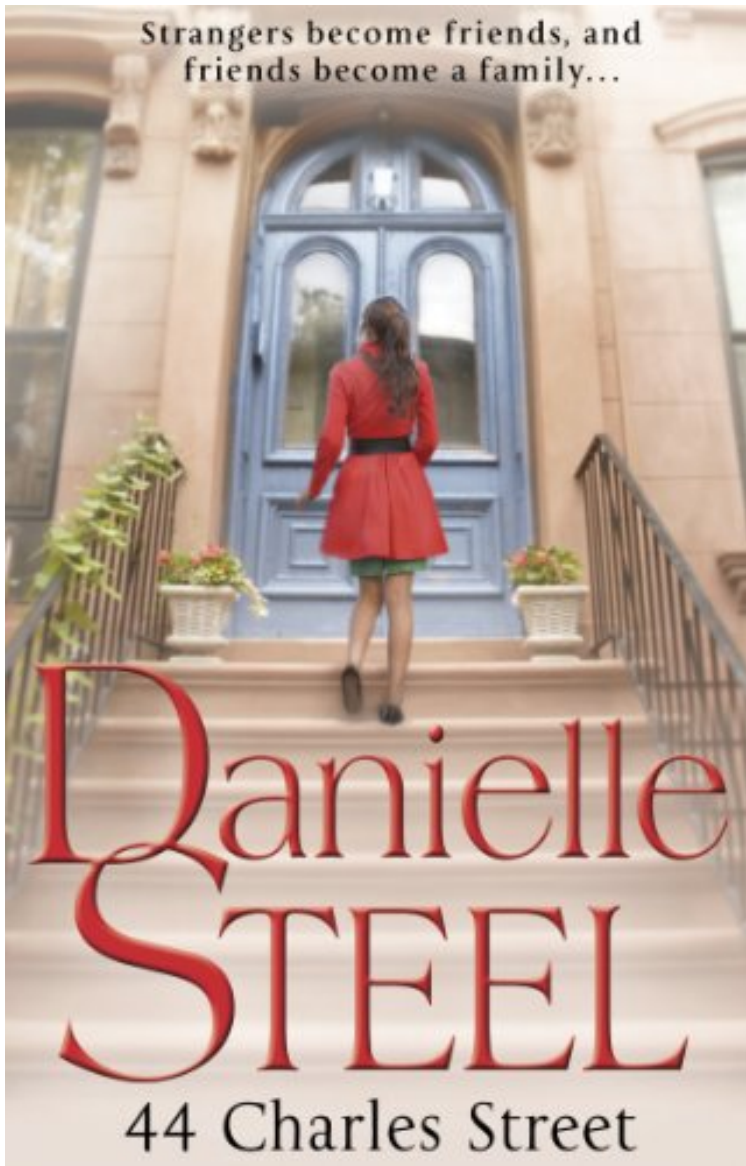


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44 Charles Street



Par Danielle Steel

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurTHE NUMBER ONE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLEREverything is falling to pieces for Francesca Thayer. Her beautiful, old house is full of leaks and in need of total restoration. Then her relationship with lawyer Todd collapses and he moves out. As the owner of a struggling art gallery she can't possibly manage the mortgage alone, so she is forced to do the one thing she never imagined she would: she advertises for lodgers.First arrives Eileen - a young, attractive schoolteacher. Then comes Chris, a newly-divorced father and graphic designer. Last to arrive is Marya - a famous cookery author who is hoping to rebuild her life after the death of her husband.And so Francesca finds that her house has become a whole new world - and that her accidental tenants have become the most important people in her life. Over their

