

## **David Ambrose**

### **Hollywood Lies - Living Legend**

She lifted her face from the swirl of water in the sink and stared into the mirror. Her eyes stared back, dark and frightened, from a tangle of bleached-blond hair. What the hell had happened? Had she passed out? Where was she? Who with? As she struggled to remember, she felt her stomach tighten and convulse again. She lowered her head and turned the tap back on, but the feeling passed. The worst was over.

Straightening up, she studied her reflection critically. She wore no make-up and was naked under the terry-cloth robe that hung loose and open from her shoulders. "Gravity," she had said to somebody not long ago, "catches up with all of us in the end." Who was it she had said that to? A reporter? A friend? Male, female? She remembered that whoever it was had laughed because she herself had laughed as she spoke; but she had not been joking. She closed the robe and tied it tighter than was necessary.

The action seemed to rekindle her memory of where she was and what she was there for. The recollection made her catch her breath. No wonder she had drunk too much or done too many pills, or whatever combination of the two it was that had caused her to pass out.

Why had she let them talk her into it? The studio was going to kill her for leaving town without permission; the picture was already weeks behind schedule because of that viral thing that had kept her temperature going up and down like a yo-yo. No wonder she felt so terrible. She was doped up to the eyeballs with medication which had obviously disagreed with some of the regular stuff that she was taking. She didn't usually make mistakes like that. It was a bad sign; she would have to be more careful.

A glass of champagne, nearly full, stood on a shelf by the shower. Bubbles still ran to the surface, so it couldn't have been there long. Maybe she'd brought it in with her, though the thought of drinking it now made her stomach heave again. She wondered if there was something in the cabinet that would help. Opening the mirrored door, she sorted through bottles and phials and boxes until she found something familiar. She swallowed three capsules, cupping water in her hands to wash them down.

It didn't take long for the effect to kick in - two minutes, tops, during which time she did nothing, neither moved nor thought nor heard nor saw, barely even breathed. It was a technique she had long since perfected, an ability to shut down all systems and turn wholly inward until the thing that she was waiting for happened, that tiny click somewhere deep in her psyche that told her she could stop hiding now, that it was safe to come out and connect with the world. It wouldn't last long, this feeling: not long enough to get her through what was

ahead, but it should get her through the start of it, the preparations. Later was later, and she would deal with that when she got there. She had her secret ways, her own methods, painfully learned over long years of torment and triumph.

She gave a little laugh, girlish and teasing, child-like for her years. They were all out there waiting, the boys and girls with their soaps and scents, their hair-dryers and sequins, and she was ready for them now. They could go to work on their creation - her.

In a single movement she shrugged off the robe and it fell around her ankles. She stepped out of it and reached for the sparkling glass of champagne. It tasted good, just what she needed. She unlocked the door and stepped onto the soft carpet of the adjoining room, naked and sheathed in glory, the goddess returning to her chosen people.

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What the hell had gone wrong? One moment she was laughing and joking, putting everybody at their ease, full of confidence and looking forward to the evening; and the next she was alone, mascara running down her face, hair all messed up again, a great Rorschach stain spreading on the wall where she had flung her glass.

She ran into the bathroom. Her hand was shaking as she yanked open the cabinet and knocked half its contents into the sink and onto the floor. Panic welled up in her as she realized that what she needed wasn't there. How could she have let this happen? Christ, she couldn't think of everything herself! There were people who were supposed to look after her. Didn't the self-centered bastards ever think about anything except themselves?

Then she saw across the room the little traveling kit she always had with her, the one she prepared and usually packed herself. She had thought she'd forgotten it. Everything had been so rushed: getting off the lot in that helicopter, knowing that the studio would have stopped her physically if they could; then that long flight from the coast, trying to sleep but with the air-conditioning drying up her sinuses and irritating the infection she'd been fighting for weeks; finally being smuggled across Manhattan and in here through the basement, praying that the people they'd found to replace her usual team would be able to handle the make-up, the hair, the dress.

My God, that dress! One mistake with that dress and the whole thing would be a calamity.

Her fingers struggled with the zipper on the little plastic bag. She definitely didn't remember packing it, but she must have - thank God. But what was in it? She finally got it open, tipped out its contents on the straw-weave stool by the bath

tub, and breathed a great, gasping sigh of relief as she found what she was looking for. She would be all right now. A couple of minutes and she would be fine.

She sat there on the floor, wearing only pants and a bra. She closed her eyes, running a finger slowly up and down an imaginary crease in the middle of her forehead, letting her mind empty. Silence wrapped itself comfortingly around her. After a while she heard a few faint notes of music in the distance. It took her a moment to realize she was humming, rocking back and forth in time to the simple melody.

What tune was that? And the words? She had to remember the words. It was all starting to come back now. She'd been humming that tune and trying to remember the words, but she couldn't. She had to go out there and perform in a few minutes, and she couldn't remember a single word of what she was supposed to do. It was the ultimate actor's nightmare. Christ, no wonder she'd gotten upset! Nobody was helping her, nobody had offered to run through it with her, nobody had put a script into her hand. What the fuck did they expect? That she'd stay calm? They weren't the ones who had to go out there in front of thousands of people, all of them just waiting for her to make a fool of herself. None of them understood that fine knife-edge between triumph and disaster which was where you had to operate if you were going to be worth watching. That edge was what being a star was all about. People say they love you, but they're never on your side. They'll pay money to see you, but hoping you'll screw up so they can sneer and say you robbed them. They tell you they want to fuck you, but nothing in your life will ever give them as big a hard-on as your death.

