

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# The Cottage

Danielle Steel

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*Public lives and private secrets collide at ...*

## **PRAISE FOR DANIELLE STEEL**

"A LITERARY PHENOMENON ... and not to be pigeonholed as one who produces a predictable kind of book."

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"Ms. Steel's fans won't be disappointed!"

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"One counts on Danielle Steel for A STORY THAT ENTERTAINS AND INFORMS."

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"STEEL IS AT THE TOP OF HER BESTSELLING FORM."

—*Houston Chronicle*

"FEW MODERN WRITERS CONVEY THE PATHOS OF FAMILY AND MARITAL LIFE WITH SUCH HEARTFELT EMPATHY."

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“It's nothing short of amazing that even after [dozens of] novels,  
Danielle Steel can still come up with a good new yarn.”

—*The (Newark) Star-Ledger*

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### *THE COTTAGE*

"A story of friendship ... fans can always count on Danielle Steel to come up with a best-selling story ... [her] charm has lasted."

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### *SUNSET IN ST. TROPEZ*

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"Steel pulls through with skillful plotting, steeping a gentle brew that will once again gratify her legions of fans."

—*Publishers Weekly*

### *LONE EAGLE*

"THE NOVEL IS BRIGHTLY PACED, and the World War II setting provides plenty of contextual drama."

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### *LEAP OF FAITH*

“STEEL IS A SKILLED STORYTELLER. [Her] tale provides entertainment and imparts important lessons.”

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“Steel uses her storytelling flair here ... beautiful people, a glamorous setting, an evil antagonist, a dash of political intrigue and a hearty dose of social consciousness combine in AN ENTERTAINING AND EYE-OPENING STORY ... it's quite a trip.”

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“[This] simple story of a courageous woman weathering the worst of life's storms is HARD TO PUT DOWN ... Steel knows how to wring the emotion out of the briefest scene.”

—*People*

***Also by Danielle Steel***

ANSWERED PRAYERS	NO GREATER LOVE
SUNSET IN ST. TROPEZ	HEARTBEAT
THE KISS	MESSAGE FROM
	NAM
LEAP OF FAITH	DADDY
LONE EAGLE	STAR
JOURNEY	ZOYA
THE HOUSE ON	KALEIDOSCOPE
HOPE STREET	FINE THINGS
THE WEDDING	WANDERLUST
IRRESISTIBLE FORCES	SECRETS
GRANNY DAN	FAMILY ALBUM
BITTERSWEET	FULL CIRCLE
MIRROR IMAGE	CHANGES
HIS BRIGHT LIGHT:	THURSTON HOUSE
THE STORY OF NICK	
TRAINA	CROSSINGS
THE KLONE AND I	ONCE IN A LIFETIME
THE LONG ROAD HOME	A PERFECT
	STRANGER
THE GHOST	REMEMBRANCE
SPECIAL DELIVERY	PALOMINO
THE RANCH	LOVE: POEMS
SILENT HONOR	THE RING
MALICE	LOVING
FIVE DAYS IN PARIS	TO LOVE AGAIN



LIGHTNING  
WINGS  
THE GIFT  
ACCIDENT  
VANISHED  
MIXED BLESSINGS  
JEWELS

SUMMER'S END  
SEASON OF PASSION  
THE PROMISE  
NOW AND FOREVER  
PASSION'S PROMISE  
GOING HOME

DANIELLE STEEL

THE  
COTTAGE

*To my very wonderful children,  
Beatie, Trevor, Todd, Sam, Nick,  
Victoria, Vanessa, Maxx, and Zara,  
who are the light of my life,  
the joy of my days,  
the comfort of my life,  
the solace in sorrow,  
my light in the dark,  
and the hope of my heart.  
No greater joy than you,  
and when you have children one day,  
may you be as lucky as I have been  
to love and be loved by you.*

