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One Day at a Time: A Novel

By Danielle Steel



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Coco Barrington was born into a legendary Hollywood family. Her mother, Florence, is a mega-bestselling author. Her sister, Jane, is one of Hollywood's top producers and has lived with her partner, Liz, for ten years in a solid, loving relationship. Florence, widowed but still radiant, has just begun a secret romance with a man twenty-four years her junior. But Coco, a law-school dropout and the family black sheep, works as a dog walker, having fled life in the spotlight for an artsy Northern California beach town.

When Coco reluctantly agrees to house-sit for Jane, she discovers an unexpected houseguest: Leslie Baxter, a dashing but down-to-earth British actor who's fleeing a psycho ex-girlfriend. Their worlds couldn't be more different. The attraction couldn't be more immediate. And as Coco contemplates a future with one of Hollywood's hottest stars, as her mother and sister settle into their lives, old wounds are healed and new families are formed—some traditional, some not so traditional, but all bonded by love.

With wit and intelligence, Danielle Steel's novel explores love in all its guises, taking us into the lives of three unusual but wonderfully real couples. Funny, sexy, and wise, **One Day at a Time** is at once moving, thought-provoking, and utterly impossible to put down.



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Editorial Review

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Steel does not depart from her typical formula in this latest offering, which centers on the life of Coco Barrington, a young and beautiful daughter of privilege. Much to her domineering mother's shock, Coco not only drops out of law school but also rejects her family's wealthy L.A. lifestyle. She chooses, instead, to pursue a semi-hippie existence in an artsy Northern California beach town. After her equally footloose boyfriend dies in a hang-gliding accident, she finds herself bereft but still choosing to live apart from her family, existing on her trust fund and the little she makes from her dog-walking business. One weekend, while house-sitting for her movie-producer sister, Jane, she strikes up a friendship with Jane's houseguest, Leslie Baxter, an impossibly handsome and witty British actor, who is currently in hiding from a psycho ex-girlfriend. Not surprisingly, Leslie and Coco begin to fall in love, and after overcoming a series of difficulties, they appear to be headed for "happily ever after." In addition, by the end, Coco has also begun to resolve her other familial difficulties, becoming closer to both her mother and sister. Fairly brief and lighthearted; nonetheless, Steel's fans will enjoy. --Kathleen Hughes

About the Author

Danielle Steel has been hailed as one of the world's most popular authors, with over 650 million copies of her novels sold. Her many international bestsellers include *Country*, *Prodigal Son*, *Pegasus*, *A Perfect Life*, *Power Play*, *Winners*, *First Sight*, *Until the End of Time*, *The Sins of the Mother*, and other highly acclaimed novels. She is also the author of *His Bright Light*, the story of her son Nick Traina's life and death; *A Gift of Hope*, a memoir of her work with the homeless; *Pure Joy*, about the dogs she and her family have loved; and the children's book *Pretty Minnie in Paris*.

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Chapter One

It was an absolutely perfect June day as the sun came up over the city, and Coco Barrington watched it from her Bolinas deck. She sat looking at pink and orange streak across the sky as she drank a cup of steaming Chinese tea, stretched out on an ancient, faded broken deck chair she had bought at a yard sale. A weather-worn wooden statue of Qan Ying observed the scene peacefully. Qan Ying was the goddess of compassion, and the statue had been a treasured gift. Under the benevolent gaze of Qan Ying, the pretty auburn-haired young woman sat in the golden light of the sunrise, as the early summer sun shot copper lights through her long wavy hair, which hung nearly to her waist. She was wearing an old flannel nightgown with barely discernible hearts on it, and her feet were bare. The house she lived in sat on a plateau in Bolinas, overlooking the ocean and narrow beach below. This was exactly where Coco wanted to be. She had lived here for four years. This tiny forgotten farm and beach community, less than an hour north of San Francisco, suited her perfectly at twenty-eight.

