

HER NEW BESTSELLER



Danielle
STEEL

Betrayal

About the Book

Tallie Jones is a Hollywood legend. An ambitious and passionate film director, her award-winning productions achieve the rare combination of critical and commercial success. But she has little interest in the glitz and glamour of Los Angeles, instead focusing intently on her work and family.

She has close, loving relationships with her daughter, her elderly father and Hunter Lloyd – her co-producer and partner of four years. Completing her trusted circle is Brigitte Parker – Tallie's best friend and devoted personal assistant. They've been friends since film school, and Brigitte's polished glamour and highly organized style provides a perfect balance to Tallie's casual appearance and down-to-earth approach to life.

However, as Tallie is in the midst of directing her most ambitious film to date, small disturbances start to ripple through her faultlessly ordered world. An audit reveals worrying discrepancies in her financial records, which have always been maintained by her trusted accountant, Victor Carson. Receipts hint at activities of which she has no knowledge. Someone close to Tallie has been steadily helping themselves to enormous amounts of her money. Her once safe world of trusted associates is suddenly shaken to its very core – and Tallie is in shock, trying to figure out who has betrayed her among those she trusts and holds dear...

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Also by Danielle Steel
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STEEL

BETRAYAL

To my beloved children,
Beatrix, Trevor, Todd, Nick, Sam,
Victoria, Vanessa, Maxx, and Zara,

May those you trust never betray you.
And may those you give your heart to
always treat it well, with tenderness and respect.
And may the love you give to others
come back to you tenfold.

With all my heart and love,
Mommy/d.s.

“In each loss there is a gain,
As in every gain there is a loss,
And with each ending
comes a new beginning.”

—*Buddhist proverb*

Chapter 1

THE TWO MEN who lay parched in the blistering sun of the desert were so still they barely seemed alive. There had been shattering explosions in the distance earlier, and one of them was covered with blood. Although they had been enemies, one of them now held the other's hand, as the lifeblood trickled from him. They looked at each other one last time, and then the injured man gave his last breath and died, just as there was the cracking sound of a gunshot nearby. The survivor of the pair looked wide-eyed and terrified as the man who had fired the gun appeared from behind them, seemingly out of nowhere, as though he had dropped from the sky like an avenging angel.

"Cut! ... and print!" a voice rang out in the stillness, and within seconds, everything was action, a flock of men with cameras and equipment entered the scene, the dead man stood up as the blood ran down his neck, and a production assistant rushed up to him with a cold drink and he guzzled it gratefully. The man who had been holding his hand an instant before walked off the set to get something to eat as soon as he was told that they were finished shooting for the day.

Two dozen people were talking, shouting, and laughing, and a tall, thin blond woman in ragged cut-off denim shorts, high-top sneakers, and a torn man's undershirt conferred with the camera crew with an enormous grin on her face.

Despite her fair coloring, she had a deep honey tan from being outdoors, and a mass of long, uncombed blond hair piled up on her head. A moment later, she braided it into a disheveled pigtail, and helped herself to a bottle of icy water as someone passed them out. There was an enormous catering truck nearby, and a still photographer shot the actors as they left the set. Four of Hollywood's biggest stars were in the film, which was always the case on her pictures. "It's going to be the best scene in the movie," the blond woman assured the head cameraman, as people came and went around them and checked with her, and the sound technician confirmed that he was happy with the scene too. Everything had gone smoothly. *The Sand Man* was going to be her best movie yet.

They were making her new film, sure to be an instant hit, like all the others Tallie Jones had made. Her films were box-office gold. She had been nominated for two Oscars and six Golden Globes. There were two Golden Globes on her desk, but no Oscars so far. And her pictures were an enormous success because she included both the kind of intense action men wanted in a film, just enough violence to suit their bloodlust without exploiting it excessively, and the sensitivity and emotional insights that made her films appealing to women. She offered the best of both worlds. Tallie had a Midas touch. At thirty-nine, she had been directing movies for seventeen years, and she hadn't made a lemon yet.