*with all my love,  
Mom/d.s.*

## ***Chapter 1***

*The sun glinted on* the elegant mansard roof of The Cottage, as Abe Braunstein drove around the last bend in the seemingly endless driveway. The sight of the imposing French manor would have taken his breath away, if the driver had been anyone but Abe. It was a spectacular home, and he had been there dozens of times before. The Cottage was one of the last legendary homes of Hollywood. It was reminiscent of the palaces built by the Vanderbilts and Astors in Newport, Rhode Island, at the turn of the century. This one was in the style of an eighteenth-century French chateau and was opulent, handsome, graceful, exquisite in every aspect of its design. It had been built for Vera Harper, one of the great stars of silent movies, in 1918. She had been one of the few early stars to conserve her fortune, had married well more than once, and had lived there until she died at a ripe old age in 1959. Cooper Winslow had bought it from her estate a year later. She had had no children and no heirs, and had left everything she had, including The Cottage, to the Catholic Church. He had paid a handsome sum for it even then, because his career had been booming at the time. His acquisition of The Cottage had caused a considerable stir. It had been quite an extraordinary house and property for a young man of twenty-eight, no matter how major a star he was. Coop had had no embarrassment about living in the palatial home, and was comfortable that it was worthy of him.

The house was surrounded by fourteen acres of park and impeccably manicured gardens in the heart of Bel Air; it had a tennis court, an enormous pool paved in blue and gold

mosaic, and there were fountains located in a number of places on the grounds. The design of the grounds and gardens had allegedly been copied from Versailles. It was quite a place. Inside the house were high-vaulted ceilings, many of them painted by artists brought in from France to do the work. The dining room and library were wood-paneled, and the boiserie and floors in the living room had been brought over from a chateau in France. It had provided a wonderful setting for Vera Harper, and had been a spectacular home for Cooper Winslow ever since. And the one thing Abe Braunstein was grateful for was that Cooper Winslow had bought it outright when he purchased it in 1960, although he had taken two mortgages out on it since. But even they didn't hamper its value. It was by far the most important piece of property in Bel Air. It would have been hard to put a price on it today. There were certainly no other houses comparable to it in the area, or anywhere else for that matter, except maybe in Newport, but the value of the estate in Bel Air was far greater than it would have been anywhere else, despite the fact that it was now somewhat in disrepair.

There were two gardeners pulling weeds around the main fountain as Abe got out of his car, and two others working in a flower bed nearby, as Abe made a mental note to cut the gardening staff in half, at the very least. All he could see as he looked around him were numbers, and dollar bills flying out windows. He knew almost to the penny what it cost Winslow to run the place. It was an obscene amount by anyone's standards, and certainly by Abe's. He did the accounting for at least half the major stars in Hollywood, and had learned long since not to gasp or wince or faint or make overt gestures of outrage when he heard what they spent on houses and cars and furs and diamond necklaces for their girlfriends. But in comparison to Cooper Winslow, all of their extravagances paled. Abe was convinced that

Coop Winslow spent more than King Farouk. He'd been doing it for nearly fifty years, he spent money like water, and hadn't had an important part in a major movie in more than twenty years. For the last ten, he'd been reduced to minor character parts, and cameo appearances, for which he was paid very little. And for the most part, no matter what the movie or the role or the costume, Cooper always seemed to play the dashing, charming, fabulously handsome Casanova, and more recently the irresistible aging roué. But no matter how irresistible he still was on screen, there were fewer and fewer parts for him to play. In fact, as Abe rang the front door bell and waited for someone to answer, Coop hadn't had any part at all in just over two years. But he claimed he met with directors and producers about their new movies every day. Abe had come to talk turkey with him about that, and about cutting back his expenses radically in the near future. He had been living in debt and on promises for the past five years. And Abe didn't care if he made commercials for his neighborhood butcher, but Coop was going to have to get out and work—and soon. There were a lot of changes he was going to have to make. He had to cut back dramatically, reduce his staff, sell some of his cars, stop buying clothes and staying at the most expensive hotels around the world. Either that, or sell the house, which Abe would have preferred.

He wore a dour expression as he stood in his gray summer suit, white shirt, and black and gray tie, as a butler in a morning coat opened the front door. He recognized the accountant immediately and nodded a silent greeting. Livermore knew from experience that whenever the accountant came to visit, it put his employer in a dreadful mood. It sometimes required an entire bottle of Cristal champagne to restore him to his usual good spirits, sometimes an entire tin of caviar too. He had put both on

ice the moment Liz Sullivan, Coop's secretary, had warned Livermore that the accountant would be arriving at noon.