year together, the house at 44 Charles Street fills with laughter, heartbreak and hope. And Francesca discovers that she might be able to open her heart again after all...ExtraitChapter 1 Francesca Thayer sat at her desk until the figures started to blur before her eyes. She had been over them a thousand times in the past two months and had just spent the entire weekend trying to crunch numbers. They always came out the same. It was three o'clock in the morning and her long wavy blond hair was a tangled mess as she unconsciously ran her hands through it again. She was trying to save her business and her house, and so far she hadn't been able to come up with a solution. Her stomach turned over as she thought of losing both. She and Todd had started the business together four years ago. They'd opened an art gallery in New York's West Village where they specialized in showing the work of emerging artists at extremely reasonable prices. She had a deep commitment to the artists she represented. Her experience in the art world had been extensive, although Todd had none at all. Before that, she had run two other galleries, one uptown after she graduated, and the other in Tribeca. But this gallery that they had started together was her dream. She had a degree in fine arts, her father was a well-known artist who had become very successful in recent years, and the gallery she shared with Todd had gotten excellent reviews. Todd was an avid collector of contemporary work, and he thought that helping her start the gallery would be fun. At the time, Todd was tired of his own career on Wall Street as an attorney. He had a considerable amount of money saved and figured he could coast for a few years. The business plan he had developed for them showed them making money within three years. He hadn't counted on Francesca's passion for less expensive work by entirely unknown artists, helping them whenever possible, nor had he realized that her main goal was showcasing the work, but not necessarily making a lot of money at it. Her hunger for financial success was far more limited than his. She was as much a patron of the arts as a gallerist. Todd was in it to make money. He thought it would be exciting and a welcome change of career for him after years of doing tax and estate work for an important law firm. But now he said he was tired of listening to their bleeding-heart artists, watching his nest egg dwindle to next to nothing, and being poor. As far as Todd was concerned, this was no longer fun. He was forty years old, and wanted to make real money again. When he talked to her about it he had already lined up a job at a Wall Street firm. They were promising him a partnership within a year. As far as selling art was concerned, he was done. Francesca wanted to stick with it and make the gallery a success, whatever it took. And unlike Todd, she didn't mind being broke. But in the past year, their relationship had begun to unravel, which made their business even less appealing to him. They argued about everything, what they did, who they saw, what to do about the gallery. She found the artists, worked with them, and curated the shows. Todd handled the money end of things and paid the bills. The worst of it was that their relationship was over now too. They had been together for five years. Francesca had just turned thirty when she met him, and Todd was thirty-five. It was hard for her to believe that a relationship that had seemed so solid could fall apart so totally in a year. They had never wanted to get married and now they disagreed about that too. When Todd hit forty, he suddenly decided he wanted a conventional life. Marriage was sounding good to him and he didn't want to wait much longer to have kids. At thirty-five, she still wanted what she had when they met five years before. They had talked about maybe having kids one day, but she wanted to turn their gallery into a success first. Francesca had been very honest with him about marriage when they met, that she had an aversion to it. She had had a front-row seat all her life to her mother's obsession with getting married and she watched her screw it up five times. Francesca had spent her entire life trying not to make the same mistakes. Her mother had always been an embarrassment to her. And she had no desire whatsoever to start emulating her now. Francesca's parents had gotten divorced when she was six. She had also watched her extremely handsome, charming, irresponsible father drift in and out of relationships, usually with very young girls who never lasted in his life for more than six months. That, combined with her mother's fetish for marriage, had made Francesca commitment-phobic until she met Todd. His parents' own bitter divorce when he was fourteen had made him skittish about marriage too. They had had that in common, but now he had begun to think that marriage made sense. He told her he was tired of their bohemian lifestyle where people lived together and thought it was fine to have kids without getting married. As soon as Todd blew out the candles on his fortieth birthday cake, it was as if a switch were turned on, and without any warning, he turned traditional on her. Francesca preferred things exactly as they were and had always been. Now suddenly, in recent months, all of Todd's friends seemed to live uptown. He complained about the West Village where they lived, and which she loved. He thought the neighborhood and people in it looked scuzzy. To complicate matters further, not long after they opened the gallery, they had fallen in love with a house that was in serious disrepair. They had discovered it on a snowy December afternoon and were instantly excited, and had gotten it at a great price because of the