There was already a smell of victory on the set, and Tallie looked happy as she walked to the trailer that was her office on location with her dog-eared copy of the script under her arm. It included all the changes that the screenwriters had made the night before. Tallie was always honing and fine-tuning, she was a perfectionist, and people who worked with her accused her of micro-managing, but it was worth it. She turned her BlackBerry on as she walked into the air-conditioned trailer, and saw that she had two

messages from her daughter, who was a freshman in college at NYU in New York, studying pre-law. Maxine, or Max as they called her, had no interest whatsoever in a career in films, only the law. She wanted to be a lawyer like her grandfather, Tallie's father, Sam Jones. He was Tallie and Max's hero, and they were the only two women in his life. Tallie's mother had died of leukemia when Tallie was in high school, and her father had been supportive of everything she did. Tallie had taken him to the Oscars with her as her escort, when she was nominated, and he was fiercely proud and protective of her.

It was Tallie's mother who had made her fall in love with movies. She had taken her to every imaginable movie as a child, watched every classic with her, and was fascinated with films and actors herself. She had named Tallie Tallulah, after Tallulah Bank-head, who she thought was the most glamorous woman who had ever lived. Tallie had always hated her name, and shortened it to something she could live with, but she had loved every film she'd ever seen with her mother, who had wanted desperately to be an actress, and wanted her daughter to fulfill her dreams. She hadn't lived to see Tallie's career or the wonderful films she made. Tallie always hoped her mother would have loved them and been proud of her. Tallie's mother had married her father at twenty-one, when he was already a successful lawyer at forty-five. It was his second marriage, but Tallie was his only child. He was eighty-five now, retired, and suffering from poor health. They called each other every day, and he loved hearing how it had gone on the set. She was his link to the outside world now, since he rarely got out anymore. Crippled with arthritis, it was just too hard.

Tallie's marital career had been a checkered one, not surprisingly in the world she lived in, where unstable relationships and quick turnover were the norm. She always said that it was impossible to meet normal, decent guys in the film industry. Max's father had been another

story entirely. He was a cowboy from Montana she'd met at USC, and she'd gotten pregnant at twenty. She had dropped out of school for a year to have the baby, and her father had insisted they get married. They were both barely more than kids themselves, and by the time Max was six months old, her father had gone back to Montana, and they got divorced. Tallie had gone to see him a few times, to see if they could maintain the relationship, but their lives were totally different. Since then, he'd been on the rodeo circuit for twenty years, married a girl from Wyoming, and had three other kids. He sent Max a birthday card every year, a souvenir from the rodeo for Christmas, and Max had seen him four times in her life. He wasn't a bad guy, he just had no connection to Max, and came from another world. He'd been a handsome boy, stunningly so at twenty, and Max was even more beautiful than her mother, a six-foot-tall blonde, long and lanky with sky blue eyes. Tallie's eyes were green, and she was slightly shorter than her daughter. When they went out together, they made a striking pair, and looked more like sisters than mother and daughter.

Tallie's only other foray into marriage had been with an actor in one of her films. She never got involved with actors on the set of her movies, but had made an exception for him. He had been a major heartthrob, a big British star, and had swept her off her feet. She was thirty and he was twenty-eight, and he had cheated on her very publicly six months later when he was on location on another film. The marriage had lasted eleven months, they only spent three months of it together, and it had cost her a million dollars when she wanted out. He drove a hard bargain, and she paid the price.

She was alone for five years after that, and concentrated on her work and her daughter. She had no desire to try marriage again. And she'd been startled when she met Hunter Lloyd, a successful producer, and they started dating. There was nothing wrong with him, he wasn't a

cheater, a liar, or a drunk. He'd had his own bad experiences with two failed marriages that had cost him a fortune too. They had started dating four years before, and lived together for the last three. He had moved in with her after a year, and had given up his own house, a palatial home in Bel Air, to his last wife. And for both of them, the arrangement worked. Tallie and Hunt loved each other, Max loved him too, and he was great to her.

