

A Hollywood Ending

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Published by Orion

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**A
HOLLYWOOD
ENDING**

ROBYN SISMAN



PART I

HOLLYWOOD

CHAPTER 1

He was the man she'd been looking for all her life. Paige adored him: body and soul, heart and mind, today and for ever. Even though she'd known him barely twenty-four hours. Even though they could never be together.

They lay facing one another, each propped on a bare elbow dug into the scratchy sand: too exhausted to move and too enraptured to want to. Their clothes were ripped and filthy, their faces marked by the ordeal they had shared and survived against all odds. But that was unimportant now. What mattered was that at last they were truly alone, just the two of them in the empty desert, with no one watching and no need to pretend.

'How long before they find us?' His voice was deep and mellow as a bass drum. They were so close that she could feel it reverberate through her own body: an intimate invasion. Her eyelashes flickered in response.

'Maybe two hours, if the locator chip's still working.' Only two hours in which to pack a lifetime of loving. '... Sir,' she added, with a gulp. It was hard to keep her voice steady.

'Sir,' he echoed bitterly. He looked away, suddenly moody and distant, displaying his impossibly handsome

profile lit by a fiery sunset glow. Paige gazed with longing at the tensed muscle of his jaw and golden gleam of his hair.

‘Wasn’t there some British king,’ he said, still staring across the sand, ‘who gave up everything to marry the woman he loved?’

‘King Edward,’ she answered softly. ‘The woman was an American. The Brits thought she wasn’t good enough for him, just because she didn’t have a title and a castle.’ She paused. ‘And because she was already married.’

‘But you’re not married.’ His head snapped back to her in alarm, and he grabbed her shoulder so fiercely that she winced. ‘*Are you?*’

‘No ... But you are.’ Her face crumpled. Tears squeezed from the corners of her eyes.

‘Don’t!’ He reached over to smudge her cheek dry with his thumb. Helplessly she melted towards him, tilting her head to caress his hand with her cheek. Any second now they’d be kissing. Her lips parted in anticipation as his hand slid to the nape of her neck and drew her towards him. ‘Don’t cry,’ he murmured huskily. ‘Please, Catherine, don’t cry.’

For a moment time seemed to stand still. Expression drained from Paige’s face. Her green-grey eyes darkened to flint. ‘Catherine’s your *wife*,’ she told him.

‘Aw, shit.’

‘Cut!’ called a voice.

‘Sorry, guys.’ Jackson Rolfe raked back his artfully tousled locks and swept the watching darkness with his naughty-boy smile. ‘Guess I never could tell one woman from another.’

Sycophantic laughter rippled around the set. Jackson

was currently the highest earning actor in Hollywood: if he cracked a joke, it was funny. Paige forced herself to smile along, as if she too found it a real gas that after six weeks of filming Jackson had ‘forgotten’ the name of his co-star’s character (Sally, short for Salima: not too taxing). She knew perfectly well that Jackson’s lapse had been intentional.

‘Fifteen minutes, folks.’ The assistant director’s second assistant’s assistant appeared at the edge of the brightly lit set, hugging her clipboard, walkie-talkie pressed to one ear, and started relaying instructions. The sand that had been artistically strewn among polystyrene boulders needed to be brushed smooth for the next take. Greens wanted to check that the olive tree was secure. The cinematographer was worried about shadows, and wanted to test different filters on the stand-ins.

Paige stood up, brushing sand from her combat trousers. She heard the insect whine of a Polaroid camera as someone took a snapshot record of how she looked. Hair, probably, or maybe Wardrobe: both were obsessed with continuity.

‘Help me up, will you, angel?’ Jackson, still sprawled on the sand, reached out his hand to her. Paige glanced down at him. ‘Angel’ was not what he called her in private. But the crew were watching. She did as he asked, but he leapt up at the same time, so that inadvertently she pulled too hard and he toppled against her, momentarily bouncing off her breasts. He leered down at her as if she had deliberately engineered this. ‘Whoa there, Salima.’