Why had she thought of death? She wasn't going to die. Damn it, she could do this. She'd handle it. She just had to do it her own way, in her own time, the way she always did if she was going to get it right.

The tune. If she could remember the words of that damn tune she'd be all right. She hummed a few more bars. The clues were there...

She clapped her hands. She'd got it at last. She started to sing in a soft voice, her lips barely moving, her eyes closed.

Happy birthday to you,  
Happy birthday to you,  
Happy birthday, Mr President,  
Happy birthday to you.

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Waiting in the wings was all the more agonizing because of that perspiring fool out there stumbling over his lines and cracking unfunny gags about her. In truth,

she'd never really liked Lawford. They were friends, but in this business being friends didn't amount to a whole lot. You were friends with somebody till they fucked you over, and then you stopped being friends - until you needed them again, or till they needed you. Sure, Lawford had introduced her to Jack, but it had been Jack's idea. She knew that because he'd told her how much he'd wanted to meet her. All Lawford had to do was make the call.

Suddenly she'd had enough of standing in the dark listening to that feeble patter on stage. She took a breath, threw back her shoulders under her ermine wrap, and stepped forward into the blinding light. The crowd went crazy the way they always did, though it never helped her sense of nervousness; just raised the stakes. The higher they lift you, the further you fall. If you fall.

"Mr President," Lawford was saying, "never in the history of the world has one woman meant so much..." Then he broke off as he turned and saw her shimmering towards him in that long, tight, all but totally transparent dress. She moved with a light, skipping motion through jostling circles of light as the spot operators struggled to focus on and follow her.

Lawford's face was a professionally smiling blur as he stepped back to make room for her at the lectern with its bank of microphones. The set-up looked more like she was going to give a press conference than a performance.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Lawford continued, his arm creeping around her shoulder, "the late Marilyn Monroe."

That jolted her, totally threw her for a second - a second in which time stood still. She felt herself freeze up inside, as though somebody had walked over her grave. Why did the son of a bitch have to say that? He'd spooked her. He probably hadn't meant to, but that didn't make it any better. All the pills, that last extra split of champagne, suddenly weren't working for her any more. Everything around her seemed to rush away. For a terrible moment she thought she was going to pass out. She licked her lips, which suddenly felt dry as cardboard.

Then, as abruptly as it had enclosed her, the vacuum popped and the world came back in focus. Out there in the dark they were still cheering and applauding. Nobody had noticed that anything was wrong. Nobody ever did. She shrugged her shoulders, and the ermine dropped from them into Lawford's hands. The crowd's roar doubled as they got the first real look at that dress.

That dress - sequins and beading on a flesh-colored body-stocking of the sheerest silk mesh in the world. She'd had to be stitched into it, and anyone standing even a few feet from her would swear she was nude except for those artfully arranged little clusters of brilliance which were all she seemed to be wearing. She felt herself trying to suppress a smile as she imagined Jack's reaction. He'd be grinning from ear to ear, probably leaning over to make some

crack to Bobby or one of his cronies, loving it. And it was for him, just him. The rest of them out there could watch, but that was all. This was a private thing.

She tapped the microphone furthest to her right, the one she had been told to use. There was no reason to check it, except that it gave her an excuse to look down, compose her features, pull that schoolgirl grin back off her face and bury it inside where secrets like that belonged.

Now she was ready. She took a step to her right to get out from behind that damn desk, twisted the microphone to follow her, and gave them her most dazzling smile. The noise went on and flashbulbs were popping everywhere. Then, just as her eyes were adapting and she was beginning to see as well as hear, some fool hit her with a blinding white arc - probably because of the dress, and certainly the public seemed to appreciate the better look that it gave them; but thank God, when she put up her hands to shield her eyes, whoever was on the gantry took the hint and cut the glare a little.

"Time", something inside her was saying. "Don't milk it, ride it. Get into the number."

She began. One word. "Happy". The note quavered uncertainly in her ear, but she'd never pretended to be a singer; nobody wanted her to be. "Birthday to you..." She could feel the crowd were behind her, helping her on. In a moment they'd be singing along with her. Somewhere she could hear the band trying to pick up her key and find a tempo, but without success.

It didn't matter. It was going to work. It was going to be all right.

It was her night.

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Later, she wasn't so sure. Yes, it had gone all right; but it was Jack's night, not hers. Somehow, at the end of it all, she had felt diminished by the event. The spotlight had left her with an abruptness she was unaccustomed to, and the brisk way Jack had mounted those steps and effortlessly taken center stage had made her feel like an amateur in the shadow of his commanding professionalism.

