. Steve had done everything he could to save him, but it was too late. At least Dinella Washington had a chance. Maybe. But according to the resident, it was a slim one. Her lung had been perforated, and the bullet had grazed her heart before it exited, and caused an extensive amount of damage. But even listening to the grim recital, Steve Whitman was not willing to give up hope yet.

Steve barked orders at them for an hour, as he fought to keep the child alive, and when they started losing her, he massaged her heart himself for more than ten minutes. He fought like a tiger to keep her going. But the deck was stacked against them. The damage had been too great, the child too small, the odds too slim, the evil forces more powerful than even his expertise or his scalpel. Dinella Washington died at 6:01 as Steve Whitman let out a long, grim sigh. Without a word, he walked away from the operating table, and pulled his surgical mask

off with a look of fury. He hated days like this, hated losing anyone, particularly a child who was nothing more than an innocent victim. He had even hated losing the boy who had shot three people before they killed him. He hated all of it. The uselessness of it. The waste. The despair. The pointless destruction of human life. And yet when he won, as he often did, it seemed worthwhile, the long hours, the endless days that ran into even longer nights. He didn't care how long he stayed or how hard he worked as long as he won some of the time.

He threw away his surgical gloves, washed his hands, took off his cap, and looked in the mirror. What he saw was the fatigue of the last seventy-one hours he had spent on duty. He tried to work no more than forty-eight-hour shifts of being on call and on duty. It was a nice thought, but it rarely worked out that way. You couldn't exactly punch a time clock in the trauma unit. And he knew what he had to do now. He had to tell the child's mother. A muscle tensed in his jaw as he walked out of the surgical area, and headed toward where he knew the child's mother would be. He felt like the Angel of Death as he walked toward her, knowing that his was a face she would never forget, at a moment in time that would haunt her for the rest of her life. He remembered the child's name, as he did all of them for a time, and knew that he would be haunted as well. He would remember the case, the circumstances, the outcome, and wish it could have been different. As little as he knew his patients, he cared about them above all.

"Mrs. Washington?" he asked, after a nurse at the desk had pointed him in her direction and she nodded, her eyes full of fear. "I'm Dr. Whitman." He had done this for a long time, too long he thought sometimes. It was all becoming too familiar. He knew he had to say it fast, in order not to hold out a hope he could no longer give her. "I've got bad news about your daughter." There was a sharp intake of breath as Henrietta saw his face, his eyes, and she knew even before he said the words to her. "She died five minutes ago." He gently touched her arm as he said it, but she was unaware of his touch or even his compassion. All she had heard were his words ... she died ... she died.... "We did everything we could, but the bullet did too much damage both on entry and exit." He felt both foolish and cruel giving her those details. What difference did it make what the bullet had done and when? All that mattered was that it had killed her child. Another casualty in the hopeless war they lived. Another statistic. "I'm so sorry." She was clutching at him then, her eyes wild, fighting to breathe after the impact of the news he had just dealt her like a blow. It was as though he had hit her with a fist in her solar plexus. "Why don't you sit down for a minute?" She had stood up to hear the news as he approached her, and now she looked as though she were about to faint. Her eyes rolled, and he lowered her back into the chair, and signaled to a nurse to bring her a glass of water.

The nurse brought it quickly, and the child's mother couldn't drink. She made terrible, airless, strangled sounds as she tried to absorb what he had told her, and Steve Whitman felt as though he had been the killer, instead of the man with the gun. He would have liked to be the savior, and sometimes he was. There were wives and mothers and husbands who threw themselves around his neck with gratitude and relief, but not this time. He hated the losses so much. And too often, the deck was stacked against him.

