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Extract

Caroline arrived in Los Angeles in November 1974, in the middle of a blazing winter heatwave, with the addresses of two old schoolfriends and one ex-boyfriend in her Chanel shoulder bag, thirteen hundred dollars in the bank and a pair of the tiniest frayed denim hot pants that the guy at the immigration desk had ever seen.

'How long you stayin' in the States, sugar?' He leered at her appreciatively from behind his bullet-proof plastic screen.

'Well, I'm not too sure,' she replied. 'That sort of depends on how nice people are to me.'

'Baby,' – he stared down blatantly at her crotch, enticingly shrink-wrapped in denim – 'I think there's *a lot* of people gonna be *very* nice to you here in LA.'

'Well, I hope so,' said Caroline, smiling.

Every head turned as she strutted through LAX to baggage reclaim.

'Can I help you with your luggage, miss?' a voice came from behind her. 'That case must be heavier than you are.'

She swung round to find herself face to face with one of the most handsome men she had ever seen. Tall, dark and slightly overly tanned, his white teeth blazed down at her in a wolfish grin as he effortlessly swung her enormous bag off the carousel. He was exactly what she had imagined Californian men to look like: fit, masculine and well groomed.

It was hard, Caroline felt, not to admire a man like that.

'Well, thank you so much, how kind.'

She smiled gratefully up at this plastic Adonis, thinking how much more impressive he looked than most of the chinless wimps who offered her their gentlemanly services back home in London.

'I'm Caroline. Caroline Berkeley.'

She gave him her hand and he crushed it.

'Brad Baxter. It's an absolute pleasure to meet you.'

Meeting Brad turned out to be an extraordinary piece of luck. Over the next six weeks, he helped to introduce Caroline to the myriad pleasures and vices that Hollywood had to offer, none of which were new to her, as well as to many of the movers and shakers in the business, who were. He was, it emerged, a PR whizz-kid from West Hollywood who ran a sideline "talent-spotting" for a soft porn producer in the Valley and was a regular on the starry, decadent social scene that was to become Caroline's natural milieu and favoured hunting ground.

Clearly, she had her sights set a lot higher than porno – although the money Brad was talking about was definitely enough to make your head spin – but she knew a well-connected guy when she saw one. She moved into his apartment immediately, as a stopgap measure while she hunted for a place of her own.

Six weeks, a lot of coke and some mediocre sex later, Brad introduced her to Duke McMahon. The rest, she felt sure, was about to become history.

On the face of it, Duke was not Caroline's ideal catch.

For one thing, he had made it clear that he would not contemplate a divorce from his wife, Minnie, although the marriage was well known in Hollywood to be a complete sham. Duke had had countless mistresses and affairs before her, and his marriage had weathered them all, which was not a good sign.

For another, he was seriously old, even by Caroline's standards. Though he was by no means the least attractive of the many men she had slept with, he was already sixty-four, and physically things could only go downhill from there.

Despite her calculated approach to relationships, Caroline still enjoyed good sex. Brad's ineptly enthusiastic efforts over the past few weeks had been absolute torture. If she were going to devote years of her life to a man, which financially she knew she must, then it had to be someone she could at least tolerate in bed. Duke was a more than adequate lover now – but in five years' time his ancient balls might be flapping against his bony, arthritic knees, and frankly she doubted that she could stomach that.

On the other hand, Duke was rich beyond even Caroline's wildest dreams. On their very first date, he had picked her up in his exquisite blue 1956 Ferrari, and driven her down to his private cove in Malibu.

'Close your eyes,' he said, as he led her, trembling with excitement, down the sandy track that wound from the road to the beach. She could feel the silky dryness of the sand between her toes as she stumbled blindly along in her open-toed stilettos. 'OK. You can open them now. Take a look.'

Caroline gasped with delight. The white sand of the beach was illuminated by a combination of pale, blue-white moonlight and the warmer, rich orange glow of hundreds of candles, some flickering softly in the sand at her feet, others hanging from the boughs of the cedars that grew along the shore.

An over-sized midnight-blue blanket had been spread out at the water's edge. It had been laid with brilliantly polished antique silver and shimmering crystal glasses, as well as a picnic of such delicious-looking food – whole cooked lobsters, tomato and basil salad, peaches in Armagnac, perfect little individual chocolate soufflés – she felt her mouth literally begin watering at the sight of it. Beside the picnic were two large ice buckets half submerged in the sand, each containing two bottles of champagne.