Hunt was a big, kind teddy bear of a man, and the picture Tallie was making was the second one she had produced with him. The first one had been a record-breaking box-office hit. Together they were even more successful than either of them had been alone. And Tallie was happier than she'd been in years. She didn't want anything more than they had. Hunt Lloyd and the solid, quiet, stable relationship they shared were perfect for her. She was a modest person, despite her vast success, and liked leading a quiet life. She had no time to go out anyway, she was either shooting, preparing a film, or in post-production. There was rarely a time when she wasn't working.

At twenty-one, after she had Max, Tallie had been "discovered" by a Hollywood agent, in a supermarket. He had gotten her a screen test and into a film. She had only done it for the memory of her mother, and because she knew what it would have meant to her. She did fine, and the film did well, but she had hated every minute as an actress. It wasn't for her, nor anything that went with it. Much to her agent's annoyance, she turned down all the offers she got after that, and there had been several. The camera had loved her looks, and with some coaching she had been a decent actress, but what she had fallen in love with was directing. It was what she wanted to learn, and when she went back to college after having Max, she enrolled in USC's film school and applied herself. Her senior project had been a small low-budget film that she

had made on a shoestring, financed with her father's help, and it had become a cult film, *The Truth About Men and Women*. It was the start of her career as a director. She had never stopped or looked back since.

Her first few movies did well and got rave reviews, and they started making big money by the time she was in her late twenties. She had become a Hollywood legend and a huge success in her seventeen years as a director. She loved what she did. What she didn't love, and never would, were all the trappings that went with it, the fame, the attention, the press, the premieres, all the opportunities to show off and be in the limelight. As far as she was concerned that was for actors, not for her, which was why she hadn't wanted to be an actress and loved being a director, and contributing to each actor's performance and interpretation of the script. After her one film as an actress, she could see what would happen to her if she pursued acting as a career, and she wanted none of it. Tallie was a worker, a creator, an artist. She was willing to work endlessly on everything she did, but not be a star. It was the one thing she didn't want, and she was very clear about it.

She'd had to go out and buy a dress for her first Golden Globes when she was nominated; she didn't own one. All she had were the clothes she worked in, which made her look like a homeless person most of the time. Tallie didn't care. She was happy just the way she was, and Hunt loved her that way too. He was smoother and more worldly than she was, and more involved in the Hollywood scene, but it never went to his head, and he was always content to come home to Tallie, sprawled out on the floor or the couch, poring over scripts. And when she was on location, he joined her whenever he could. He was more of a businessman than someone involved in Hollywood. Pictures were big business to him, and it didn't get much bigger than a film produced with and directed by Tallie Jones. And

whether she bothered to comb her hair or not was immaterial to him.

They were near Palm Springs, in the location they had set up. She had a hotel room there for when she wanted to spend the night, but most nights she tried to get back to her house in L.A. to be with Hunt, if she didn't have to work too late, or he came out to be with her.

Tallie wanted to look at some of the day's takes, particularly the last one, before she left the set for the day. She had three pencils and a pen stuck in her hair as she made notes and answered e-mails, and she was just leaving her trailer to go look at the day's rushes when a cloud of dust appeared on the road leading to the set, with a shiny silver Aston Martin causing it.

She squinted into the remaining sun as the sports car approached, spinning up a cloud of dust around it. The car came to a rapid halt near where Tallie stood, and she grinned as the driver got out. The woman emerging from the car was a spectacular-looking girl in a micromini skirt, with endless sexy legs, a striking figure, and a mane of blond hair. She looked rushed and windblown and like something in a movie as she climbed out of the car. She had an enormous turquoise bracelet on one wrist, diamond studs in her ears, and was wearing towering high heels.

"Shit, did I miss the last take of the day?" Brigitte, the beauty who owned the Aston Martin, looked annoyed, and Tallie grinned.

"It went great. You can watch the dailies with me. I was just going to look." Brigitte looked relieved.