He stayed with Henrietta Washington for as long as he could, and then left her to the nurses. He'd been paged again, for a fourteen-year-old who had fallen out of a second-story

window. He was in surgery for four hours with her, and at ten thirty he walked out of the operating room, hoping he had saved her, and finally made it to his office for the first time in hours. It was the quiet part of the night for him, usually the really bad cases didn't start to come in till after midnight. He grabbed a cup of cold coffee off his desk, and two stale Oreos and cookies. He hadn't had time to eat since breakfast. He'd been on duty officially for forty-eight hours, and had done another forty-eight as a favor to one of his colleagues whose wife was in labor. He was long overdue to go home, but hadn't been able to break away until then. He had a stack of papers on his desk to sign, and he knew that as soon as he did, he could go home. There was already another doctor on duty to take his place. And as he heaved a long sigh, he reached for the phone. He knew Meredith would still be up, or maybe even still in the office. He knew how busy she'd been for the past few weeks, and he wasn't sure if she'd still be in meetings, or if she'd finally gone home.

The phone rang once, and she answered. Her voice was as calm and cool as Meredith herself. They were a good balance for each other. She had always matched Steve's volcanic intensity with her own special brand of silky smoothness. No matter how crazy things got, Meredith always seemed to stay calm in the heat of crisis. She was quiet and elegant and cool. Her entire being was a contrast to her husband.

"Hello?" She had suspected it would be Steve, but she was in the midst of a huge deal, and it could have been someone in her office calling her at that hour. She had in fact gone home. Meredith Smith Whitman was a partner in one of Wall Street's most respected investment banking firms, and highly respected in her field. She lived and breathed and ate the world of high finance, just as Steve was totally engulfed by his work in trauma. And they each loved what they did. For each of them, it was an all-consuming passion.

"Hi, it's me." He sounded tired and sad, but relieved that she had answered.

"You sound beat," she said, sympathetic and concerned.

"I am." But he smiled as he heard her. "Just another day at the office. Or three of them, actually."

It was Friday night, and he hadn't seen her since Tuesday morning. They had lived that way for years. They were used to it, and had long since learned how to work and live around it. She was all too familiar with his crazy two- and three-day shifts, the emergencies that dragged him back to work only hours after he finally got home. But they each had a healthy respect for the other's work. They had met and married when he was a resident and she was in grad school. It had been fourteen years, and sometimes, to Steve at least, it seemed more like weeks. He was still as crazy in love with her as he had been in the beginning, and their marriage was a marriage that worked well for both of them, for a variety of reasons. They certainly didn't have time to get bored with each other, in fact they hardly had any time at all. And with their two all-consuming careers, they had never had the time or the inclination to have children, although they talked about it from time to time. It was an option neither of them had entirely ruled out yet.

"How's your big deal going?" he asked her. For the past two months she had been working on the prospectus for the initial public offering of a high-tech venture in Silicon Valley. They were going to take the company public and sell stock to people buying shares in the company. It was a hot deal for Meredith's firm, and fascinated her, although it wasn't a

prestigious as some of the bond offerings they did. But Meredith was much more interested in the firms in Silicon Valley, and the opportunities they presented than their more traditional deals in Boston and New York.

“We’re getting there,” she said, sounding a little tired. She’d been at the office until midnight the night before. It was easy for her to do that when Steve was working. He knew she was going to lead the road show for the IPO, to tell potential investors about the company and encourage them to invest, in the next month, and she’d be gone for a couple of weeks. He was hoping they’d be able to spend some time together before that, and he was going to take time off to be with her on the Labor Day weekend. “I’ve almost finished the red herring.” He knew the jargon, it was a term they all used for the prospectus, and it was called that because of the red caution-warnings required by the SEC along the outer edge of the prospectus. “When are you coming home, sweetheart?” she asked, stifling a yawn. She had just gotten home from the office, and it was nearly ten thirty.

“As soon as I sign some stuff they left for me. Have you eaten yet?” He was more interested in her than the forms he had to sign, as he sat sprawled in his office, staring at the papers on his desk.

“More or less. They threw me a sandwich a few hours ago, at the office.”