She had been waiting for Abe in the paneled library, and crossed the front hall with a smile as soon as she heard the bell. She had been there since ten that morning, going over some papers to prepare for the meeting, and she'd had a knot in her stomach since the night before. She had tried to warn Coop what the meeting was about, but he'd been too busy to listen the previous day. He was going to a black-tie party, and wanted to be sure to get a haircut, a massage, and a nap before he went out. And she hadn't seen him that morning. He was out at a breakfast at the Beverly Hills Hotel when she arrived, with a producer who had called him about a movie with a possible part in it for him. It was hard to pin Coop down, particularly if it involved bad news or something unpleasant. He had an instinctive sense, a kind of finely tuned supersonic radar that warned him almost psychically about things he didn't want to hear. Like incoming Scud missiles, he managed to dodge them with ease. But she knew he had to listen this time, and he had promised to be back by noon. With Coop, that meant closer to two.

"Hello, Abe, it's nice to see you," Liz said warmly. She was wearing khaki slacks, a white sweater, and a string of pearls, none of which flattered her figure, which had expanded considerably in the twenty-two years she'd worked for Coop. But she had a lovely face, and naturally blonde hair. She had been truly beautiful when Coop hired her, she had looked like an advertisement for Breck shampoo.

It had been love at first sight between them, not literally, or at least not from Coop's side. He thought she was terrific, and valued her flawless efficiency, and the motherly way she had taken care of him from the first. When he hired her she had been thirty years old, and he was forty-eight. She had worshipped him, and had a secret crush on him for

years. She had given her life's blood to the impeccable running of Cooper Winslow's life, working fourteen hours a day, sometimes seven days a week, if he needed her, and in the process, she had forgotten to get married or have kids. It was a sacrifice she had willingly made for him. She still thought he was worth it. And at times she was worried sick about him, particularly in recent years. Reality was not important to Cooper Winslow. He considered it a minor inconvenience, like a mosquito buzzing around his head, and he avoided it all costs. Successfully, from his perspective at least, most of the time. Nearly always in fact. Coop only heard what he wanted to hear, i.e., only good news. The rest he filtered out long before it reached either his brain or his ears. And so far, he had gotten away with it. Abe had come that morning to deliver reality to him, whether Coop liked it or not.

"Hello, Liz. Is he here?" Abe asked, looking stern. He hated dealing with Coop. They were opposites in every way.

"Not yet," she said with a friendly smile, as she led him back to the library, where she'd been waiting for both of them. "But he'll be back any minute. He had a meeting about a lead part."

"In what? A cartoon?" Liz very diplomatically did not respond. She hated it when people said rude things about Coop. But she also knew how irritated the accountant had been with him.

Coop had followed absolutely none of his advice, and his precarious financial situation had become even more so, disastrously so in fact, in the past two years. And Abe's last words to Liz on the phone the day before had been "This has to stop." He had come on a Saturday morning to deliver the message, and it annoyed him no end that as usual, Coop was late. He always was. And because of who he was, and how endearing he could be when he chose to, people always waited for him. Even Abe.



“Would you like a drink?” Liz asked, playing hostess, as Livermore stood by stone-faced. He had a single expression he used in every situation, none. It seemed to suit his part. Although rumor had it that once or twice, when Cooper teased him mercilessly about something, he had actually smiled. But no one had actually seen him do it, so it was more legend than fact. But Coop swore he did.

“No, thanks,” Abe said, looking almost equally expressionless as the butler, although Liz could see that irritation was creeping in at a rapid speed.

“Iced tea?” There was still an ingenue quality about her as she tried to put him at ease.

“That would be fine. How late do you think he'll be?” It was twelve-oh-five. And they both knew that Coop would think nothing of being an hour or two late. But he would come armed with a plausible excuse, and a dazzling smile, which made women go weak at the knees, but not Abe.

“Hopefully, it won't be long. It's just a preliminary meeting. They were going to give him a script to read.”

“Why?”