"The traffic was unbelievable. I got stuck for half an hour twice." Brigitte looked every inch a star. In her platform stiletto sandals, she was taller than Tallie, her makeup was perfect, she never went out without it, and her outfit suited her to perfection, showed off her incredible body, and made her look irresistibly sexy. She was the opposite of Tallie in every way. Everything about her had

been carefully thought out to catch the eye, as opposed to Tallie, who preferred to think of herself as invisible, and liked it that way. Her whole business was to show off others, not herself. Brigitte Parker loved the attention she got and had none of Tallie's subtlety and shyness. The two women had similar looks, both tall, thin, and blond, but did entirely different things with the attributes nature had given them. Tallie hid them, and Brigitte shone a spotlight on them. Tallie honestly didn't care how she looked and never thought about it. Brigitte put a lot of thought and effort into her dazzling appearance.

They were the same age, but Brigitte had knocked ten years off her looks, although Tallie had done so inadvertently too. By looking as though she dressed out of a rag bag, in high-topped Converse sneakers, torn jeans, and T-shirts, she looked like a kid. Brigitte had had her eyes done, was proud of her breast implants, got Botox shots regularly, collagen in her lips, and spent time every day at Hollywood's most exclusive gym. She worked hard at how she looked, and the results were great. She was as beautiful as any star.

They had met at film school at USC seventeen years before. Brigitte had wanted desperately to be an actress, and was determined to learn everything about films she could. Everyone knew she was a debutante from San Francisco and didn't have to work, but all she craved was an acting career. Like Tallie, she had lost her mother at an early age. Her father had remarried a much younger woman very quickly, and the prospect of dealing with her "evil stepmother" had driven Brigitte to L.A. Tallie had hired her to help her with her first independent film, while she was in school, and Brigitte had been so efficient, so organized, and such an enormous help to her that she had asked her to work on her next film too. Brigitte made all aspects of Tallie's life easy, and she loved doing it. In the end, she had given up her dreams of becoming an actress,

and had been Tallie's assistant ever since. She was everything that Tallie didn't want to be or do. Brigitte was the perfect front man, protected Tallie fiercely from the press, and shielded her from all she could. She liked to say that she would have taken a bullet for her. There was such a naïveté and simplicity about Tallie in some ways that she needed someone to run interference for her and protect her. Brigitte was Tallie's representative in the world, and she thrived on every part of that, and she took all the tasks off Tallie's hands that she could, which gave Tallie more time for her work, or to spend with her daughter. She was grateful for what Brigitte had done for her in the past seventeen years. It was an arrangement that worked perfectly for both of them, and met both their needs, and the time they had spent together had made them best friends. As hard as she worked, Tallie never had time to have many friends. Brigitte was always there, protecting and pampering her in every way she could, and she took great pride in what she did for her. No task was too difficult, too challenging, too time-consuming, or too menial for her.

They walked side by side to the trailer where Tallie could view the dailies, and chatted animatedly about the day's takes, as Brigitte minced along the rocky path in her towering stiletto heels.

"You need to get yourself a decent pair of shoes," Tallie teased her with a grin. It was a comment she often made. Brigitte never wore anything but stiletto heels, as sexy as she could get them, and they looked great on her. She acted like they were running shoes.

"Like Converse maybe?" Brigitte chuckled. Tallie never wore her newer ones, but only the ones that were torn, stained, and full of holes. She could have looked as sexy and fabulous as Brigitte did if she wanted to, but it interested her not at all, and Hunt didn't care. He loved her as she was. Her scruffy look was part of her charm, and

what he admired most about her was her brilliant, creative mind. It was what Brigitte appreciated about her too. They both knew that Tallie would be recognized as one of the greatest filmmakers of her time one day.

They got to the trailer and watched the dailies together. Tallie was silent and intense, observing every minute detail. She had them stopped several times and made comments to the editors who would work on them in post-production. She had a keen eye and saw nuances that no one else did, which was what made her great. And she had a discussion with the assistant director and the editors before she left. It was after seven when she walked back to her trailer with Brigitte. Tallie looked tired but pleased.

"Are you going home tonight?" Brigitte asked her. She had an overnight bag in the trunk of her car in case Tallie wanted her to stay. She always put Tallie's needs and plans first, and made her own around her. It never bothered her to take a backseat to Tallie's life, which was one of the things that made her so valuable to Tallie. She was the perfect personal assistant in every way.