“I’ll make an omelette when I get home, or do you want me to pick something up?” Despite their heavy work schedules, Steve was usually the one who did the cooking, and he liked to brag that he cooked better than she did. And he obviously enjoyed it more. Meredith had never claimed to be particularly domestic. She’d rather eat a sandwich or a salad at her desk, than come home and whip up a four-course dinner. And he liked cooking a lot more than she ever had.

“An omelette would be great,” she smiled, listening to him. Their time apart always made her miss him, even when she was busy. Theirs was an easy, comfortable relationship, and an attraction that had never dimmed, even in the fourteen years they’d been married. They were still passionately devoted to each other, despite their demanding careers and hectic lives.

“So what happened today?” She could always hear in his voice when things hadn’t gone well. They knew each other better than most people did, and cared a lot about each other’s victories and defeats.

“I lost two kids,” he said, sounding depressed again. He couldn’t help thinking of the young black woman who had lost her daughter five hours before, and how much he would have liked things to come out differently for her. But he was a doctor, not a magician. “A fifteen-year-old kid who got in a shoot-out against a rival gang. He managed to hit three of them before he went down, but they killed him. And a little girl a few hours ago. She was an innocent bystander in a shootout between three kids and the cops in Harlem. They shot her in the chest. We operated, but she didn’t make it. I had to tell her mother, the poor woman was devastated. And after that, I operated on a fourteen-year-old who fell out a second-story window. She’s in lousy shape, but I’m pretty sure she’s going to make it.” Meredith would have hated doing what Steve did, the constant agony of the patients he saw, the despair, the losses, the heartbreak. She knew all too well what it did to him, and she could hear the toll it had taken.

“Sounds like a miserable day, sweetheart ... I’m sorry. Why don’t you come home and relax? You need it.” He hadn’t been home in three days, and he sounded exhausted and disheartened.

“Yeah, I need a break. I’ll be home in about twenty minutes. Don’t go to bed till I get there.” She smiled at the warning.

“There’s no danger of that. I came home with a full briefcase.”

“Well, park it somewhere when I get there, Mrs. Whitman. I want your full attention.” He was dying to see her. Going home to Meredith was like being on another planet from his work and all the responsibilities he had there. She was a refuge for him, a breath of fresh air and normalcy and health, a safe haven from the brutality and violence he dealt with every day. And he could hardly wait to see her. He didn’t want to come home and find her asleep or working.

“I promise you will have my full attention, Doctor. Just get your ass home.” She grinned and he smiled, envisioning her, as beautiful and sensuous as ever.

“Pour yourself a glass of wine, Merrie, and I’ll be there in a few minutes.” He was always optimistic about time, but she knew that about him.

As it turned out, he walked in the door of their apartment nearly forty minutes later. The chief resident had needed a quick consultation with him before he left, about a broken hip and pelvis on a ninety-two-year-old woman, and the fourteen-year-old who’d fallen out the window had developed complications. But Steve knew better than anyone that it was time for him to go home. He was beyond exhausted. He finished the paperwork on his desk, and signed out for the weekend. He didn’t have to be back on duty at the trauma unit until Monday, and he could hardly wait to get out, he’d had it. Enough was enough. He was so tired by the time he left, he could hardly think straight.

He hailed a cab just outside the hospital and was home ten minutes later, and as he stepped himself into the apartment, he could hear soft music playing, and smell Meredith’s perfume. It was like coming home to Heaven after three days in hell. His time with Meredith was what he lived for, but she knew he loved his work too, just as he knew how much she loved what she did.

“Merrie?” he called out to her, as he unlocked the door of the apartment, but there was no answer. She was standing in the shower when he found her, long and lanky, and blond and incredibly beautiful and graceful. She had modeled for extra money when she was in college. They had both gotten through school on scholarships. Both of them were only children, and both of them had lost their parents while they were in college. Hers in a car accident in the South of France on the first real vacation her parents had taken in twenty years, and his to cancer within six months of each other. For years now, they were not only husband and wife but they were the only family each had, and as a result they meant everything to each other.