His more recent parts had been walk-ons, or showed him walking in or out of a premiere, or at a bar draped over some girl. Almost every part he played was in black tie. And he was as charming on the set as he was in real life. So much so that even now, the perks in his contracts were legendary. He somehow always got to keep his costumes, and negotiated his wardrobe, custom made at all his favorite tailors in Paris, London, and Milan. In addition to which, much to Abe's chagrin, he continued to buy more, wherever he went, along with antiques, crystal, linens, and staggeringly expensive art for his house. The bills were stacked up on Abe's desk, along with the bill for his most recent Rolls. Rumor had it he currently had his eye on a limited-edition, turbo-powered convertible Bentley Azure for

half a million dollars. It would be a handsome addition to the two Rolls, a convertible and a sedan, and the custom-built Bentley limousine he had in the garage. Coop viewed the cars and wardrobe not as luxuries, but as the necessities of life. Those were the basics, the rest was cream.

A houseman appeared from the kitchen with two glasses of iced tea on a silver tray. Livermore had disappeared. The young man hadn't even left the room when Abe looked over at Liz with a frown.

"He's got to fire the staff. I want to do it today." Liz saw the houseman glance back over his shoulder with a look of concern, and she smiled reassuringly at him.

It was her job to keep everyone happy and pay what bills she could. Their salaries were always top on her list, but even those had to slide for a month or two at times. They were used to it. And she herself hadn't been paid in six months. She'd had a little trouble explaining that to her fiancé. She always caught up when Coop did a commercial or got a small part in a film. She could afford to be patient. Unlike Coop, she had a nest egg socked away. She never had time to spend money, and she had lived frugally for years. Coop was always generous with her, when he could.

"Maybe we can let them go slowly, Abe. This is going to be hard on them."

"He can't pay them, Liz. You know that. I'm going to advise him to sell the cars and the house. He won't get much for the cars, but if he sells the house, we can pay off the mortgage, and his debts, and he can live decently on the rest. He can buy an apartment in Beverly Hills, and be in good shape again." He hadn't been in years.

But the house, Liz knew, was part of Coop, like an arm or a leg or an eye. It was his heart. It had been part of his identity for more than forty years. Coop would rather have died than sell The Cottage. And he wouldn't part with the

cars, she was sure. The idea of Coop behind the wheel of anything but a Rolls or a Bentley was unthinkable. His image was part of who he was, all of who he was in fact. And most people had no idea that he was in dire financial straits. They just thought he was casual about paying his bills. There had been a little problem with the IRS a few years before, and Liz had seen to it that all the proceeds from a movie he made in Europe had gone to them instantly. It had never happened again. But things were tough these days. All he needed was one great film, Coop said. And Liz echoed that to Abe. She always defended Coop, and had for twenty-two years. It was getting harder to do so lately because of the irresponsible way he behaved. That was just Coop, they both knew well.

Abe was tired of the games he played. "He's seventy years old. He hasn't had a part in two years, or a big one in twenty. If he did more commercials, it would help. But it still won't be enough. We can't do this anymore, Liz. If he doesn't clean this mess up soon, he's going to wind up in jail." Liz had been using credit cards to pay credit cards for over a year, as Abe knew, and it drove him insane. There were other bills that didn't get paid at all. But the idea of Coop in jail was absurd.

It was one o'clock when Liz asked Livermore to bring Mr. Braunstein a sandwich, and Abe looked as though there was smoke about to come out of his ears. He was furious with Coop, and only his devotion to his job kept him sitting there. He was determined to do what he had come to do, with or without Coop's help. He couldn't help wondering how Liz had stood him for all those years. He had always suspected they'd had an affair, and would have been surprised to learn that wasn't the case. Coop was smarter than that, and so was Liz. She had adored him for years, and never gone to bed with him. Nor had he asked. Some relationships were

sacred to him, and he would never have tainted theirs. He was a gentleman after all, and at all times.

Abe finished his sandwich at one-thirty, and she had drawn him into a conversation about the Dodgers by then, his favorite team. She knew he was a passionate baseball fan. Putting people at ease was one of the things Liz did best. He had almost forgotten the time, as Liz turned her head. She knew the sound of his car on the gravel, although Abe hadn't heard a thing.