But the thing that had really gotten to her was that word "wholesome". His slightly hesitant delivery had always covered an actor's sense of timing; she'd even told him once that he reminded her of Jimmy Stewart. Now there he was, role-playing to perfection, turning around to acknowledge the band, then back to the audience with that big grin on his face, letting them cheer and stamp and applaud as they hung on to every second of that pause for just as long as he chose to stretch it out. Finally he let them see that he was ready to speak.

"Thank you... I can now retire from politics after having had Happy Birthday sung to me in such a sweet, wholesome way."

It was the way that he'd turned to the band again in between "sweet" and "wholesome" that really drove the joke home. It was a a nudge in the ribs, a leer between guys: "We know the score here - right, fellas?" And the audience loved it. It was the biggest laugh of the evening, and at her expense. He had both acknowledged her and trashed her with that one, perfectly timed, ironic "wholesome".

By the time she got back to her dressing room she had made up her mind that she wasn't going to the party. Let them snigger if they wanted to behind her back. She felt like shit, she had a picture to finish in L.A., and she needed sleep. She had done her patriotic duty; fucking him was optional, and this weekend it was off the menu, birthday or no birthday.

She had just told someone to bring her a fresh glass of champagne, and was mounting a stool so that they could start peeling that dress off her, when the room fell silent. She hadn't been expecting it, but she knew at once what that kind of silence meant. It happened when somebody very famous joined a small group of people. It was the kind of reaction she herself provoked often. But this silence went further than that. Theses people were used to movie stars. It took more than fame to provoke this kind of reponse. It took power. She looked over her shoulder, and saw Jack.

Everyone was already leaving as though in response to some unspoken order from him, though he didn't look at any of them, didn't even seem to be aware of them. His eyes were fixed on her, and there was an amused half-smile playing around his mouth. He didn't move until his Secret Service detail had shut the door, staying outside in the corridor with everybody else. Then he spoke.

"You were great. Song was great. So's the dress."

"Wholesome?" she said, lifting one eyebrow a fraction.

He laughed. "Yeah. Wholesome." He took a step forward. "What are you doing up there?" As he said it, he held out a hand to help her down from the stool. She ignored it.

"I was about to get changed," she said.

"Don't do that. Wear it to the party," he said.

His hand was still out. She took it and stepped down. It gave her a moment to think about what she was going to say.

"I'm not going to the party," she said. She was looking up at him now instead of down. She wished that she'd stayed on the stool.

"Oh, come on," he said, not taking her seriously. "You can't let me down. Everybody wants to meet you."

What was he planning, she wondered? To hand her around like a slice of birthday cake? "I'm not feeling great," she began, but he wasn't listening.

"We'll ride over there together," he said. "Get your wrap and let's go."

She wasn't expecting that. Ride over there together? It made a big change from the hide-and-seek games they usually played, with her wearing sunglasses and a dark wig, being smuggled in back doors and service elevators to the President's suite. What was going on? Was it possible that he was about to acknowledge their relationship openly?

Everything she had dreamed off since their first meeting raced through her mind. She knew that her fantasy of supplanting his wife and becoming First Lady of the United States was just that - a fantasy. But she also knew that fantasies come true. Look at her life: the girl from nowhere who became the biggest female star in Hollywood, married the greatest athlete in America, then its most famous playwright. If that wasn't a fantasy come true, then she didn't know what was. And now..?

He kissed her on the lips. At the same time his hand ran down her back and squeezed her left buttock so hard that she gave a little gasp. But she didn't mind. He was looking at her with that softness that made her forget and forgive everything except how much she loved and wanted him.

"How the hell does this thing come off?" he asked, his hands fluttering all over now, pulling and tugging at the dress.

"I thought you wanted me to wear it for the party," she said.

"I do, but..."

"If it comes off, it stays off," she told him with a laugh. She was feeling wonderful now, light as a feather, like a little girl.

"Let's go," he said, his grin widening as he took her hand and headed for the door. The two Secret Service men snapped to attention as he pulled it open. Everyone else had been cleared away.

She was still laughing as he strode down the corridor, pulling her along so that she had to take awkward little running steps to keep up with him in that tight skirt.

Then they were at the limo, its door open, the soft interior beckoning. The door slammed shut with a solid, reassuring sound.

Outside the darkened windows the lights of Manhattan zipped by. She leaned her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes, listening to the sirens as they cleared a way for them through the dense uptown traffic. She was, she realized with that little shiver of surprise that always accompanied the feeling, happy.

The sound penetrated her consciousness only slightly. Its familiarity made it both something to ignore, or, depending on where you were and what you were doing, something to pay very close attention to. Present circumstances favored close attention: somewhere a zipper had unzipped. It wasn't hers. There was only one - clear plastic down the back of the dress - and that hadn't budged. She opened her eyes a fraction. Jack's pants were undone and his hand was pulling out his penis in a way that left no doubt about what he wanted from her.

It was over in about a minute; Jack was always on a short fuse. It didn't do much for her, though the thought of giving head in the Presidential limo with the cops on their motorbikes riding right alongside made it kind of appealing. She lifted her face to look up at him. His head lolled back in ecstasy on the plush upholstery. It always amused and in some ways bewildered her that men were so easy to keep happy, at least on that level. She tidied him away and was about to zip him up, when she felt him move. He was looking down at her.