"I don't know," Tallie answered. "Did you see Hunt before you left?" She wanted to be at home with him, although she knew they wouldn't get back to the city till nine or ten.

"He said he'd cook dinner for you if you come home, or he'll drive out if you prefer. I told him I'd let him know." Tallie hesitated for a minute, and realized she wanted to go home. Even if they only had a couple of hours together before she went to sleep and had to get up at four the next morning, she liked being in her own house with him, and he was a terrific cook.

"I think I'll go back."

"I'll drive you. You can sleep on the way in." It had been a long day for Tallie, it always was on location. She was used to it and enjoyed it.

“Thanks,” Tallie said, and picked up a canvas bag she had been using as a handbag for months. She had found it at a garage sale, it was meant to carry plumber’s tools, and was perfect for the scripts and notebooks she carried everywhere, to study whenever she had the time and opportunity. She was always working, and making notes of new ideas, either for the scenes she was currently shooting, or for her next film. Her mind was constantly racing at a hundred miles an hour.

Brigitte texted Hunt that Tallie was coming home, as she had promised him she would. She had made a dozen calls for Tallie earlier that day, taken care of several errands, ordered some things for Max in New York, and paid the bills. Brigitte was the most efficient person Tallie had ever met, and Hunt agreed with her. He always said that Tallie was lucky that Brigitte had the kind of personality to do the job. She was perfectly content to live in Tallie’s shadow and be her emissary to the world. And it had perks for her as well. Every time Brigitte admired some new outfit, fur jacket, or piece of jewelry, the stores gave them to her, and she gloated victoriously. It was one of the best perks of her job. Jewelers and designers sent her gifts either for Tallie, or to induce her to convince Tallie to wear their creations, which Tallie had absolutely no interest in. She was only too happy to let Brigitte keep their gifts. Brigitte was delighted to accept them and looked fabulous in everything she wore. She had even gotten a great deal on her Aston Martin, and owned a gorgeous house in the Hollywood Hills with its own pool. She lived well, and had a lot of fun being Tallie’s assistant. It had been a great blessing for her for seventeen years. And even if she came from money and didn’t need the advantages Tallie offered her, she enjoyed them anyway, and didn’t have to deal with her father and stepmother. She liked being independent of the family money, although she admitted that she had paid for her house out of her inheritance from her mother, but it had been a great

investment, and was now worth two or three times what she had paid for it. Between what she had on her own, and the handsome salary Tallie paid her, along with a constant flow of complimentary gifts and perks, Brigitte lived a golden life, better than Tallie in many ways, or at least it looked that way.

Tallie was naturally more discreet, although she had grown up comfortable too, but not on the scale that Brigitte described her childhood. Brigitte went to see her family from time to time, and always complained about it when she did. She thought San Francisco was dreary, still hated her stepmother, and hadn't gotten along with her father since he'd been married to her. Tallie had been her family, the one she really cared about, for seventeen years, and Tallie felt the same way about her. Brigitte had become the sister she'd never had, and a benevolent adopted aunt for Max, who adored her, and told her everything about her life as she was growing up, sometimes even more than she did to her mother, particularly if Tallie was busy or on location with a film.

Tallie got into the passenger seat of the flashy Aston Martin, put on her seat belt and settled back against the seat. She'd been on the set since five o'clock that morning and suddenly realized how tired she was. They had handed her new script changes just before she left, and she took them out to read them on the way, but she was exhausted as they drove off the set.

"Why don't you just sleep?" Brigitte suggested. "You can read the changes tomorrow morning. I'll drive you back. You don't have to read them tonight." Tallie was unfailingly conscientious.

"Thanks," Tallie said gratefully. She couldn't imagine what her life would be like without Brigitte to do everything for her, and hopefully she'd never have to try. She hoped that they'd be old ladies together, and Brigitte always teased her and said that would be the case. She

assured her she wasn't going anywhere, she was never tempted to move on, or take any of the offers she frequently got trying to steal her away to work for someone else. She was quick to confirm that this was the job and employer she loved, and after so many years together, Tallie was also her best friend.

