



The Apartment: A Novel

By Danielle Steel

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • This vibrant, tender, and moving tale pulses with the excitement of New York City, as Danielle Steel explores twists of fate, and the way that sometimes, in special places, friends can be the family we need most.

They come together by chance in the heart of New York City, four young women at turning points in their lives. Claire Kelly finds the walk-up apartment—a spacious loft in Hell’s Kitchen. But the aspiring shoe designer needs at least one roommate to manage it. She meets Abby Williams, a writer trying to make it on her own, far away from her successful family in L.A. Four years later, Morgan Shelby joins them. She’s ambitious, with a serious finance job on Wall Street. Then Sasha Hartman, a medical student whose identical twin sister is a headline-grabbing supermodel. And so the sprawling space, with its exposed brick and rich natural light, becomes a home to friends about to embark on new, exhilarating adventures.

Frustrated by her ultra-conservative boss, Claire soon faces a career crisis as a designer. Abby is under the spell of an older man, an off-off-Broadway producer who exploits her and detours her from her true talent as a novelist, while destroying her self-confidence. Morgan is happily in love with a successful restaurateur who supplies her roommates with fine food. At her office, she begins to suspect something is off about her boss, a legendary investment manager whom she’s always admired. But does she even know him? And Sasha begins an all-work-no-play residency as an OB/GYN, as her glamorous jet-set sister makes increasingly risky decisions.

Their shared life in the apartment grounds them as they bring one another comfort and become a family of beloved friends. Unexpected opportunities alter the course of each of their lives, and as they meet the challenges, they face the bittersweet reality that in time, they will inevitably move away from the place where their dreams began.

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Editorial Review

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 *Property of a Noblewoman*, *Blue*, *Precious Gifts*, *Undercover*, *Country*, *Prodigal Son*, *Pegasus*, *A Perfect Life*, 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 books *Pretty Minnie in Paris* and *Pretty Minnie in Hollywood*.

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Chapter 1

Claire Kelly hurried up the stairs, as best she could, carrying two bags of groceries, to the fourth-floor apartment she had lived in for nine years, in Hell's Kitchen, in New York. She was wearing a short black cotton dress and sexy high-heeled sandals with ribbons that laced up to her knees. They were samples she had bought at a trade show in Italy the year before. It was a hot September day, the Tuesday after Labor Day, and it was her turn to buy the groceries for the three women she shared the apartment with. And whatever the weather, it was a hike up to the loft on the fourth floor. She had been living there since her second year at Parsons School of Design when she was nineteen, and it was home to four of them now.

Claire was a shoe designer for Arthur Adams, a line of ultraconservative classic shoes. They were well made but unexciting and stymied all her creative sense. Walter Adams, whose father had founded the company, staunchly believed that high-fashion shoes were a passing trend, and he discarded all her more innovative designs. As a result, Claire's workdays were a source of constant frustration. The business was hanging on but not growing, and Claire felt she could do so much more with it, if he'd let her. Walter resisted her every step of the way on every subject. She was sure that business, and their profits, would have improved if he listened to her, but Walter was seventy-two years old, believed in what they were doing, and did not believe in high-style shoes, no matter how fervently she begged him to try.

Claire had no choice but to do what he wanted her to, if she wanted to keep her job. Her dream was to design the kind of sexy, fashionable shoes she liked to wear, but there was no chance of that at Arthur Adams, Inc. Walter hated change, much to Claire's chagrin. And as long as she stayed there, she knew she would be designing sensible, classic shoes forever. Even their flats were too conservative for her. Walter let her add a touch of whimsy to their summer sandals sometimes for their clients who went to the Hamptons, Newport, Rhode Island, or Palm Beach. His mantra was that their customer was wealthy, conservative, and older and knew what to expect from the brand. And nothing Claire could say would change that. He didn't want to appeal to younger customers. He preferred to rely on their old ones. There was no arguing with Walter about it. And year after year, there were no surprises in the merchandise they shipped. She was frustrated, but at least she had a job, and had been there for four years. Before that, she had worked for an inexpensive line whose shoes were fun but cheaply made. And the business had folded after two years. Arthur Adams was all about quality and traditional design. And as long as she followed directions, the brand and her job were secure.

At twenty-eight, Claire would have loved to add at least a few exciting designs to the line, and try something new. Walter wouldn't hear of it, and scolded her sternly when she tried to push, which she still did. She had never given up trying to add some real style to what she did. He had hired her because she was a good, solid,

well-trained designer who knew how to create shoes that were comfortable to wear and easy to produce. They had them made in Italy at the same factory Walter's father had used, in a small town called Parabiago, close to Milan. Claire went there three or four times a year to discuss production with them. They were one of the most reliable, respected factories in Italy, and they produced several more exciting lines than theirs. Claire looked at them longingly whenever she was at the factory, and wondered if she'd ever have a chance to design shoes she loved. It was a dream she refused to give up.

Her long, straight blond hair hung damply on her neck by the time she reached the fourth floor in high heels. After nine years, she was used to the climb, and claimed that it kept her legs in shape. She had found the apartment by accident, by walking around the neighborhood. She had been living in Parsons's freshman dorm at the time, on Eleventh Street, and had wandered uptown through Chelsea, and continued north into what had once been one of the worst areas of New York, but had slowly become gentrified. Since the nineteenth century, Hell's Kitchen had had a reputation for slums, tenements, gang fights, and murders among the Irish, Italian, and later Puerto Rican hoodlums who lived there, in a constant state of war. All of that was gone by the time Claire arrived from San Francisco to attend design school. It was the same school where her mother had studied interior design in her youth. It had been Claire's dream to attend Parsons and study fashion design. Despite their tight budget, her mother had saved every penny she could and made it possible for her to enroll and live in the dorm for her first year.