"Leave it," he said.

"You can't arrive at the party like this," she answered with a smile.

"Fuck the party. We aren't going to no fucking party."

The tone of his voice shocked her. There was a thickness to it that was alien to him, crude almost. Jack was a lot of things, including sometimes crude; but always with a touch of lightness, and usually some wit. There was no lightness in the voice that had just spoken.

"What d'you mean no party?" she protested. "You can't not show up at your own party. Think of all those people who are waiting for you."

"Fuck `em. I've got other plans for you and me, baby." He was looking at her now, and there was something in his face she didn't recognize, a coarseness, an almost drooling carnality that alarmed her. It was a look that made her feel cheap, anonymous, disposable; a look that she had never seen in him before.

"What plans?" she inquired, not managing to hide the unsureness in her voice.

"You'll find out. Don't worry about it."

"Who says I'm worrying?" She drew away from him slightly, making an effort to steady her voice and sound more confident than she felt. "A while ago you were telling me how everybody wanted to meet me and I had to be there. Now why the change of plan? I don't understand."

The truth was that she understood only too well, or feared she did. She almost laughed aloud when she thought back to her fantasies of barely half an hour ago. How could she have been naive enough to think that Jack would even dream of walking into a roomful of socialites and political big-hitters with her on his arm, let alone one day acknowledge their relationship to the whole world? The years of psychoanalysis, not to mention countless hours of grueling self-examination in acting class, had taught her to face things that could not be escaped. Ultimately she always faced the truth; it was what kept her sane.

"Where are we going, Jack? Can you tell me?" She tried to sound casual, but his arm was around her and his weight against her, and his other hand was trying to find a way under her skirt and up her leg.

"Hey, baby, we can go anywhere we like." His voice was rougher than before, breathless, like an animal on heat who'd had his first taste and wanted more, much more. "We can drive around a while..."

"Drive around? Like this?"

"Why not? Aren't you having fun?"

"Jack, I... I really wanted to go to that party with you... you know?"

"Will you stop going on about the fucking party? The party's no part of this deal - all right? Will you try to get that through your fucking head? There's no party."

She didn't respond. She didn't trust herself to speak. So this was where it ended, full circle, where it started: on her knees to some guy - starting in a field behind the orphanage, then a hotel room, then maybe a million hotel rooms. After that it had been studio bungalows, executive suites, private yachts and penthouse apartments. And finally, now, in the back of the Presidential limo, in the middle of the Presidential fucking motorcade, going up (she looked out of the window) Fifth fucking Avenue.

"Not bad for an old broad of thirty-six", she had joked earlier in the day when they were getting her into the dress. Everyone had laughed and said she was good for a long time yet. But how much time did she have? Already it was too late for so many things. And what did she have to put in their place? How much longer would she even be a star?

Like a fool she had left her pills in the dressing room. There was nothing between her and the raw panic she could feel coming at her like a wall. She couldn't handle this. She had to get out. Somehow.

She moved so fast that he didn't know what happened. There was a tearing sound and he looked down at the flimsy shred of fabric in his hand. He saw a flash of hair, of flesh, her hands outstretched, reaching for the door. She yanked the handle back, pushed, and launched herself full length into the night.

His cry echoed behind her. Echoed, but did not die away as it should have. She hit the ground, and realized that the car wasn't moving. Had they stopped without her noticing?

She became aware that she wasn't hurt, not even grazed. She hadn't fallen far or hard enough. And this was no road surface she was pushing herself up from. It was smooth and firm, yet had absorbed the impact of her fall.

"What the fuck - ?" Jack roared behind her.

She turned. He was getting out of the car after her. But it wasn't Jack. He was dressed like Jack, he was the man she'd just been with. But how in hell had she ever thought this man was Jack? She saw now that he was shorter, heavier, with thinning black hair and a round face flushed with anger.

"What the fuck is going on here?" he yelled over her head at somebody she couldn't see.

She followed his gaze, taking in her surroundings in a single sweep; and she realized that something was terribly wrong. She could still hear the sounds of the street, and she could see people on the sidewalk and lights and traffic and movement of all kinds; but it wasn't real. It was some kind of back-projection, but a kind she hadn't seen before. There was a 3-D quality to it, and it didn't seem to be projected on a screen so much as hanging there in the air, a glittering, moving model of reality.

"Somebody fuckin' answer me!"

The man she'd thought was Jack was screaming now in a paroxysm of rage. She turned back - and saw that the thing she'd just jumped out of wasn't a vehicle at all. It didn't even have wheels. It was a section, a mock-up, a studio set for an interior limo scene.

She was almost on her feet now, but her legs buckled under her. She would have blacked out - except that the world blacked out first, which piqued her attention so hard that she stayed conscious and watching.

Where Fifth Avenue had been just a moment ago there were now only black drapes with a couple of weird tripod-type arrangements in front of them, each one supporting a little metal box with a kind of tiny camera lens on the front. She figured that these must be projectors, but she still couldn't work out what they must have used for a screen.

A couple of seconds after the world vanished the sound of it died too. In the silence she heard running feet coming towards her, and voices, men's voices, alarmed and angry.