Paige disengaged her hand, determined not to react. ‘Could I get a glass of water here?’ she called into the shadows.

‘Sure thing, Miss Carson.’ Almost at once there was the sound of crushed ice rattling into a paper cup.

She stepped off the raised set onto the concrete floor.

‘Careful, Miss Carson. Watch out for the dolly track,’ warned a voice.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust after the brilliance of the set. Then the familiar scene came into focus: not sunset in the desert, but a sound stage on a Hollywood lot, where the sun never penetrated and the air was strictly temperature-controlled. It was a huge, windowless aircraft hangar of a building, with fat rubber cables taped to the floor, plywood walls that ended in mid-air, and steel gantries stretching overhead like the tracks of some vast floating railroad station. There was the usual clutter of ladders, tripods, reflector boards, and metal tables covered with focus tape, screwdrivers, batteries, spare lenses and stained Styrofoam cups. People stood or lounged in apparently aimless groups, dwarfed by their surroundings. Two cameras were poised on the set, like empty-eyed robots waiting to attack.

As usual between takes, Jackson had hurried over to Video Village to check his performance on the monitor. Paige could see him bending over the director’s shoulder as they both peered at the screen on the steel trolley table. Lester sat hunched in his wood and canvas chair, sneakered feet tucked on the footrest, wearing his usual director’s outfit of sloppy black T-shirt, headphones and straggly beard. It was part of the Lester Legend that he grew a beard while shooting a movie, then shaved it off for the wrap party. Next to him sat the script editor, the shooting script open in front of her amid the

usual clutter of water bottles, megaphone, highlighter pens and coils of coloured cabling. The assistant director and cinematographer were there too, looking like Tweedledum and Tweedledee in their matching *Code Red* baseball caps as they consulted the stopwatch that recorded the duration of each take. Behind them stood various assistants, dressed as though for the beach in shorts and tennis shoes. Everyone was staring at the monitor. Paige hated seeing herself on screen, but for a moment she couldn't resist watching the watchers, trying to gauge how things were going from their expressions. Lester frowned as Jackson pointed at the screen and murmured persuasively into his ear. What was it this time? Did Jackson have yet another 'suggestion' that would result in more camera time for him and less for her?

'Miss Carson?' Someone was holding out a cup to her.

'Is this my special water?' she demanded.

'Kabbalah mineral, right?' The boy was ridiculously cute, and looked so anxious that Paige regretted her snappy tone. It wasn't his fault that she was so wound up.

'Thanks.' She smiled, taking the cup. There were two crates of this stuff in her trailer, a gift from her friend and total lifesaver, Gaby, who'd told her that the wisdom of centuries was distilled in every drop – though it tasted pretty much like ordinary water. Paige drained the cup and crushed it in her hand. If Lester was unhappy with her performance, he could tell her to her face. Meanwhile, she needed to keep focused. She went over to her chair, found her iPod and plugged herself in. Her eyes closed. *Stay in character.*

OK. She was Salima, one quarter Palestinian by birth, one hundred per cent American by upbringing, a top CIA field agent whose tough exterior hid a failed marriage and a dead child. Because she spoke fluent Arabic she'd been one of the team parachuted into Lebanon to rescue the US President (played by Jackson), who was being held hostage by an Islamic militant group after Air Force One had crashed.

No one had wanted Salima on the 'Code Red' mission. Firstly, she was a woman. Secondly, there were doubts about her loyalty: Salima's grandmother had been expelled by Israeli forces from her home in Palestine and had nearly died in a refugee camp before fleeing to America. In the movie's second-act climax, when Salima revealed herself as a double-agent in cahoots with the kidnapers, these doubts seemed shockingly justified. Of course this turned out to be a clever double bluff, as well as a total rip-off from *Where Eagles Dare* – or *hommage*, as Hollywood liked to call it. 'For the first two-thirds of the movie Salima is a beautiful enigma,' Lester had told her, sculpting his words out of the air with a pudgy hand. 'Is she a patriot, or the enemy? A closed-down fighting machine, or a real woman? Then she releases her inner passion: emotionally, politically – and, of course, sexually.'