By second semester, Claire had been looking for an apartment for a while, and had heard of Hell's Kitchen, but never ventured there until a spring Saturday afternoon. Stretching from the upper Thirties to the Fifties, on the West Side, from Eighth Avenue to the Hudson River, Hell's Kitchen had become home to actors, playwrights, and dancers, for its proximity to the theater district, the famed Actors Studio, the Baryshnikov Arts Center, and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Many of the old buildings were still there, some of them warehouses and factories that had been turned into apartments. But in spite of its modest improvements, the neighborhood still had much of its original look, and many of the structures still looked run-down.

She had seen a small sign in a window, indicating an apartment for rent, and called the number listed on it that night. The owner said he had a loft available on the fourth floor. The building was an old factory that had been changed into living space fifteen years before, and he said it was rent stabilized, which sounded hopeful to her. When she went to see it the next day, she was stunned to find the space was vast. There was a huge loftlike living room with brick walls and a concrete floor painted a sandy color, four large storerooms that could be used as bedrooms, two clean, modern bathrooms, and a basic kitchen with the bare essentials from IKEA. It was far more space than Claire needed, but it was bright and sunny and in decent condition, the building had been modestly restored. The rent was exactly twice what she could afford, and she couldn't imagine living there alone. The halls of the building were a little dark, the neighborhood still had a slightly rough quality to it, and it was located on Thirty-ninth Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues. The owner told her proudly that it had been one of the worst streets in Hell's Kitchen forty years before, but there was no evidence of it now. The street just looked shabby and still somewhat industrial, but she was excited by the loft. All she needed to do was find a roommate to live there with her and pay half the rent. She didn't say anything about it to her mother, she didn't want to panic her over the expense. Claire had figured out that if she found someone to share the rent with her, it might be cheaper than the dorms.

The following week she met a girl at a party, who was a creative writing major at NYU. At twenty, she was a year older than Claire, and had grown up in L.A. Abby Williams was as small as Claire was tall. She had dark, curly hair and almost black eyes, in contrast to Claire's long straight blond hair and blue eyes. She seemed like a nice person and was passionate about her writing. She said she wrote short stories and wanted to write a novel when she graduated, and she mentioned casually that her parents worked in TV. Claire later

learned that Abby's father was the well-known head of a major network, and her mother had had a string of hit TV shows as a writer/producer. Both Abby and Claire were only children, and were dedicated to their studies and ambitions, determined to justify their parents' faith in them. They went to see the apartment together, and Abby fell in love with it too. They had no idea how they would furnish it other than at garage sales over time, but they figured out that it was within their budgets, and two months later, with their parents' cautious blessing and signatures on the lease, they moved in, and had been there ever since, for the past nine years.

The two women had shared the apartment for four years, and after they graduated, in an effort to rely less on their parents, be more independent, and cut costs, they decided to take in two more roommates, to reduce their expenses even further.

Claire had met Morgan Shelby at a party she went to on the Upper East Side, given by a group of young stockbrokers someone had introduced her to. The party was boring, the men full of themselves, and she and Morgan had started to talk. Morgan was working on Wall Street, and had a roommate she hated in an apartment she couldn't afford and said she was looking for an apartment farther downtown that would be closer to where she worked. They exchanged phone numbers, and two days later, after talking to Abby, Claire called her and invited her to come and take a look at the apartment in Hell's Kitchen.

Claire's only hesitation was that she wondered if Morgan might be too old. She was twenty-eight at the time, five years older than Claire, and had a serious job in finance. Morgan was pretty with well-cut dark hair and long legs. Claire had been in her first job at the shoe company that later folded and was living on a tight budget, and Abby was waiting on tables at a restaurant and trying to write a novel, and they both wondered if Morgan was too "grown up," but she loved the loft the minute she saw it, and almost begged them to let her move in. The location was much more convenient for her job on Wall Street. They had dinner with her twice and liked her. She was intelligent and employed, she had a great sense of humor, her credit references were solid, and six weeks later she moved in. The rest was history, she had been there for five years, and now they were best friends.

Abby met Sasha Hartman through a friend of a friend from NYU, two months after Morgan moved in, and they were still looking for a fourth roommate. Sasha was in medical school at NYU, hoping to specialize in OB/GYN, and the location worked for her too. She liked all three women living in the loft and assured them that she'd never be around. She was either in class, at the hospital, or at the library studying for exams. She was a soft-spoken young woman from Atlanta and mentioned that she had a sister in New York too, living in Tribeca. She failed to mention that they were identical twins, which caused considerable consternation the day she moved in, when her sister suddenly appeared, with the same mane of blond hair, in the same T-shirt and jeans, and the three residents of the apartment thought they were seeing double. Valentina, Sasha's twin, enjoyed confusing them, and had done so regularly in the five years since. The two sisters were close, Valentina had a key to the apartment, and they were as different as night and day. Valentina was a successful model, involved in a high-powered world, and Sasha was a dedicated doctor, whose wardrobe consisted mainly of hospital scrubs, and was in her residency at NYU Langore Medical Center five years after she'd moved in.

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