And then suddenly out of nowhere, Tallie chuckled as she glanced at herself in the mirror on the visor. "You look like you picked up a hitchhiker. I'm a mess."

"Yes, you are," Brigitte said, laughing as she glanced at her. "Maybe you should try combing your hair once in a while." Brigitte added extensions to hers, which made them look even more similar. Tallie's long mane was natural, and the big difference between them was that Brigitte's was always combed. She couldn't have gone to work looking the way Tallie did, but she wouldn't have wanted to anyway. And Tallie's work was more physically arduous, she was always climbing ladders, or riding up on cranes to get a better view of the shot. She sat for hours in the sun, without bothering to put sunblock on despite Brigitte's dire warnings about how wrinkled she'd get. Tallie would crouch on the ground behind a camera, or lie in the dirt to see the angle better. Tallie was a workhorse in every way, but even when she looked disheveled, she was beautiful, in a natural shining way. She seemed almost lit from within. Brigitte's looks were more studied and took far more work to maintain. Tallie would never have the patience or the interest to look that way or invest the time and effort it took.

"Thanks for driving me back," Tallie said gratefully with a yawn. Now that she was relaxing, she realized how tired she was.

"Close your eyes and go to sleep," Brigitte ordered her, and Tallie did what she said with a peaceful smile. And five minutes later, as they got onto the freeway to L.A., Tallie was sound asleep, as Brigitte drove her home.

Chapter 2

BRIGITTE SHOOK HER gently when they got to the house in Bel Air. Tallie didn't like obvious shows of wealth, but she had a beautiful home that was simply decorated, with stark, modern open rooms, and a peaceful feeling to it. Tallie had no need for clutter in her life. She had a house in Malibu she rarely had time to use, the apartment in New York for Max, and a small apartment in Paris that she had bought with her first big success. It was something she had always wanted, although she hadn't been there in two years, but she loved knowing she had it, and loaned it to friends occasionally. Brigitte had used it for her last vacation, and loved being there. Tallie had been in Africa on location while Brigitte had gone to Paris for a week. The perks of Brigitte's job were nothing less than fabulous, which was what being a personal assistant was all about. You shared your employer's life, and gave up your own to do it, and Brigitte's own life fit easily into Tallie's or around it. She had a date that night at ten o'clock, and if it turned out to be midnight because Tallie needed her for something, that was fine with her too.

"You're home," Brigitte said softly as Tallie opened her eyes. The script changes were still on her lap, unread. But Brigitte was right, she could do it in the morning. She felt refreshed after she'd slept. For a minute, she didn't know where she was.

"Wow, I slept the whole way," Tallie said with a grin, and looked like a kid sitting in the front seat of the Aston Martin outside her house. She still had all the pens and one pencil stuck in her hair. She added them one by one throughout the day.

"Hunt texted me and said he has dinner ready. You're a lucky woman," she said, as Tallie opened the door of the car.

"Yes, I am." But they both knew that an arrangement like Hunt and Tallie's had never been what Brigitte wanted. She liked her freedom and a variety of men, usually younger than she was, for only a short duration in her life, and most of them were actors working on Tallie's films. She had a weakness for young actors who had the potential for behaving badly. She never kept them around long enough to give them that chance. She slept with them during the filming of the picture, and after that they both moved on. It worked for her.

"I'll pick you up at four-thirty tomorrow morning," Brigitte called out to her, and Tallie waved as she got to her front door. She wanted to be back on the set by six. As usual, it would be a short night, and before she could unlock the front door with her key, it was opened by a tall, handsome man with dark hair and a beard wearing an apron over a T-shirt and shorts. He kissed Tallie hard on the mouth, and the door closed.

Brigitte drove away. One of the actors from Tallie's current movie was waiting for her at her house. She had told him where the spare key was. Tommy was twenty-six years old, and when Brigitte got home, he was naked and waiting for her in the pool.