And as she saw him, she smiled broadly, turned off the shower, and grabbed a towel. Her shoulder-length blond hair dripped water on her breasts, and her green eyes were sexy and warm. She was as happy to see him as he was to see her when he kissed her and pulled her close to him soaking wet. He didn’t care how wet she was, he just wanted to hold her.

“God, what you do to me when I come home like this ... you make me wonder why I even

go to work.”

“To save lives of course,” she said as she put her arms around his neck and glued herself to him. She made him feel refreshed and alive again, better than a vacation or a night’s sleep. He kissed her, and in spite of the grueling seventy-six hours he had just spent at the hospital, he was instantly aroused by her. She had a powerful effect on him, and had since the day they met.

“What do you want first? Me, or the omelette?” he asked with a boyish smile, and she looked at him with feigned consternation.

“That’s a pretty tough choice. I was beginning to get hungry.”

“Me too,” he grinned. “Maybe the omelette first, and then I’ll hop into the shower, and we can celebrate the fact that we’re both here for the night. I was beginning to feel like they were never going to let me out. Thank God I’m off for the weekend. I can’t believe we’ve actually got two days to spend together.” But her eyes clouded as soon as he said it.

“I get the feeling you’ve forgotten I’m leaving for California on Sunday.” She looked instantly apologetic. She hated leaving when he was off, it was so rare that they got a whole weekend together. As second in command in the trauma unit, it was pretty common for him to work weekends. And when he was off during the week, she had to be at the office. “I’ve got to go back out to meet with Callan Dow one last time before the road show. We’re getting down to the wire, and I want to go over the prospectus one more time with him in California.” She was meticulous about every detail.

“I know, don’t worry about it. I forgot.” He tried not to look disappointed, as he watched her towel-dry her hair, and then left her to go to the kitchen and cook them the omelette he had promised.

She joined him wearing a white cashmere bathrobe five minutes later. Her hair was still wet, her feet were bare, and he could glimpse that she was naked underneath the bathrobe.

“If you flash me, I’ll burn the omelette,” he warned, pouring the mixture into the pan with one hand, and then pouring himself a glass of white wine with the other. She didn’t say anything, but he looked drained. There were dark circles under his eyes, and a worn look that came from three nights of no sleep. “It’s good to be home,” he said, turning to look at her with a tired smile and unconcealed admiration. “I missed you, Merrie.”

“I missed you too,” she said, putting her arms around him as she kissed him. And then she sat down on a high leather stool at their kitchen counter. Their apartment had a sleek New York look that seemed more Meredith’s style than his. There was something very stylish about her, and everything about her exuded the aura of competence and success. Steven had the ruffled, disheveled look of a harried overworked doctor. It had been weeks since he had time to get a haircut and he hadn’t shaved in two days. He looked younger than his forty-two years, and it was hard to tell in scrubs what he would look like dressed. He was wearing mismatched athletic socks, and a battered pair of clogs that were comfortable for him to work in. It was hard to imagine him in a blazer and gray flannels and a tie, although he looked terrific when he wore them. But most of the time when he wasn’t working, he wore faded jeans and T-shirts. Most of the time, he was too tired to think about wearing much else.

“So what are we going to do tomorrow, other than sleep and make love and stay in bed

until dinner?" he said, smiling at her mischievously as he set the omelette down in front of her on a plate on the granite counter. Their kitchen was all beige and white, and looked like a magazine layout.

"All of the above sounds good to me, except I have to drop by the office to pick up some papers. And then come home and read them. They're for the meeting in California," she said apologetically, with a look of regret.

"Can't you read them on the plane?" He looked disappointed as he devoured his half of the omelette.

"I'd have to fly to Tokyo to do it. I won't work longer than I have to, I promise."

"That sounds ominous," he smiled, as he poured them each another glass of wine. It felt great to be off duty. He had no responsibilities to anyone except his wife. He couldn't wait to get to bed and make love to her, and then sleep until noon the next day. "So tell me about work. How's your IPO coming?" He knew how much her work meant to her, and her eyes danced with excitement as she answered.