She looked around for some escape. There was only darkness everywhere, so she ran in the opposite direction from where the men seemed to be coming. She had lost one shoe; now she kicked the other off and ran barefoot. She heard another sharp tearing sound as the tight skirt split up beyond her knees. Holding her breath, she pushed through the heavy black drapes, fighting her mounting sense of panic as the darkness went on and on it seemed for ever.

Then, suddenly, there was light. A single bulb suspended overhead illuminated a bare, black-curtained semi-circle in the center of which a narrow stage had been erected. But it was the thing on the stage that caught her eye. She had to look at it for several moments before she could be sure. Then, still not taking her eyes from it, she mounted the wooden steps that "Jack" had mounted earlier, and stood before the lectern and the bunch of microphones where she had sung "Happy Birthday" not so long (but how long?) ago.

Slowly she turned, numbly looking for the vanished vastness filled with twenty thousand cheering people who had laughed and loved and sung along with her in celebration of the birthday of their glamorous President. But all she could see were a couple more of those little camera-like things on their tripod supports. Above them, suspended on the end of filament-thin cable, were a half dozen or so miniature spots which, she found herself thinking, must have far more power than their size suggested to have dazzled her as they had when she was here before.

Only as the shock of recognition wore off did the questions rush in: Why? Where? How? What sense did it all make? Was she insane, imaging it all? Was that the only explanation?

She looked down at herself, at the torn and ragged dress, the bare feet dusty from the floor, and thought of Cinderella. She could feel her hair was all mussed up and her make-up smudged and running. She must look a fright. A sound came from her throat, something between a sob and laughter.

"She's over here!" she heard someone shout. "On the Garden stage."

Out of the corner of her vision she caught a flash of movement, but she didn't wait for more. Leaping from the low stage, she plunged once more into the dense black drapes like some B-picture heroine fighting her way through a studio jungle.

It was more frightening this time. She could hear them all around, closing in on her. She expected any second to be seized roughly in the darkness, and gave an involuntary cry of alarm as one of the invisible drapes wrapped itself around her and clung more tightly than the rest.

Pulling herself free, she stumbled backward and against something flat. It wobbled and gave way, and as it fell a light once more washed over her. She found herself standing in the bathroom of her dressing room - minus one wall which was now under her feet. Nothing else had changed. There was the mirrored cabinet, the straw-weave stool by the bath tub, and on the stool her little plastic traveling kit of pills.

She lunged for it like a junkie for a fix, a soul in search of salvation. Her trembling fingers had sorted twice through all the phials and bottles before she realized with a cold sensation down the spine that there was no drug, no upper, downer, tranquillizer, stimulant or vitamin that was capable of making any impact on the surreal nightmare in which she now found herself. There was nothing between her and what was happening. If she was hallucinating, she didn't know how or why, and she sure as hell didn't have the antidote. And if she was insane, if that final, primal terror of hers had at last risen up and come to claim her, then there was nothing she could do.

For a moment she just knelt there by the little straw-weave stool and the bath tub, paralyzed by a sense of emptiness. A second or a year could have passed without her knowing the difference. Then she felt eyes burning, the way they always did, into her back. She spun around. Watching her from the door of her dressing room were a handful of anxious faces: hairdressers, wardrobe, make-up. But what was wrong? They were the same people she'd worked with, talked with, laughed with, screamed at earlier. And yet, like Jack when he got out of that mock-up limo, they were somehow subtly different, not quite the way they'd seemed.

They scattered as she came towards them. By the time she stood in the center of the dressing room itself the place was empty. She turned around. On an instinct she went up to one of the walls and pushed. It rocked. A goddamn set. Not real.

But the shouts in the distance were real enough. Whoever those men were who were after her, they weren't giving up. She ran to the door that led to the corridor and looked out. It was deserted. Last time, with Jack, they'd gone to the right. Now she turned left. After ten yards or so another corridor crossed. She remembered vaguely that left had been the way that had taken her to the Garden

stage before, so now she turned right - and let out a shrill scream of pure terror as she cannoned into somebody's arms.

It was Lawford, without his tuxedo now, tie-less and in his shirtsleeves. Their faces were inches apart, and he looked more terrified than she was.

Except it wasn't Lawford. She knew he was the man she'd somehow taken for Lawford, but he wasn't. She didn't even have to break away from him; he pressed his back to the wall and just watched, open-mouthed, as she ran.

The first door she saw had "w.c." painted on it in small letters. She pushed; it was stuck. She hit it with her shoulder, and it swung open - not into a bathroom, but once more into that strange, dark hinterland of black drapes that seemed to surround all these oases of illusion. But this time the darkness lasted only for an instant. As quickly as she was in it she was through it, running now across a vast open though enclosed space, the smooth, warm floor slapping beneath her bare feet. Ahead was a postage stamp of daylight, growing as she approached.

She knew where she was now: a sound stage in some studio. Why or how were questions without answers, but it was some small comfort to be in surroundings that at least she recognized.

Her breath came raggedly and her lungs were starting to burn. She didn't remember when she'd ever run like this. She kept her eyes on that small patch of light, letting its growth push all else from her mind. In a few moments she would be through it, leaving this madness behind her on the studio floor where it belonged.