condition it was in. They restored it together, doing most of the work themselves. If they weren't working in the gallery, they were busy with the house, and within a year everything in it gleamed. They bought furniture at garage sales, and little by little they had turned it into a home they loved. Now Todd claimed that he had spent all of the last four years lying under a leaky sink, or making repairs. He wanted an easy modern condominium where someone else did all the work. Francesca was desperately fighting for the life of their business and the house. Despite the failure of the relationship, she wanted to keep both, and didn't see how she could. It was bad enough losing Todd without losing the gallery and her home too. They had both tried everything they could to save the relationship, to no avail. They had gone to couples counseling and individual therapy. They had taken a two-month break. They had talked and communicated until they were blue in the face. They had compromised on everything they could. But he wanted to close or sell the gallery, which would have broken her heart. And he wanted to get married and have kids and she didn't, or at least not yet and maybe never. The idea of marriage still made her cringe, even to a man she loved. She thought his new friends were dreary beyond belief. He thought their old ones were limited and trite. He said he was tired of vegans, starving artists, and what he considered left-wing ideals. She had no idea how they had grown so far apart in a few short years, but they had. They had spent last summer apart, doing different things. Instead of sailing in Maine as they usually did, she spent three weeks in an artists colony, while he went to Europe and traveled with friends and went to the Hamptons on weekends. By September, a year after the fighting had begun, they both knew it was hopeless and agreed to give up. What they couldn't agree on was what to do about the gallery and the house. She had put everything she had and could scrape up into her half of the house, and now if she wanted to keep it, he expected her to buy him out, or agree to sell it. They had less invested in the business, and what he wanted from her was fair. The problem was that she just didn't have it. He was giving her time to figure it out. Now it was November, and she was no closer to a solution than she had been two months before. He was waiting for her to get sensible and finally give up. Todd wanted to sell the house by the end of the year, or recoup his share. And he wanted to be out of the business by then too. He was still helping her on weekends when he had time, but his heart was no longer in it, and it was becoming increasingly stressful for both of them to live under one roof in a relationship that was dead. They hadn't slept with each other in months, and whenever possible he spent the weekend with friends. It was sad for both of them. Francesca was upset about ending the relationship, but she was equally stressed about the gallery and the house. She had the bitter taste of defeat in her mouth, and she hated everything about it. It was bad enough that their relationship had failed five years seemed like a long time to wind up at ground zero in her life again. Closing the gallery, or selling it, and losing the house was just more than she could bear. But as she sat staring at the numbers, in an old sweatshirt and jeans, she could find no magic there. No matter how she added, subtracted, or multiplied, she just didn't have the money to buy him out. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she looked at the amounts again. She knew exactly what her mother was going to say. She had been vehemently opposed to Francesca going into business and buying a house with a man she loved but didn't intend to marry. She thought it was the worst possible combination of investment and romance. And what happens when you break up? her mother had asked, assuming it was inevitable, since all of her own relationships had ended in divorce. How will you work that out, with no alimony and no settlement? Her mother thought that all relationships had to start with a prenup and end with spousal support. We'd work it out just like your divorces, Mom, Francesca had answered, annoyed by the suggestion, as she was by most of what her mother said. With good lawyers, and as much love for each other as we can muster at that point, if that happens, and good manners and respect. All of her mother's divorces had been on decent terms, and she was friendly with all her former husbands, and they still adored her. Thalia Hamish Anders Thayer Johnson di San Giovane was beautiful, chic, spoiled, self-centered, larger than life, glamorous, and a little crazy by most people's standards. Francesca referred to her as colorful when she was trying to be nice about her. But in fact, her mother had been an agonizing humiliation for her all her life. She had married three Americans and two Europeans. Both of her European husbands, one British and one Italian, had titles. She had been divorced four times, and widowed the last time. Her husband had been a very successful writer, Francesca's father, the artist, the scion of a famous British banking family, a Texas land developer who left her comfortable with a big settlement and two shopping malls, which in turn had allowed her to marry a penniless but extremely charming Italian count, who died eight months later in a terrible car accident in Rome in his Ferrari. As far as Francesca was concerned, her mother came from another planet. The two women had nothing in common. And now of course she would say I told you so when Francesca told her that the relationship was over, which Francesca hadn't had the guts to do yet. She didn't want to hear what she would

have to say about it. Her mother hadn't offered to help her when Francesca bought the house and opened the gallery, and she knew she wouldn't help her now. She thought the house a foolhardy investment and didn't like the neighborhood, and like Todd, she would advise Francesca to sell it. If they did, they would both make a profit. But Francesca didn't want the money, she wanted to stay in the house, and she was convinced there was a way to do it. She just hadn't found it yet. And her mother would be no help with that. She never was. Francesca's mother wasn't a practical woman. She had relied on men all her life, and used the alimony and settlements they gave her to support her jet-set lifestyle. She had never made a penny on her own, only by getting married or divorced, which seemed like prostitution to Francesca. Francesca was totally independent and wanted to stay that way. Watching her mother's life had made her determined never to rely on anyone and particularly not a man. She was an only child. Her father, Henry Thayer, was no more sensible than her mother. He had been a starving artist for years, a charming flake and a womanizer, until, eleven years ago, he had the incredible good fortune to meet Avery Willis, when he was fifty-four. He had hired her as an attorney to help him with a lawsuit, which she won for him, against an art dealer who had cheated him out of money. She then helped him invest it instead of letting him spend it on women. And with the only genius he had ever shown, in Francesca's opinion, he had married Avery a year later, she for the first time at fifty, and in ten years she had helped him build a solid fortune, with an investment portfolio and some excellent real estate. She talked him into buying a building in SoHo, where he and Avery still lived and he still painted.