"It's going to be fantastic. I can hardly wait till the road show," she said, referring to the due diligence tour where they sold the opportunity to potential investors. "I just know this is going to go over big. I talked to Dow this morning, and he's like a little kid waiting to hit home run in the play-offs. He's a nice guy. I think you'd like him. He's built the company up from nothing, and he's deservedly proud of it, and now he's taking it public. It's like a dream come true for him. It's exciting showing him how it all works."

"Make sure that's all you show him," he admonished, pointing at her with his fork, as she leaned toward him and he could see one creamy white breast exposed within her bathrobe. She laughed at what he was saying.

"This is strictly business," she said confidently. For her, it always was.

"For you maybe. I just hope the guy is short, fat, and ugly and has a girlfriend who screws him blind. Sending you on the road with a guy is like waving fish at a porpoise ... pretty damn tempting, sweetheart." He looked at her admiringly. It was impossible not to notice how spectacular looking she was, and he was sure the men she worked with weren't oblivious to it either. Better yet, she was smart, and fun to be with. And she had not only held his interest for fourteen years, but still aroused his passion. No matter how tired he was, he was always anxious to get her into bed, and she loved that about him.

"Believe me, all these guys think about is their business," she reassured him. "And Callan Dow is no different. This is his baby. His dream come true. The love of his life. He wouldn't notice if I looked like Godzilla. Besides," she smiled at her husband, "I love you. I don't care if he looks like Tom Cruise, you're the guy I'm in love with."

"Good." Steve looked pleased, and then glanced at her with concern. "But now that you mention it, does he?"

"Does he what?" She looked baffled by the question. She was tired too.

"Look like Tom Cruise. Does he?"

"Of course not." She laughed, and then teased him a little. "More like Gary Cooper. Or Clark Gable."

“Very funny.” It was true, but she didn’t press the point, it was of no importance to her. “He’d just better look like Peter Lorre, or they can send some other partner on the road show with him. Besides, two weeks is too long, and I’ll get too lonely. I hate it when you’re gone that long.”

“So do I,” but that was not entirely true, and they both knew it. If the IPO was exciting enough, and she cared about the company, she loved it. She thoroughly enjoyed her business and taking companies public. “Ten cities in two weeks is not exactly a vacation.”

“You love it, and you know it.” He finished his wine, and sat back to look at her admiringly. She looked relaxed and beautiful and sexy. And he felt in desperate need of a shave and a shower. He knew he looked a mess. But when he was at the hospital, how he looked was the last thing on his mind. It only mattered when he came home to her, and even then, sometimes he was too exhausted to get dressed.

“Sometimes I love the road shows. Not always. When they’re good, they’re a lot of fun, and a lot of work. It depends on the company. But this one’s a good one. The stock is going to go through the roof.” Steve knew they made high-tech medical diagnostic equipment, some of which the CEO, Callan Dow, had invented himself. Steve knew from Meredith that Callan Dow’s father had been a small-town surgeon and had wanted his son to be a surgeon too. But instead, Callan had been fascinated by business and high-tech inventions, and had set up his company to make high-tech surgical instruments instead. Steven knew his products and had been impressed with them, but he wasn’t particularly interested in the stock, no matter how impressive Meredith said the company was. Steve let Meredith handle all of their finances after all it was what she did best. And he knew nothing about it.

She put the dishes in the dishwasher. Steve went to take a shower, and a few minutes later she turned off the lights and met him in their bedroom. It was well after midnight, and they were both tired, and he found her in bed a few minutes later. He slipped into bed next to her and she smiled as he took her in his arms and held her close. She could easily feel how much he wanted her, and it was entirely mutual. She kissed him, and then gave a soft moan as he began to caress her. And within minutes both the hospital and her public offering were forgotten. All that mattered just then was the private world that they shared and thrived in.

ON SATURDAY MORNING, when Steve woke up, Meredith had already left for the office. She thought she could get downtown and back before he woke up. But he was sitting in a towel, fresh from the shower, reading *The New York Times* when she walked back into the apartment in white slacks and a white T-shirt, carrying her briefcase.