The warm, bright air hit her like a hammer blow. She stumbled, blinded, tripped and fell - but never hit the ground. Strong arms caught her, held her, then lifted her lightly, easily upright.

He had dark, thick hair, slicked back. His skin was pale but not unhealthy-looking. His features were chiseled, the nose fine and perfectly symmetrical, the cheekbones high and prominent. He wore sunglasses unlike any she'd ever seen; they seemed molded to the contours of his face instead of resting on them: part of him, not accessories.

"That's enough. Calm down. You're going to do some damage to yourself."

His voice was soft, filled with the bland confidence of someone who knew that his authority over her was total. She didn't like that; it was the way the doctors had spoken last time she'd been hospitalized with that so-called "breakdown".

"Let me go!" She struggled, but he held on, long fingers curled with effortless strength around her wrists. Something in the way that black-gazing, eyeless face stared down at her, into her, unmoving, made her stop struggling.

"That's better," he said. "Nobody's going to hurt you."

"Who the fuck are you?" she asked, so short of breath that half the words were swallowed as she gasped for air.

"It doesn't matter," he answered. The way he dismissed the question, and by implication the questioner, as unimportant angered her more. Who the fuck was this flunky to talk to her that way?

"Do you know who I am?" she shouted in his face.

"I know exactly who you are," he replied. There was a hint of movement somewhere around those hidden eyes, a twitch of the tip of that all-knowing nose.

She bit him. She sank her teeth deep into the heel of the hand that was gripping her right wrist. He gave a howl of pain and let her go. She ran without looking back, careening around corners and down the white-walled canyons between sound stages, finally reaching the long, low, colonial-style executive offices with their venetian-blinded windows and trimmed herbaceous borders.

The strange thing was that nobody was about. It was the first time she had seen a studio lot without people passing and crossing everywhere, either on foot or riding golf-carts, talking urgently, delivering messages, hurrying to meetings. Even on a public holiday there was always somebody about. Now it was as though the whole place had been cleared for some mysterious purpose she knew nothing of.

Once more, behind her, she heard running feet, more shouting. She glanced over her shoulder. They weren't in sight yet, but they were close.

Another corner; then, on her right, she saw steps leading up an outside wall to the second floor of one of the office buildings. She ran up, grasped the handle of the door at the top - and froze.

From where she was she could see a section of the studio main gate. She had glimpsed a couple of things as she ran that had given her a good idea of which studio lot she was on, and that famous gate confirmed it.

She could also see out over the boundary wall and clear across to downtown L.A. But something elusive, something she could not put her finger on, was wrong. She ought to have been looking out over cars, freeways, and block after

block of ugly buildings to a skyline eternally shrouded in that yellowish haze that always looked the way she thought bad breath would look if you could see it.

Instead, she found herself looking out over a gleaming city of glass and chrome, marble and stone. The air was so crystal clear that she could see, for the first time she could remember, mountains in the distance. And the skyline itself was not only crisply defined against the cloudless sky; it was also different. It rose higher, spread further.

Then, beyond it all, she saw something the like of which she had never seen outside of those dumb science fiction movies where spaceships wobbled against painted backgrounds. But this was no model, and that was no painted background.

The thing had a metallic look, but didn't reflect the light. It had a simple, sculpted shape, and rose gently into the air as though by gravity-defying magic. It was hard to tell how big it was, but she had a feeling it was huge. It hung for a moment, then banked gently to one side and accelerated so fast towards the horizon that in seconds it had disappeared.

She barely had time to question what she she'd seen, let alone wonder what it meant, before the voices bore in on her again, drawing dangerously close. Her fingers still gripped the handle of the door. She pushed, and a moment later was running down a long carpeted corridor, reassuring in its relative familiarity.

On the walls hung portraits of movie stars and stills from pictures that she mostly recognized, and the rest she didn't have time to think about. She heard a door bang somewhere up ahead, then another one behind. They were checking the building. Although she didn't think they'd seen her, she was trapped. She pushed open the nearest door, and found herself in some executive office. At one end was a large desk with nothing on it but two phones and a blotter. At the other end armchairs and a couple of sofas were arranged around a coffee table for informal meetings. On the walls were movie posters, prints from the Los Angeles Museum of Art, and photographs.

She looked around for some way out. If this was a movie, she couldn't help thinking, there'd be a lower rooftop outside the window with a safe drop into some convenient haystack, or a truckload of mattresses that happened to be passing. But this was not a movie, and there was no way out. Nor was there, so far as she could see, much place to hide.

Then, at about knee-height and marked only by a hairline in the clean white paintwork, she saw a hinged panel in the air-conditioning duct beneath the window. She found the tiny white-painted handle, yanked it open, and rolled into the confined near-darkness.

The panel had a fine filigree pattern carved into it which gave her a limited and fragmented view of the room. Almost at once she saw the door open and two men enter. They made a quick search - checking behind furniture, curtains, connecting doors - then went out. She realized she had been holding her breath, crouched, with her legs tucked under her. She exhaled gratefully and tried to shift her position, wondering whether she should stay put or make a run for it. Before she could decide, the door banged open again.