Calling her home a house was generous. It was barely more than a cottage, and her mother and sister referred to it as a hovel or, on better days, a shack. It was incomprehensible to either of them why Coco would want to live there—or how she would even tolerate it. It was their worst nightmare come true, even for her. Her mother had tried wheedling, insulting, criticizing, and even bribing her to come back to what they referred to as "civilization" in L.A. Nothing about her mother's life, or the way she had grown up, seemed "civilized" to Coco. In her opinion, everything about it was a fraud. The people, the way they lived, the goals they aspired to, the houses they lived in, and the face-lifts on every woman she knew. It all seemed artificial to her. Her

life in Bolinas was simple and real. It was uncomplicated and sincere, just like Coco herself. She hated anything fake. Not that her mother was "fake." She was polished and had an image she was careful to maintain. Her mother had been a best-selling romance novelist for the past thirty years. What she wrote wasn't fraudulent, it simply wasn't deep, but there was a vast following for her work. She wrote under the name Florence Flowers, a nom de plume from her own mother's maiden name, and she had enjoyed immense success. She was sixty-two years old and had lived a storybook life, married to Coco's father, Bernard "Buzz" Barrington, the most important literary and dramatic agent in L.A. until his death four years before. He had been sixteen years older than her mother and was still going strong when he died of a sudden stroke. He had been one of the most powerful men in the business, and had babied and protected his wife through all thirty-six years of their marriage. He had encouraged and shepherded her career. Coco always wondered if her mother would have made it as a writer in the early days without her father's help. Her mother never asked herself the same question and didn't for an instant doubt the merit of her work, or her myriad opinions about everything in life. She made no bones about the fact that Coco was a disappointment to her, and didn't hesitate to call her a dropout, a hippie, and a flake.

Coco's equally successful sister Jane's assessment of her was loftier, though not kinder: Jane referred to Coco as a "chronic underachiever." She pointed out to her younger sister that she had had every possible opportunity growing up, every chance to make a success of her life, and thus far had thrown it all away. She reminded her regularly that it wasn't too late to turn the boat around, but as long as she continued to live in a shack in Bolinas like a beach bum, her life would be a mess.

Her life didn't feel like a mess to Coco. She supported herself, was respectable, she didn't do drugs and never had, other than the occasional joint with friends in college, and even that had been rare, which was remarkable at that age. She wasn't a burden on her family, had never been evicted, promiscuous, pregnant, or in jail. She didn't criticize her sister's lifestyle, and had no desire to; nor did she tell her mother that the clothes she wore were ridiculously young, or that her last face-lift still looked too tight. All Coco wanted was to be her own person and lead her own life, in the way she chose. She had always been uncomfortable with their luxurious Bel-Air lifestyle, hated being singled out as the child of two famous people, and more recently the much younger sister of one. She didn't want to lead their life, only her own. Her battles with them had begun in earnest after she had graduated with honors from Princeton, went to Stanford law school a year later, and subsequently dropped out in her second year. It had been three years since then.

She had promised her father she would try law, and he assured her there was a place for her in his agency. He said it helped to have a law degree if you were going to be a successful agent. The trouble was she didn't want to be one, especially working for her father. She had absolutely no desire whatsoever to represent best-selling authors, scriptwriters, or badly behaved movie stars, which were her father's passion, bread and butter, and only interest in life. Every famous name in Hollywood had come through their house when she was a child. She couldn't imagine spending the rest of her life with them, as her father had. She secretly believed all the stress of representing and indulging spoiled, unreasonable, insanely demanding people for nearly fifty years had killed him. It sounded like a death sentence to her.

He had died during her first year in law school, and she stuck it out for another year and then dropped out. Her mother had cried over it for months, still berated her for it, and told her she lived like a homeless person in the shack in Bolinas. She had only seen it once, and had ranted about it ever since. Coco had decided to stay in the San Francisco area after dropping out of Stanford. Northern California suited her better. Her sister Jane had moved there years before, but commuted to L.A. frequently to work. Their mother was still upset that both her children had moved north and fled L.A. although Jane was there a lot. Coco rarely went home.

