



A Step Too Far

Joanna North

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In the dramatic novel A Step Too Far, both love and hate are motivating forces.

In Joanna North's psychological thriller *A Step Too Far*, an aggressive child grows up to wreak havoc on his family.

After years of compliance and unhappiness, Charles has made the bold decision to leave his loveless wife, June, hateful son, Freddie, and youngest boy, Anthony, behind. Promising to provide for them and at first wanting a relationship with his sons, Charles navigates the complications created by his spiteful ex-wife and her overbearing parents. Their intrusive behavior ramps up when Charles falls in love with Alicia, a former coworker. Alicia and Charles try to interact with both Freddie and Anthony; while Anthony is receptive, he dares not cross his brother. Freddie's darkness has been there since his childhood, and Charles and his new family stand to bear the brunt of his misplaced anger.

Charles is introduced during a transformative period in his life, but is seen addressing new challenges in healthy ways. He goes to therapy; his conversations with his therapist run through his mind when he's making decisions and setting boundaries. His relationships with June and Freddie are defined by the latter's contemptuousness; Charles proves unable to stand up for himself. As his counter, Freddie progresses from being manipulative to bullying. He is cruel to animals. June is often blamed, accused of spoiling Freddie and ignoring the realities of his behavior. Long psychological explanations of these characters' thought process and mental states fill the novel, fleshing out the family's dynamics.

Meanwhile, Gwen and Abigail, two elderly women who people watch and discuss everyone's business, are the connective thread between Charles's family and the town beyond them. Their observations set the surrounding scenes, reflecting a close-knit community wherein not much goes unnoticed. The town's locations are described in emotional ways: Charles's post-marriage cottage is a place of metamorphosis, and he repaints and landscapes in time with his personal betterment. Seasonal changes are also reflected in the character's moods and situations.

But the story encompasses decades, and clarity regarding its events arrives late. There's a drastic change in the book's tone near its end, which shifts its focus to address Alicia's courage and resolve, as well as Gwen and Abigail's role in their town. The story's cursory wrap-up does not address the fates of many of its characters.

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DELIA STANLEY (September 23, 2020)

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