"Shit! This is all we need." She recognized the man she had bitten. He had a band-aid on now, but was massaging the wound as though it was still painful. "Bitch nearly bit my hand off!"

"You okay, Al?" The question came from a younger man who followed him in. His voice and manner marked him out as some kind of gofer.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Get out there and help find her."

"Merrill says will you talk to the client? He's real upset."

"Yeah - ask him to step in here, will you?"

The gofer left. She watched as the one called Al, the one she had bitten, paced the room anxiously. Once he came and stood right in front of the dusty cubbyhole where she was hiding. She held her breath until she almost burst and was sure she would give herself away; but then there were footsteps in the corridor and Al crossed over to the door. It opened and the man she had taken for Jack was shown in by the gofer, who left them alone.

"Sir, I'm truly sorry about all this," Al began, making an effort to sound more in control of things than he'd seemed a few moments ago. "I apologize, and we're doing everything possible to get things back on track just as fast as we can."

"What the hell went wrong?" Jack demanded. For some reason she still thought of him as Jack even though he so obviously wasn't. Everything about him was wrong, from the belligerence of his voice to the squat, stocky form that it came from. She fought back a wave of disgust as she remembered what she had done with this ugly little man.

"We have to remember," Al was saying, "that we're dealing with something organic here, therefore by definition not entirely predictable. If you think about the process..."

"I know all I need to know about the damn process," Jack snapped. "I saw that movie a million times on TV when I was a kid - the one about cloning those things from their own DNA. Shit, if they could do it back then, how come you can't get it right now?"

"In fact they couldn't actually do it in those days. That was just a piece of fiction. However, in recent years..."

Jack interrupted again with a wave of his stubby hand. "Look, I haven't got all day. Why don't you just get another one up here? You've got others, haven't you?"

"None available, I'm afraid. At least, none that can be ready for this scenario in the time we have."

"Then just what the hell do you propose?"

"As soon as we find her we'll have everything back to normal in no time. All we have to do is - "

Jack waved his hand again, bored with the details. He took a cigar from a case in his pocket and clipped it with a silver cutter as he spoke.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do," he said. "I'm going to take a walk around, look at some of the exhibits you have here - and if you get this show on the road inside an hour, let me know. Otherwise I'm gone." He lit a match and touched it to the end of his cigar.

"I'm sure there'll be no problem, sir. Make yourself comfortable, and of course the hospitality wing is entirely at your disposal."

"Find her, fix her..." Jack inhaled his cigar, blew out a cloud of smoke, and gave Al one of those sly, dirty, between-guys kind of smiles, "... and leave the rest to me."

She didn't see them leave because her head was down and her eyes shut tight. She didn't know whether she was holding something in or keeping it out. Distantly, she heard them walking away, still talking, though she couldn't catch what they were saying.

For some time she remained absolutely still, re-playing in her head the conversation she had overheard. In the end it was the sheer physical discomfort of her position that made her move. She pushed open the panel, crawled halfway out, stopped, and listened hard. She could hear nothing. It seemed that the whole building was once again empty.

The first thing she saw when she stood up was her reflection in a mirror. She looked like she'd been pulled through a hedge; which, come to think of it, she pretty much had been. But there was nothing she could do about that now. The

most important thing was to get hold of her agent, her lawyer, her analyst if need be - whoever and whatever it took to get her the hell out of here.

She ran to the large desk and picked up a phone. She had started to dial before she realized that the line was dead. She picked up the other phone. The same. She jiggled the cradle. Nothing.

"That won't help you."

The voice came from behind her, making her spin around with a gasp of surprise. Al was standing in the door, watching her from behind those strange dark glasses.

"Those phones are just museum pieces, baby," he said, coming into the room and closing the door behind him. "Like this whole place. A tribute to the past. To the days when they made movies the way you remember them. Long gone faraway days."

She backed away from him, still holding the phone like a weapon to defend herself.

"I figured you must be somewhere in this block," he said. "Only place you could be after we checked everywhere else."

"Don't come near me," she warned, feeling foolish, as she always did when she tried to threaten somebody, which anyway wasn't often.

"It's okay," he said, spreading his hands so that she could see the palms. "I told you - nobody's going to hurt you."

"What's happening?" she said, her voice trembling with rage as much as fear. "What the fuck is going on here? Tell me!"

He sighed, then walked over to one of the sofas and sat down, crossing his legs, oddly relaxed compared with how he'd been before. It was as though the fact of having found her made everything all right. She noticed for the first time how well his clothes hung on him. It wasn't just the way they were cut, loose but form-fitting; it was something in the material itself, a texture, natural but somehow resistant to stretching or creasing.

"There's no way you can understand what's happening. You're better off not asking. In a while you won't even want to. Trust me."

"Fuck you."

He made a little gesture, a kind of shrug, to show that he wasn't offended. There was something condescending in it that puzzled her as much as it angered her. Who was this guy who she'd never seen before to treat her like this? Nobody treated her like this. Nobody! Not any more.

"Answer my question."

He was looking up at her, his head slightly cocked to one side, as though something about her provoked his curiosity.