“You don’t look old enough to be an investment banker,” he said with a smile when he saw her, and she set her briefcase down next to the couch. She looked happy and relaxed; the night before had been as good as it always was, maybe even better. Their sex life had always been four star, and they both enjoyed it, when they saw each other, which was always too rare. Sometimes she wondered if their erratic schedules kept the romance alive for them, and made them hungrier for each other than most couples were after fourteen years of marriage.

“How about going out to lunch?” It was still hot, but he was longing to get out in the air and go somewhere with her. “Tavern on the Green?”

“That would be fun,” she said, feeling only slightly guilty. She had to get her reading done but she knew she could always do it later. She knew how much he needed relief and distraction after being on duty for three days. He needed a counterpoint to the misery he saw there, and he expected her to join him. She didn’t have the heart to tell him that she needed to work.

He made a reservation and at noon they went out hand in hand, and were startled by how much hotter it had gotten. The heat of the New York summer was stifling, and it was so humid they could hardly breathe as they left the building.

They took a cab to the restaurant and enjoyed each other’s company over lunch. She told him more about the offering she was working on, and he listened with interest. He liked hearing about what she did. It was her one and only passion for the moment, but he loved that about her. She was amazingly single-minded and relentlessly focused when she was working on something. It was part of why she was so good at what she did, that and the fact that she had extraordinarily good judgment. She was respected at her firm for it, although Meredith sometimes felt she didn’t get the same opportunities the men did. She’d been a partner of the firm for the past four years, but more often than not, she did the lion’s share of the work, and the truly creative things, and one of the male partners got the glory. It was something that had irked her for years, but it was also the nature of some of the firms on Wall Street. She worked for what was called a “white shoe” firm, where the men kept the control of the power in their exclusive little world. It was a very old-guard way of doing business, and she knew it had its limitations for her. She had chosen to work in a male world, and to conquer their mountaintops, and they didn’t always thank her for it. In fact she was going to the West Coast with one of the more senior male partners the next day, and she was annoyed that he had insisted on coming with her. At first, no one else had wanted to work on this deal with her, and now that they sensed how important it was going to be, they were trying to climb on the bandwagon with her. But at least Callan Dow knew she had championed his cause right from the beginning.

Meredith and Steve talked about some of his problems at the hospital over coffee. He had

been the number-two man in the trauma unit for the last five years, and he was itching to run it. Harvey Lucas, the man in charge, threatened regularly to move on, but he seemed to be going nowhere. He'd been talking about moving to Boston for several years, but he just couldn't seem to tear himself away, and Steve's hands were tied until he did. He had contented himself with being the assistant head of the department. But it was the best trauma unit in the city and he had no desire to leave. And Lucas was a good friend to him.

After lunch, Steve and Meredith took a leisurely stroll through the park, listening to the Steel bands and the jazz musicians, as they wandered past the model boat pond, and watched the children play. They still talked about having children from time to time, but the prospect seemed to get more remote to them every year. Lately, Steve had been talking about it a lot, but Meredith was still not yet ready to listen. And she wasn't sure she ever would be. At thirty-seven, she was beginning to think that there would never be room in their lives for children. They were both too busy with their careers. Meredith had always been afraid that a child would somehow come between them, rather than bring them closer, as Steve was so sure it would. The very thought of a baby made Meredith feel threatened. She didn't want to be torn between a baby and her job.

The heat was still deadly, and they were both tired when they got back to the apartment and sprawled out on the couch side by side.

"How about a nice cool air-conditioned movie tonight, after I make us some dinner?" Steve looked happy and relaxed and like a different man than the one who had practically crawled into their apartment the night before after three and a half days on duty. All he had needed to revive him was some time with Meredith and a night's sleep. He already felt better and more alive.

"I can't go to the movies, Steve." She looked at him regretfully. "I have to pack, and I haven't even started my reading." She'd been out with him all afternoon.