"There he is," she smiled at Abe, as though announcing the imminent arrival of the three kings.

And as always, Liz was right. Coop was driving the Bentley Azure convertible the dealer had just loaned him for several weeks. It was a splendid machine, and suited him to perfection. He was playing a CD of *La Bohème*, as he came around the last curve, and stopped the car in front of the house. He was a breathtakingly handsome man, with chiseled features and a cleft chin. He had deep blue eyes, smooth, fair skin, and a full head of immaculately trimmed and combed silver hair. Even with the top down, he didn't have a hair out of place. He never did. Cooper Winslow was the epitome of perfection in every detail. Manly, elegant, with a sense of extraordinary ease. He rarely lost his temper, and seldom looked unnerved. There was an air of aristocratic grace about him, which he had perfected to a fine art, and came naturally to him. He was from an old family in New York, with distinguished ancestors and no money, and his name was his own.

In his prime, he played all the rich-boy, upper-class parts, a sort of modern-day Cary Grant, with Gary Cooper looks. He had never played a villain or a single rough part, only playboys and dashing heroes in impeccable clothes. And women loved the fact that he had kind eyes. He didn't have a mean bone in his body, he was never petty or cruel. The women he dated adored him, even long after they left him.

He somehow nearly always managed to engineer it so that they left him, when he had had enough of them. He was a genius at handling women, and most of the women he had affairs with, those he remembered at least, spoke well of him. They had fun with him. Coop made everything pleasant and elegant, for as long as the affair lasted. And nearly every major female star in Hollywood, at some point, had been seen on his arm.

He had been a bachelor and a playboy all his life. At seventy, he had managed to escape what he referred to as "the net." And he looked nowhere near his age.

He had taken extraordinarily good care of himself, in fact he'd made a career of it, and didn't look a day over fifty-five. And when he stepped out of the magnificent car, wearing a blazer, gray slacks, and an exquisitely starched and laundered blue shirt he'd had made in Paris, it was obvious that he had broad shoulders, an impeccable physique, and seemingly endless legs. He was six feet four, also rare in Hollywood, where most of the movie idols had always been short. But not Coop, and as he waved at the gardeners, he flashed not only a smile which showed off perfect teeth, but a woman would have noticed that he had beautiful hands. Cooper Winslow appeared to be the perfect man. And within a hundred-mile radius, you could see how charming he was. He was a magnet to men and women alike. Only a few people who knew him, like Abe Braunstein, were impervious to his charm. But for everyone else, there was an irresistible magnetism, a kind of aura about him that made people turn and look, and smile with awe. If nothing else, he was a spectacular-looking man.

Livermore had seen him coming too, and opened the door as he approached, to let him in.

"You're looking well, Livermore. Did anyone die today?" He always teased him about his somber mood. It was a challenge to Coop to make the butler smile. Livermore had

been with him for four years, and Coop was immensely pleased with him. He liked his dignity, his stiffness, his efficiency, and his style. It lent his home precisely the kind of image he wanted to achieve. And Livermore took care of his wardrobe impeccably, which was important to Coop. It was a major part of the butler's job.

"No, sir. Miss Sullivan and Mr. Braunstein are here, in the library. They just finished lunch." He didn't tell his employer they'd been waiting for him since noon. Cooper wouldn't have cared anyway. As far as Coop was concerned, Abe Braunstein worked for him, and if he had to wait, he could charge him for that too.

But as Cooper strode into the room, he smiled winningly at Abe, and looked faintly amused, as though they shared a long-standing joke. Abe didn't fall for it, but there was nothing he could do. Cooper Winslow danced to his own tune.

"They served you a decent lunch, I hope," he said, as though he were early instead of nearly two hours late. His style generally threw people off guard, and made them forget they'd been angry at him for being late, but Abe refused to be distracted and got right to the point.

"We're here to talk about your finances, Coop. There are some decisions we have to make."

"Absolutely," Coop laughed as he sat down on the couch and crossed his legs. He knew that within seconds, Livermore would bring him a glass of champagne, and he was right. It was the vintage Cristal he always drank, chilled to the perfect temperature. He had dozens of cases of it in his cellar, along with other fabulous French wines. His cellar was legendary, as was his taste. "Let's give Liz a raise," he beamed at her, and her heart went out to him. She had some bad news for him too. She'd been dreading telling him all week, and had put it off until the weekend.