"What the hell!" he said eventually, as though making a decision. "I'll answer it."

He placed his hands on his knees and levered himself upright again. He was still looking at her, and she at him. She was unused to being stared at by someone in dark glasses. Usually it was the other way around; and if the star wasn't wearing them, nobody wore them. But she didn't say anything. She felt that what she was about to hear was more important. She knew how to listen when she had to.

"What you are, baby, is a Living Legend. The biggest of them all. Others come and go, but you just keep on getting bigger. You're a phenomenon. You're the only one they want."

She hadn't taken her eyes off him. Still she didn't. He'd warned her that she wouldn't understand. Perhaps she wouldn't. Yet in some odd, hidden part of herself she felt she might. Perhaps she did already; just didn't know that she did.

He walked away, was silent for a moment, then turned.

"'Living Legend'. That's a brand name. We own it. As a matter of fact I thought it up myself, registered it offshore, before this whole thing came out into the open. Not that it altogether has, but you know how it is - once people know that something can be done, then sooner or later it will be. The world finds a way of living with these things. A modus vivendi. You know what that means?"

"Yes. I know," she said in a small, flat voice.

"Don't let it worry you," he said. "In a few minutes you won't even remember that we had this conversation."

She tried to speak again, but her mouth was dry. It was a moment before the words came.

"That man... he wasn't... he isn't... who is he?"

"That's client confidentiality. But no, he isn't who you thought he was. None of them were."

"Then why... what..?"

"That's what they pay for. These are the hardcore fans, baby. Knowing all about you isn't enough for them. They want to know you. They want to play some part in your life, whether it's hair-stylist, make-up artist, dresser, whatever. What they play depends on what they pay. For some of them it's just the one time - thrill of a lifetime. For others - well, there's one guy, for instance, comes in here every week to play your shrink."

She was perfectly still, trying to work out what she felt, what she thought. But nothing came. She felt empty. Dead. It was a moment before she realized that she had sunk onto the edge of a chair, her knees and feet together, her hands playing nervously in her lap.

"Why me?" she said at last, in a barely audible whisper.

"You tell me, baby," he said. "You wanted what you wanted, and you got it. You created yourself. All we did was make copies. I've lost count how many. You're everywhere. And they're always wanting more - in spite of the occasional little problem, like today."

He had walked across the room again, and regarded her now from a far corner.

She looked back at him through the tangle of hair that had fallen over her eyes. She had begun to shake and couldn't stop. It was worse than a shake; it was a bone-twitching, teeth-chattering shudder that ran through her whole body like a series of electric shocks.

"All right," he said to somebody over her shoulder, "you'd better take her down."

She gave a cry of alarm and sprang to her feet, but before she could turn she was seized by two pairs of strong hands. She had a glimpse of two men, one bald and in a white coat like a doctor, the other younger, broad-shouldered and muscular. Then something was jabbed into her arm. It didn't feel like an injection, in fact it didn't hurt at all. But almost at once she felt herself starting to lose consciousness. She fought it, but knew, even as she did, that she had lost.

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"Here, honey, take these."

She opened her eyes and realized she was lying down. When she tried to get up she found her movements were restricted. She started to panic, but the woman with her put out a reassuring hand.

"Careful, honey. We just got you sewn into this thing - don't ruin it."

Of course. The dress. The damn dress. She let the woman help her into a sitting position. She was in her dressing room backstage at the Garden.

"Take these now, you'll feel better."

She took the two pills that the woman was offering, then the glass of water that she handed her.

"What are they?"

"They're your prescription. It's okay."

She swallowed them, one after the other. As she did, she became aware of a handful of people standing around, watching her. She wasn't sure she recognized them, then she remembered that they were the people they'd got in for just this one show in New York.

The hairdresser came forward, flicked his comb, sprayed something on her.

"Perfect! I'm so proud. We all are. You're going to be wonderful."

"Come on, let me help you. Everybody's ready."

It was the woman again, helping her gently to her feet. She stood upright. She felt fine. She couldn't remember why she had been lying down. Had she passed out? Had she been asleep? It didn't matter. All she knew now was what she had to do.

She saw an open bottle of champagne in an ice bucket.

"Give me a glass of that, will you?"

"Sure."

The woman passed it to her. She took a sip. Another. It tasted good, gave her just that little extra charge she needed. She'd be all right now.

There was a knock at the door. Someone opened it, then turned to her. "They're ready. Joe here'll take you to the stage."

She looked. A page-boy waited, expectant, nervous-looking. She finished her glass, held it out, someone took it.

"Let's go," she said. She felt nervous, but it was the right kind of nerves. Good nerves. Someone placed the wrap around her shoulders. She pulled it closer and started out in little, carefully measured steps.

The corridor was long and dark, underground. In the distance she could hear applause, laughter. Somebody was talking on a mike.

"Excuse me..." It was the page-boy at her side. He sounded nervous. "D'you mind if I tell you something, Miss Monroe?"

"Mm-hm?" she murmured absently, her mind on what she had to do, rehearsing the moves and the words, but not wanting to seem off-hand. "Go ahead."

"I just want you to know - this moment is the biggest thrill of my life."