"That's too bad," he said, looking disappointed, but he was used to it. She almost always brought work home from the office with her. "What time are you leaving?" he asked, as he sprawled out on the couch. He was wearing khaki pants and a blue shirt, and bare feet in loafers, and Meredith thought he looked unusually handsome. He would have looked better still with a tan, but he never had the time to get one. And his pale angular face somehow made his dark hair and eyes seem even darker and more intense.

"I'm on a noon flight," she explained. "I'll have to leave here around ten."

"There goes Sunday," he said, but there was nothing either of them could do about it. Business was business, and she had to see Callan Dow in California. Steve understood that.

He watched TV that night while she worked in the small den she used as an office. It was crammed with his medical books, and books she kept on recent rulings of the SEC, and an assortment of medical texts, finance books, and novels. Her computer was set up there, and Steve had one of his own, but seldom used it. In some ways, their interests were widely divergent, and always had been, and yet they were each intrigued by the other's field. But Steve always laughed about the fact that he knew virtually nothing about finance. She had a better grasp of what he did, and considerably more interest in it. But at the same time, he had a healthy respect for the fact that she earned a better living. She earned a big salary

which was something he knew he never would in his line of work. And she chafed at the fact that she didn't make more than she did, and felt she should have. But they had more than enough for their comfortable lifestyle. They had lived in the same apartment for the past five years, it was a co-op and Meredith had paid for it in full when she became a partner. Steve would have liked to contribute to it, but just plain couldn't. The disparity in their incomes had never been an issue between them, it was something they both understood and accepted. Unlike other couples, they never fought about money, just about whether or not to have kids.

She read until nearly midnight that night, and Steve was asleep in front of the TV when she finally finished. He had drunk half a bottle of wine, and was feeling relaxed and content. Meredith packed her suitcase before she woke him. It was one o'clock by then, and he was in a sound sleep when she kissed him, and he stirred.

"Let's go to bed, sweetheart. It's late. And I have to get up early tomorrow," she said softly. She knew he had called a friend that afternoon, and was going to play tennis with him after she left for the airport.

Steve followed her sleepily into the bedroom, and a few minutes later, they were in bed with their arms comfortably wrapped around each other. And five minutes later, he was snoring. They both slept soundly until six A.M., when the phone rang. It was the hospital for him. Harvey Lucas, the head of the trauma unit, was in surgery with the chief resident and two other doctors, working on four victims of a head-on collision, and they needed Steve to come in. He could refuse if he wanted to, since he wasn't on call, but he knew from what they said that they needed someone there right away, and he didn't want to let them down. He never did. And with a glance at Meredith, he told them he'd be there as soon as he could. Two of the victims were children, one was a severe head injury, and the pediatric neurosurgeon was already on his way in. The parents were both in critical condition, and they weren't sure yet if the second child would make it. His neck was broken and they thought he had a spinal cord injury. He had been in a coma since they brought him in.

"I hate to leave before you," Steve said as he climbed into jeans and pulled on a clean white T-shirt. He would change into scrubs in the hospital, and he slipped his bare feet into the clogs he wore at work.

"That's okay," she smiled sleepily at him, she was used to it, they both were. "I have to get up pretty soon anyway."

"So much for tennis, or a leisurely Sunday. I should be able to get back in a couple of hours. It was wishful thinking on his part, they both knew, and she'd be gone by then anyway. Meredith knew that once he was at the hospital, he'd stick around, and check on his other cases, and he probably wouldn't be home before midnight, if then. He might even stay overnight if there was enough for him to do, and he'd just go back on duty anyway the next morning. Although Meredith would be back Tuesday morning, he wouldn't be off duty till Wednesday, and she wouldn't see him till late that night.

"I'll call you from California." She wasn't even sure where she was staying. Callan Dow had said he'd make the arrangements for her.

"Just make sure Cary Grant, or Gary Cooper, or whoever the hell you said he looked like doesn't sweep you off your feet while I'm saving lives." He smiled, but she could see a mild

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