Coco's sister Jane was thirty-nine years old. By the time she was thirty, she had become one of the most

important film producers in Hollywood. She'd had a dazzling career so far, and eleven record-breaking box-office hits. She was a huge success, which only made Coco look worse. Her mother never stopped telling Coco how proud their father had been of Jane, and then she'd burst into tears again, thinking about her younger daughter's wasted life. Tears had always worked well for her, and got her everything she wanted from Coco's father. Buzz had thoroughly indulged his wife and adored his daughters. Coco liked to believe at times that she could have explained her choices, and the reasons for them to him, but in truth she knew she couldn't have. He wouldn't have understood them any better than her mother or sister did, and he would have been both baffled and disappointed by her current life. He'd been thrilled when she got into law school at Stanford, and hoped it would put an end to her previously extremely liberal ideas. In his opinion it was all right to be kind-hearted and concerned about the planet and your fellow man, as long as you didn't carry it too far. In her college days and before, Buzz thought she had, but he had assured her mother that law school would get her head on straight. Apparently it hadn't, since she dropped out.

Her father had left her more than enough money to live on, but Coco never touched it, she preferred to spend only what she earned, and often gave money away to causes that were important to her, most of them involved in ecology, the preservation of animal life on the planet, or to assist indigent children in Third World countries. Her sister Jane called her a bleeding heart. They had a thousand unflattering adjectives for her, all of which hurt. Coco readily admitted that she was a "bleeding heart," however, which was why she loved the statue of Qian Ying so much. The goddess of compassion touched her very soul. Coco's integrity was impeccable, and her heart was huge and constantly focused on kindness to others, which didn't seem like a bad thing to her, nor a crime.

Jane had caused her own ripples in the family in her late teens. At seventeen, she had told her parents that she was gay. Coco had been six at the time, and unaware of the stir it made. Jane announced that she was gay in her senior year in high school and became a militant activist for lesbian rights at UCLA, where she studied film.

Her mother was heartbroken when she asked her to be a debutante, and Jane refused. She said she'd rather die. But in spite of her different sexual preferences, and early militancy, essentially she had the same material goals as her parents. Her father forgave her once he watched her set her sights on fame. And as soon as she achieved it, all was well again. For the past ten years Jane had lived with a well-known screenwriter who was a gentle person and famous in her own right. They had moved to San Francisco because of the large gay community there. Everyone in the universe had seen their films and loved them. Jane had been nominated for four Oscars but hadn't won one yet. Her mother had no problem now with Jane and Elizabeth living as partners for the past decade. It was Coco who upset them all deeply, who worried the hell out of them, annoyed them with her ridiculous choices, her hippie life, her indifference to what they thought was important, and it made her mother cry.

Eventually, they blamed Coco's attitudes on the man she was living with when she dropped out of law school, rather than their effect on her for years before. He had lived with her during her second and final year of law school, and had left law school himself without graduating several years before. Ian White was everything her parents didn't want for her. Although smart, capable, and well educated, as Jane put it, he was an "underachiever" just like her. After leaving school in Australia, Ian had come to San Francisco, and opened a diving and surfing school. He had been bright, loving, funny, easy-going, and wonderful to her. He was a rough diamond and an independent sort who did whatever he wanted, and Coco knew she had found her soul mate the day they met. They moved in together two months later, when she was twenty-four. He died two years later. They were the best years of her life, and she had no regrets, except that he was gone, and had been for two years. He died in a hang-gliding accident, when a gust of wind crashed him into the rocks, and he fell to his death below. It was over in an instant, and their dreams went with him. They had

bought the shack in Bolinas together, and he left it to her. His wet suits and diving gear were still at the cottage. She'd had a hard time for the first year after he died, and her mother and sister had been sympathetic in the beginning, but since then their sympathy had run out. As far as they were concerned, he was gone, and she should get over it, get a life, grow up. She had, but not the way they chose. That was a capital offense to them.