"I'm firing all your domestic help today," Abe said without ceremony, and Cooper laughed at him, as Livermore left the room expressionlessly. It was as though nothing had been said at all. Cooper took a sip of the champagne, and set the glass down on a marble table he'd bought in Venice when a friend's palazzo had been sold.

"There's a novel idea. How did you come up with that? Shouldn't we just crucify them, or maybe shoot them perhaps? Why fire them, it's so middle class."

"I'm serious. They've got to go. We just paid their salaries, they hadn't been paid in three months. And we can't pay them again, we can't keep up this kind of overhead, Coop." There was a sudden plaintive note in the accountant's voice, as though he knew that nothing he could say or do would make Cooper take him seriously. He always felt as though someone had pressed the "mute" button when he was talking to Coop. "I'm going to give them notice today. They've got to be out of here in two weeks. I'm leaving you one maid."

"How marvelous. Can she press suits? Which one are you going to leave me?" He had three maids, as well as a cook, and the houseman who'd served lunch. Livermore, the butler. Eight gardeners. And a driver he used part-time for important events. It took a lot of staff to run his enormous house, although he could have done without most of them. But he liked being well served, and indulging himself.

"We're leaving you Paloma Valdez. She's the cheapest one," Abe said practically.

"Which one's she?" Coop glanced at Liz. He couldn't remember anyone by that name. Two of them were French, Jeanne and Louise, he knew who they were, but Paloma didn't ring any bells with him.

"She's the nice Salvadorian I hired last month. I thought you liked her," Liz said, as though speaking to a child, and

Coop looked confused.

"I thought her name was Maria, at least I've been calling her that, and she didn't say anything. She can't run this whole house. That's ridiculous," he said pleasantly, as he glanced back at Abe. Coop looked remarkably unruffled by the news.

"You have no choice," Abe said bluntly. "You have to fire the help, sell the cars, and buy absolutely nothing, and I mean nothing, not a car, not a suit, not a pair of socks, not a painting or a place mat for the next year. And then maybe you can start to dig yourself out of the hole you're in. I'd like to see you sell the house or at the very least rent the gatehouse, and maybe even part of this house, which would bring some money in. Liz tells me you never use the guest wing in the main house. You could rent that out. We could probably get a big price for it, and for the gatehouse. You don't need either of them." Abe had put considerable thought into it, he was very conscientious about what he did.

"I never know when people are coming from out of town. It's ridiculous to rent out part of the house. Why don't we just take in boarders, Abe? Or turn it into a boarding school? A finishing school perhaps. You come up with the oddest ideas." Coop looked vastly amused and as though he had no intention of doing any of it, but Abe was glowering at him.

"I don't think you have a full understanding of the situation you're in. If you don't follow my suggestions, you're going to have to put the whole house on the market and sell it in six months. You're damn near bankrupt, Coop."

"That's ridiculous. All I need is a part in one major film. I got a terrific script for one today," he said, looking pleased.

"How big is the part?" Abe asked mercilessly. He knew the drill.



"I don't know yet. They're talking about writing me in. The part can be as big as I want."

"Sounds like a cameo to me," Abe said, as Liz winced. She hated it when people were cruel to Coop. And reality always seemed cruel to him, so much so that he never listened to it. He just shut it out. He wanted life to be pleasant and fun and easy and beautiful at all times. And for him it was. He just couldn't pay for it, but that never stopped him from living the way he wanted to. He never hesitated to buy a new car, or order half a dozen suits, or buy a woman a beautiful piece of jewelry. And people were always willing to do business with him. They wanted the prestige of having him wear or use or drive their things. They figured he would pay for whatever it was eventually, and most of the time he did, when he could. Somehow, in time, the bills got paid, mostly thanks to Liz.

"Abe, you know as well as I do, that with one big film, we'll be rolling in money again. I could get ten million dollars for a picture by next week, or even fifteen." He was living in a dream.