Duke's right-hand man, Seamus, looking half decent for once in a crisp white linen suit, stood at a respectful distance, ready to wait on the two of them hand and foot.

'Do you like it?' asked Duke.

'Do I like it?' She looked at him incredulously. 'Duke, I have never seen anything quite so beautiful, and quite so romantic, in my entire life.'

She meant it, too. She felt like a queen, adored and indulged – and she hadn't so much as kissed him yet. At that moment, she was quite sure that she *could* love Duke McMahon, should she ever find herself called upon to do so.

'Well, I'm glad,' he said, helping her down on to the blanket and signalling to his old friend to crack open the champagne. 'A beautiful girl like you deserves nothing less. In fact . . .' He fumbled in his inside jacket pocket, and produced a long black box. 'I bought you a little something that I thought might complement your beauty this evening. It's just a token. But I hope you like it.'

It was a struggle for her to maintain her composure, to slowly take and open the box rather than snatch it out of his hand like an overexcited kid at Christmas. Inside was an obscenely large diamond-and-platinum necklace.

Caroline, who knew a thing or two about diamonds, could see at a glance that it must be worth upwards of fifteen thousand dollars. Tentatively, lovingly, she stroked the largest of the stones.

'Oh, Duke,' she whispered, her voice hoarse with emotion. 'Oh my God.'

He lifted the necklace, fastening it gently around her neck.

'You like it?'

Caroline kissed him quickly on the mouth.

'I love it.'

'Good. Now take off your dress.'

'I'm sorry?' She'd been so mesmerised by the incredible diamonds, she wondered whether she could have heard him correctly.

'No need to be sorry,' said Duke. 'I want you naked. Please undress. You can keep the necklace on.'

Caroline's eyes narrowed. She was not used to being spoken to like this, and she wasn't at all sure that she liked it.

Who the hell did he think he was?

She wasn't some prostitute, paid to be at his beck and call. Her face flushed with anger and embarrassment. She noticed that Seamus had not moved but stood just a few feet away, impassively watching her reaction.

'How dare you speak to me like that?' she demanded, fumbling angrily at the clasp at her neck and standing up to leave. 'I don't care how fucking famous you are, or how many necklaces you can afford, nobody speaks to. . . .'

'Oh, don't you?' Duke interrupted her mid-flow. 'Don't you care?'

He had grabbed her arm quite forcefully, but Caroline saw with surprise that he was smiling, his eyes full of warmth and mischief. All of a sudden she felt confused. Why was he laughing at her? Was this some kind of joke?

'Well, excuse me, Ms Berkeley, but I happen to think that's a crock of shit.'

'I beg your pardon?' She was doing her best to sound shocked.

'I think you care *very much* how many necklaces I can afford. In

fact, Caroline, my darling, I think we both know that's exactly why you're sitting here, about to have dinner with an old man like me.'

'No it isn't. Of course it isn't,' said Caroline.

But she sat back down.

'I didn't mean to offend you,' continued Duke. 'But I also don't intend to be played for a fool. I thought I could save us both a lot of time by laying a few cards on the table right now – so that we can both enjoy the first of what I hope will be many, many pleasant evenings together.'

She looked at him warily. 'Go on.'

'I bought you that necklace because I thought you would look beautiful in it, and you do. And because I knew you would like it.'

'I do like it.' Caroline couldn't resist touching the exquisite stones again as she listened to him. 'Very much.'

'I know you do. And I know there are a lot of other things you would like. Things that I can give you. That I would like to give you.' She smiled at him encouragingly. 'But there is also something that you can give me. Something that I want very badly.'

Caroline's face fell. She drew her cashmere stole tighter around her shoulders.

'Now don't you look at me like that,' said Duke. 'You aren't Pollyanna, and you sure as hell aren't some innocent little virgin either.'

Despite herself, Caroline gave him a conspiratorial smile.

'That's better,' said Duke. 'You're a smart girl, Caroline. You know what you want, and I like that. I like it a lot. We both know I can give you what you want. But I'm not a young man any more, kiddo, and I don't like wasting my time. I didn't bring you here tonight for conversation.'

Without breaking eye contact, he reached out and touched her breast, gently rolling the nipple between his thumb and forefinger through the cotton of her dress.

Caroline thought about it for a split second, but did not protest. Seamus had tactfully withdrawn to the other side of the cedar trees, but she knew he was probably watching them, the dirty old sod. The thought, combined with Duke's practised touch, sent a sudden jolt of lust right through her body.

'Now, please,' he resumed, 'if it isn't too much to ask, I'd like you to take off your dress.'