Coco herself knew that she had to let go of Ian's memory and move on. She had been out on a few dates in the last year, but no one came close to Ian. She had never met a man with as much life, energy, warmth, and charm. He was a tough act to follow, but she hoped that someday someone would come along. They just hadn't yet. Even Ian wouldn't have wanted her to be alone. But she was in no hurry. Coco was happy living in Bolinas, waking up every day, facing each day as it came. She was on no career path. She didn't want or need fame to validate herself, as the rest of her family did. She didn't want to live in a big house in Bel-Air. She didn't want anything more than she'd had with Ian, beautiful days and happy times, and loving nights, all of which she knew she would carry with her forever. She didn't need to know where her next steps would lead, or with whom. Each day was a blessing unto itself. Her life with Ian had been absolutely perfect and exactly what they wanted, but in the last two years since his death, she had made her peace with being on her own. She missed him, but had finally accepted that he'd gone on. She wasn't frantic to get married, have children, or meet another man. At twenty-eight, none of that seemed pressing, and just rolling along in Bolinas was more than enough for her.

At first, living there had seemed odd to her and Ian as well. It was a funny little community. The local residents had chosen years before not only to be inconspicuous but to virtually disappear, like Brigadoon. There were no road signs to indicate how to get to Bolinas, or even to admit that it was there. You had to find it on your own. It was a time warp that they had both laughed at and loved. In the sixties it had been full of hippies and flower children, many of whom were still there. Only now they were weather beaten and wrinkled and had gray hair. Men in their fifties or even sixties, headed for the beach with their surfboards under their arms. The only shops in town were a clothing store, which still sold flowered muumuus and everything tie-dyed, a restaurant full of grizzled old surfers, a grocery store with mostly organic food, and a head shop that sold every possible kind of paraphernalia and bongs in all colors, shapes, and sizes. The town itself sat on a plateau that hung over a narrow beach, and an inlet separated it from the long expanse of Stinson Beach and the expensive houses there. There were a few beautiful homes tucked away in Bolinas, but mostly there were families, dropouts, older surfers, and people who, for whatever reason, had chosen to get away and disappear. It was an elitist community in its own way, and the antithesis of everything she had grown up with, and the high-powered family Ian had fled in Sydney, Australia. They had been perfectly matched that way. He was gone now, but she was still there, and she had no intention of leaving anytime soon, or maybe ever, no matter what her mother and sister said. The therapist she had seen after Ian died, until recently, had told her that she was still rebelling at twenty-eight. Maybe so, but as far as Coco was concerned, it worked for her. She was happy in the life she had chosen, and the place where she lived. And the one thing she knew for sure was that she was never, ever going back to live in L.A.

As the sun rose in the sky, and Coco went back inside for another cup of tea, Ian's Australian shepherd, Sallie, sauntered slowly out of the house, fresh from Coco's bed. She gave a faint wave of her tail, and headed off on her own for a morning stroll on the beach. She was extremely independent, and helped Coco in her work. Ian had told her Australian shepherds made great rescue dogs, and were herders by instinct, but Sallie marched to her own tune. She was attached to Coco, but only to the extent she chose to be, and had her own plans and ideas at all times. She had been impeccably trained by Ian, and answered to voice commands.

She bounded off as Coco poured herself a second cup of tea and glanced at the clock. It was just after seven, and she had to shower and get to work. She liked to be on the Golden Gate Bridge by eight, and at her first

stop by eight-thirty. She was always on time, and supremely responsible to her clients. Everything she had learned by association about hard work and success had served her. She had a crazy little business, but it paid surprisingly well. Her services were in high demand, and had been for three years, since Ian helped her set it up. And it had grown immeasurably in the two years since he died, although Coco diligently limited her clients, and would only take so many. She liked to be home by four o'clock every day, which gave her time for a walk on the beach with Sallie before dusk.

Coco's neighbors on either side of her shack were an aromatherapist and an acupuncturist, both of whom worked in the city. The acupuncturist was married to a teacher at the local school, and the aromatherapist lived with a fireman from the firehouse at Stinson Beach. They were all decent, sincere people who worked hard, and helped each other out. Her neighbors had been incredibly kind to her when Ian died. And she had gone out with a friend of the teacher's once or twice, but nothing had clicked for her. They had wound up friends, which she enjoyed too. Predictably, her family dismissed them all as "hippies." Her mother called them deadbeats, which none of them were, even if they seemed that way to her. Coco didn't mind her own company, and was alone most of the time.

From the Hardcover edition.

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