"Make that one, if you're lucky. Or more like five hundred thousand, or three or two. You can't pull in the big money anymore, Coop." The only thing he didn't say was that Cooper Winslow was over the hill. Even Abe had boundaries about what he felt he could say to him. But the truth was he'd be lucky to get a hundred thousand dollars, or maybe two. Cooper Winslow was too old to be a leading man now, no matter how handsome he was. Those days were over for good. "You can't count on a windfall anymore. If you tell your agent you want to work, he can get you some commercials, for fifty thousand dollars, maybe a hundred if the product is big. We can't wait for big money to come in, Coop. You've got to cut back until it does. Stop spending money like water, reduce the staff down to next to nothing, rent out the gatehouse and part of this house, and we'll take

another look at things in the next few months. But I'm telling you, if you don't, you'll be selling this house before the end of the year. I think you should. But Liz seems to think you're determined to stay here."

"Give up The Cottage?" Coop laughed even more heartily this time. "Now that is an insane idea. I've lived here for more than forty years."

"Well, someone else will be living here if you don't start tightening the belt. That's no secret, Coop. I told you that two years ago."

"Yes, you did, and we're still here, aren't we, and I'm neither bankrupt nor in jail. Maybe you need to take mood elevators, Abe. They might help that dismal point of view." He always told Liz that Abe looked like an undertaker, and dressed like one. Coop didn't say it, but he strongly disapproved of Abe wearing a summer suit in February. Things like that bothered him, but he didn't want to embarrass him by commenting on it. At least he wasn't suggesting Coop sell his wardrobe too. "You're serious about the staff, aren't you?" Coop glanced at Liz, and she was looking at him sympathetically. She hated knowing how uncomfortable he would be.

"I think Abe's right. You're spending an awful lot on salaries, Coop. Maybe you should cut back just for a little while, until the money starts rolling in again." She always tried to allow him his dreams. He needed them.

"How can one Salvadorian woman possibly run this entire house?" Coop said, looking momentarily stunned. It was a truly absurd idea. To him at least.

"She won't have to, if you rent out part of it," Abe said practically. "That'll solve one problem at least."

"Coop, you haven't used the guest wing in two years, and the gatehouse has been closed for nearly three. I don't think you'll really miss either one," Liz gently reminded him,

sounding like a mother trying to convince a child to give up some of his toys to give to the poor, or eat his meat.

"Why on earth would I want strangers in my house?" Cooper asked, looking bemused.

"Because you want to keep the house, that's why," Abe said doggedly, "and you won't be able to otherwise. I'm dead serious, Coop."

"Well, I'll think about it," Coop said, sounding vague. The whole idea just didn't make sense to him. He was still trying to imagine what his life would be like without help. It didn't sound like much fun to him. "And you're expecting me to cook for myself, I assume," he said, looking nonplussed.

"Judging by your credit cards, you're out for dinner every night anyway. You'll never miss the cook. Or the rest of them. We can get a cleaning service in from time to time if things get out of hand."

"How charming. A janitorial service perhaps? Maybe we could get a crew of convicts on parole, that might work." There was a spark in Coop's eyes again, and Abe looked exasperated.

"I've got their checks, and letters giving them all notice," Abe said, looking grim. He wanted to be sure that Coop understood he was really going to fire them. There was no other choice.

"I'll talk to a realtor on Monday," Liz said in a soft voice. She hated upsetting him, but he had to know. She couldn't just do it without warning him. But she thought renting out the two guest facilities was actually not a bad idea. Coop wouldn't miss the space, and they could get a very high price for the rent. She thought it was one of Abe's better ideas. And it would be a lot easier on Coop than selling the place.

"All right, all right. Just make sure you don't bring some serial killer into my house. And no children for God's sake, or

barking dogs. In fact, I only want female tenants, and damn attractive ones. I should audition them myself," he said, only half-joking. Liz thought he was being exceptionally reasonable not to make a fuss about it, and she was going to try to find tenants as soon as she could, before he balked. "Is that all?" he asked Abe, as he stood up, signaling that he'd had enough. That had been a strong dose of reality for Coop at one go. And it was obvious he wanted Abe to leave.