They also had a weekend house in Connecticut now. Avery had become his agent and his prices had skyrocketed along with his financial affairs. And for the first time in his life he had been smart enough to be faithful. Henry thought his wife walked on water and adored her. Other than Francesca's mother, she was the only woman he had committed to by marrying her. Avery was as different from Thalia as two women could ever get. Avery had a respectable career as a lawyer, and never had to be dependent on a man. Her husband was her only client now. She wasn't glamorous, although she was good-looking, and she was a solid, practical person with an excellent mind. She and Francesca had been crazy about each other from the first time they met. She was old enough to be Francesca's mother, but didn't want to be one. She had no children of her own, and until she got married she had the same distrust of marriage that Francesca did. She also had what she referred to as crazy parents. Francesca and her stepmother had been close friends for the last ten years. At sixty, Avery still looked natural and youthful. She was only two years younger than Francesca's mother, but Thalia was an entirely different breed. All Thalia wanted now at sixty-two was to find another husband. She was convinced that her sixth would be her final and best one. Francesca wasn't as sure, and hoped she'd have the brains not to do it again. She was sure that her mother's determined search for number six had frightened all possible candidates away. It was hard to believe she had been widowed and unmarried for sixteen years now, despite a flurry of affairs. And she was still a pretty woman. Her mother had had five husbands by the time she was forty-five. She always said wistfully that she wished she were fifty again, which she felt would have given her a better chance to find another husband than at the age she was now. Avery was totally happy just as she was, married to a man she adored, and whose quirks she tolerated with good humor. She had no illusions about how badly behaved her husband had been before her. He had slept with hundreds of women on both coasts and throughout Europe. He liked to say he'd been a bad boy before he met Avery, and Francesca knew how right he was. He had been bad, in terms of how irresponsible he had been, and a lousy husband and father, and he would be a boy till the day he died, even if he lived to be ninety. Her father was a child, despite his enormous artistic talent, and her mother wasn't much better, only she didn't have the talent. Avery was the only sensible person in Francesca's life, with both feet on the ground. And she had been a huge blessing to Francesca's father, and to her as well. She wanted Avery's advice now, but hadn't had the guts to call her yet either. It was so hard admitting she had failed on every front. In her relationship, and in her struggling business, particularly if she had to close it or sell it. She couldn't even keep the house she loved on Charles Street unless she could find the money to pay Todd. And how the hell was she going to do that? Bottom line, she just didn't have the money. And even Avery couldn't work magic with that. Francesca finally turned off the light in her office next to her bedroom. She started to head downstairs to the kitchen to make a cup of warm milk to help her sleep, and as she did, she heard a persistent dripping sound, and saw that there was a small leak coming from the skylight. The water was hitting the banister and running slowly down it. It was a leak they'd had before, which Todd had tried to fix several times, but it had started again in the hard November rains, and he wasn't there that night to fix it. He kept telling her that she'd never be able to maintain the house by herself, and maybe he was right. But she wanted to try. She didn't care if the roof leaked, or the house came down around her. Whatever it took, whatever she had to do, Francesca wasn't ready to give

up. With a determined look, she headed down to the kitchen. On her way back up, she put a towel on the banister to absorb the leak. There was nothing else she could do until she told Todd about it in the morning. He was away for the weekend with friends, but he could deal with it when he got home. It was exactly why he wanted to sell the house. He was tired of coping with the problems, and if they weren't going to live there together, he didn't want to own it. He wanted out. And if she could find a way to pay him, the problems were going to be all hers, on her own. With a sigh, Francesca walked back upstairs to her bedroom, and promised herself she'd call her stepmother in the morning. Maybe she could think of something that Francesca hadn't. It was her only hope. She wanted her leaky house and her struggling gallery with its fifteen emerging artists. She had invested four years in both, and no matter what Todd and her mother thought, she refused to give up her dream or her home. From the Hardcover edition. *Revue de presse* "Charismatic and talented, The Big Five have been firm friends since their first day at school and the challenges, pitfalls and heartache of adult life make them ever more reliant on their trusty friendships. A satisfying novel from the Queen of Romance which explores each of the five's complicated family dynamics." (Sunday Express)