"Well, isn't that a pretty sight." Brigitte smiled as she admired him, and then stepped out of her skirt, and stood there in her thong and high heels, and then she pulled off her shirt and unhooked her bra. The breasts she had invested in several years before stood in sharp relief

against the spotlights as the young actor gazed at her appreciatively. She had an amazing body, and made good use of it.

"Come on in," he said invitingly, thoroughly enjoying the warm water and the prospect of a night with her. They had been having an affair for the past six weeks, during the making of the film. No promises had been exchanged and wouldn't be. The kind of night they were about to spend with each other was all they wanted and all it would ever be. Brigitte wanted nothing more. She dove into the pool and came up between his legs, and he laughed. She was an incredible woman, and he had a great time with her. And he was hoping she'd help get him a part in another of Tallie's films after this. She hadn't promised, but she had implied it. And even if she didn't, he was having a ball with her. She was one of the most important women in Hollywood, as far as he and others were concerned, she had total access and the confidence of Tallie Jones. The one thing you could never do with Brigitte was say anything bad about Tallie. Brigitte was instantly ready to kill you if you did. She was the most loyal woman he had ever met. And offered the best sex.

* * *

Hunt handed Tallie a glass of wine as she walked in. She put her canvas bag and the script down on a kitchen chair, and smiled at the great smells all around them. The kitchen led out into the garden, and they wandered out onto the deck together and sat down. She was happy to see him and glad she had come home to him instead of staying in Palm Springs, and he was happy too. He was an easygoing person, and their lives had meshed perfectly for the past four years. There was rarely any friction between them, he had never disappointed her, and she loved sharing her work with him.

“Good day?” he asked, as he took off the apron and tossed it on a chair. He was taller than she was, and slightly round since he enjoyed eating well, but he was a handsome man. He was forty-five years old, and the beard gave him a more mature look than his years.

“Very good,” she confirmed with a smile about her day. “When are you coming to Palm Springs?”

“I can’t tomorrow. I’ve got meetings. Maybe the day after. How’d the death scene work out today?” He tried to keep up on the script changes, but with Tallie there were many of them, and sometimes she altered the script as she went along. She was always sensitive to how the dialogue was working, and let her actors add something more to it, if they could. The results were often breathtaking.

“It was perfect,” Tallie said, looking pleased. “I’m starving. What’s for dinner?” He often made Japanese food for her, Chinese, and Thai. He had a gift for Asian cuisine, and French, and sometimes made Mexican on the weekends. Hunt loved cooking, and everyone devoured what he made. It was fun coming home to the surprises he prepared, and the dinner he served her that night was no exception. They spent a relaxing evening, talking and eating on the deck, and he had gotten a bottle of her favorite white wine, Corton-Charlemagne. It was like going out to dinner whenever she came home, only better, because they were alone and she didn’t have to get dressed up or even comb her hair.

He was already working on putting together their next joint venture. They would be on location in Italy for it, and he was planning to spend a lot of the time there with her. They wanted to rent a villa in Tuscany for the duration of the film. He was already lining up the cast, and working with their insurers and investors to secure the film. It was what he did best, while Tallie did the directing. And he set it all up meticulously. He had enlisted an important Japanese investor to back the film. It was easy raising

money for a movie directed by Tallie Jones, but all the conditions had to be right. Hunt was great about it and as meticulous a perfectionist as Tallie.

"I think we're all set," he said about the Japanese investor as they cleared the table together after a wonderful meal. She had thanked him with a kiss. "The only thing he wants is an audit of our books on the project, and our personal ones as well. I guess he wants to make sure we're both solvent and won't run off with his money." He was smiling as he said it. "You don't have a problem with that, do you?" he asked her as they cleaned up the kitchen.

"Of course not. I'll tell Victor Carson to give him whatever he wants." They both knew he was a solid investor, and they wanted his money for their next film.

"He's using some very fancy independent accounting firm, run by a couple of ex-FBI guys. I hear they're pretty thorough, but that way everyone will be happy. We'll have his money, he'll know we're honest, and we can lock everything in." He'd been talking to all the big agents in Hollywood about who he wanted to star in it, and once they had the money, they'd be ready to move ahead very quickly with contracts.