"It'll do for now," Abe answered, standing up. "And I meant what I said, Coop. Do not buy *anything*."

"I promise. I'll make sure that all my socks and underwear have holes in them. I'll let you inspect them the next time you come."

Abe didn't respond as he walked to the door. He handed the envelopes he'd brought to Livermore and asked him to distribute them to the staff. They all had to be gone in two weeks.

"What a disagreeable little man," Coop said with a smile at Liz after Abe left. "He must have had a miserable childhood just to think like that. He probably spent his boyhood years pulling the wings off flies. Pathetic, and God, someone should burn his suits."

"He means well, Coop. I'm sorry, it was a tough meeting. I'll do my best to get Paloma trained in the next two weeks. I'll have Livermore show her how to handle your wardrobe."

"I shudder to think what that's going to look like. I suppose she'll be putting my suits in the washing machine. I might start a whole new look." He refused to be daunted by it, and continued to seem vaguely amused as he glanced at her. "It'll certainly be quiet here with just you and me and Paloma, or Maria, or whatever her name is." But he saw a strange look in Liz's eyes as he said it. "What's that about? He's not firing you too, is he?" For a fraction of a second,

she saw a look of panic, and it nearly tore her heart out. And it took her an eternity to answer him.

“No, he isn't, Coop... but I'm leaving “She said it in a whisper. She had told Abe the day before, which was the only reason why he wasn't firing her too.

“Don't be silly. I would rather sell The Cottage than have you leave, Liz. I'll go out and scrub floors myself to keep you.”

“It's not that...” there were tears in her eyes, “I'm getting married, Coop.”

“You're *what* ? To whom? Not that ridiculous dentist in San Diego?” That had been five years earlier, but he lost track of things like that. He couldn't even conceive of losing Liz, and it had never occurred to him she might get married. She was fifty-two years old and it seemed not only like she'd been there forever, but always would be. She was family after all these years.

There were tears rolling down her cheeks as she answered. “He's a stockbroker in San Francisco.”

“When did he come into the picture?” Coop looked shocked.

“About three years ago. I never thought we'd get married. I told you about him last year. I just figured we'd go on dating forever. But he's retiring this year, and he wants me to travel with him. His kids are grown up, and he finally said now or never. I figured I'd better grab the chance while I still have it.”

“How old is he?” Coop looked horrified. It was the one piece of bad news of the day he had never expected to hear, and which had shaken him up.

“Fifty-nine. He's done very well. He has a flat in London, and a very nice house in San Francisco. He just sold it and we're moving to an apartment on Nob Hill.”

"In San Francisco? You'll die of boredom, or get buried in an earthquake. Liz, you'll hate it." He was reeling from the impact. He couldn't begin to imagine managing without her. And she was blowing her nose and couldn't stop crying.

"Maybe I will. Maybe I'll come running back. But I thought I should at least get married once, just so I can say I've done it. You can call me anytime, Coop, wherever I am."

"Who's going to make my reservations, and talk to my agent? And don't tell me Paloma, whoever the hell she is!"

"The agency said they'd handle as much as they can for you. And Abe's office will handle all the bookkeeping. There's really not much else I do here," other than field calls from his girlfriends, and keep his press agent fed with fresh information, mostly about who he was dating. He was going to have to start making his own phone calls. It was going to be a new experience for him. She truly felt as though she had betrayed him, and was abandoning him.

"Are you in love with this guy, Liz, or just panicked?" It hadn't occurred to him in years that she still wanted to get married. She had never said anything to him, and he never asked about her dating life. It was rare for her to mention it to him, or to even have time to date anyone. She was so busy juggling Coop's appointments, his purchases, parties, and trips, she had hardly seen the man she was going to marry in the last year, which was why he had finally put his foot down. He thought Cooper Winslow was a narcissist and an egomaniac, and he wanted to save Liz from him.

"I think I'm in love with him. He's a good person, he's nice to me. He wants to take care of me, and he has two very nice daughters."

"How old are they? I can't imagine you with kids, Liz."

"They're nineteen and twenty-three. I really like them, and they seem to like me. Their mother died when they were very young, and Ted brought them up himself. He did a nice