"I'll have Brigitte call Victor tomorrow," Tallie said as they turned the light off in the kitchen and went upstairs to the large master bedroom with the enormous movie screen in it. They loved lying in bed and watching movies. But not tonight. It was midnight by then, and she had to get up in four hours. She was used to living on very little sleep when she was working.

She had wanted to call Max that night, but it was too late in New York by the time she thought of it, and she'd have to call her in the morning. And then Hunt mentioned that her father had called right before she got home and he'd forgotten to tell her.

"He has to have some tests tomorrow," Hunt told her, and she looked instantly concerned. "He said it's nothing important, just routine stuff. He was wondering if you were working tomorrow, and I said you were."

"I can have Brig take him, or his housekeeper Amelia," she said thoughtfully. Her father always said that her assistant was a Hot Mama, which made her laugh. He thought Brigitte was gorgeous and the sexiest woman he'd ever seen.

"I told him I'd drive him," Hunt said easily. "I can make the time. It's not a big deal. He was fine with it, if that's okay with you."

"You're a saint," she said, putting her arms around him and he pulled her close.

"No, I just love you. Thanks for coming home tonight."

"Thank you for cooking me dinner. Do you want to come to Palm Springs tomorrow night?" she asked him again, thinking that they'd have more time together without the long drive back to L.A., and the hotel they were staying at in Palm Springs was very nice, and had a terrific spa. She liked it when he came out there to spend the night with her. And sometimes it was easier for her than coming home if she had long shooting days.

"I've got some things I really need to do tomorrow, and a meeting tomorrow night. I think I'll come out the day after. Why don't you stay out there for the next couple of nights, so you don't have the long drive after work, and I'll spend the night with you the day after tomorrow?"

"Sounds good to me," she said, and then went off to take a shower, and a few minutes later she was in bed next to him, and cuddled up close to his body. She noticed that he was naked, and she peeled off the T-shirt she had worn as a nightgown, and they lay pressed against each other as he kissed her, and she was even happier that she'd come home.

"I miss you when you're on location," he whispered to her, and she kissed him again. Palm Springs was hardly a hardship location. There were films she had made where she'd spent six months in the jungle, three months living in a village in Africa, and they had been in places where civil war had broken out while they were there. Palm Springs was a piece of cake, and it was only two hours from home. They'd be coming back from location soon anyway, and it was a little bit like a vacation when he came out to spend the night with her.

"I miss you too," she whispered as he started to make love to her, and after that she forgot everything but him.

Afterward, they lay in each other's arms and talked for a few minutes, and she had to fight to stay awake. She was so peaceful and at ease, she couldn't keep her eyes open. She put an arm around him, and while he was still talking to her and stroking her hair, Tallie fell sound asleep.

Chapter 3

BRIGITTE WAS IN the driveway at four-thirty the next morning, right on time, as always. No matter what she did the night before, she always came to work on schedule, whatever the hour. She texted Tallie that she was there, and she came out of the house barefoot and carrying her shoes, and closed the door silently behind her. Tallie ran to the Aston Martin and got in. She had showered again and her hair was wet, and if possible she looked an even bigger mess than she had the day before. She was wearing another pair of ratty, torn denim cut-off shorts with a T-shirt that was in shreds.

"Is that fashionable and you paid a fortune for it," Brigitte asked, referring to the shirt with fascination, "or did you get it at Goodwill?" There were in fact items of clothing that looked like that, wrecked by trendy designers who tore the clothes before they sold them. Max was always buying things with that look at Max-field's. Tallie usually created hers for free, but with her you never knew. She rarely spent much on clothes. And designer anything was of no interest to her.

"No," Tallie said happily, "I got this shirt out of the garbage. Hunt threw it away, but I hated to waste it. It looks like it still has some life in it." She seemed pleased.

"As what? A rag at a car wash? You're the only woman I know who makes the kind of money you do and dresses out