Of course. Paige counted deep breaths in and out, trying to will herself into a passionate yet enigmatic state. But all she felt was the same knot of anxiety and mounting rage that had lodged behind her breastbone for weeks.

It was hard to remember how ecstatic she'd been to land this part. After an inexplicable run of flops her position on the A-list had been looking a teensy

bit precarious, and she'd needed a bankable project. Obviously, she also owed it to herself to choose a role that would stretch her as an artist. *Code Red* had seemed perfect on both counts. It was a thriller, but it was 'edgy' (Hollywood's latest buzzword), thanks to on-screen presidential adultery and the daring portrayal of an Arab woman as liberated, empowered, and pledged to America's democratic values. Lester was the king of action movies; Jackson had just won a Golden Globe for his title role in the King Arthur blockbuster, and was nominated for Best Actor in the upcoming Academy Awards. Here was a huge opportunity for Paige to show the world her acting range which did, yes, actually, go beyond taking off her clothes.

Consequently, she'd pulled every string in town, hassled her agent, put out for the studio execs, and made sure that she was seen looking super-fit and sexy in running shorts and crop top. Fortunately, she was what Hollywood called 'the exotic type', which basically meant you weren't blonde. For once she'd had the edge over the favoured golden ones. There'd been a bad moment when it seemed that the part might go to a rival, but then it turned out that the shooting schedule clashed with the other actress's plan to travel to China and pick out a baby girl to adopt. *Quel* relief!

Paige had totally knocked herself out on the preparation: three weeks training with the Marines (her thighs were like rock); hours in the firing range (even though she hated loud noises); late-night sessions with her acting coach, mapping out the inner journey of her character. The studio had hired a dialect coach for her too. Arabic had a wonderful snarling sound to it. Paige had loved sitting out on her patio at night with her earplugs in,

gazing over the lights of Los Angeles and repeating the breathy phrases to any eavesdropping coyote. Her coach said she was one of the quickest students he'd ever had. Ha! Tell that to the Principal of Pacific High, where she'd majorly flunked out. Though maybe the coach was just flattering her because of who she was. Last week she'd learned, just by chance, that a real Arabic speaker had been hired to loop in her Arabic words in post-production. All that practising had simply been to ensure that her mouth made more or less the right shapes on screen. Unconsciously Paige bent her head and pressed her palms cross-wise to her chest.

'Hey, babe. You OK?' Lester had lumbered up behind her and laid his hands on her shoulders, bending close to her ear so that his beard grazed her neck.

'Sure.' Paige snapped her eyes open and sat up perkily. 'Just getting a little, you know, head space.' She turned to give him her best good-sport smile, which tightened as she saw Jackson beside him.

Lester pulled a chair close, and gestured to Jackson to do the same, so that the three of them were huddled in a tight, secret circle. Oh God: group hug time. Sure enough, Lester draped his arms around Paige and Jackson and pulled them close.

'Remember the scene at the airport when Ilsa and Rick say goodbye?' he began.

Paige nodded. She knew what was coming. In practically every picture she'd made, from comedy to costume drama, there was always a moment when the director invoked *Casablanca*. 'That's the kind of intensity we need here,' Lester continued. 'This is *the* emotional climax. A four-handkerchief scene. I want audiences all over the world sobbing into their popcorn. This

is real love. This is real tragedy. You're not President and agent any more, just Hart and Sally, a man and a woman wanting what they can never have. I need you to give me all you've got. And you've got plenty: I know that. Now let me see it.' With a final squeeze of their shoulders he let them go, stood up, and clapped his hands. 'Let's get this show on the road.'

Instantly all was bustle and efficiency. Jackson was swept off to have his tan retouched. Paige hardly had time to put her iPod away before she was pounced on. Hands kneaded gel into her hair to reinstate the mussed-up, escaped-from-death look. She offered her lips for more gloss, her cheek for a dab of purple bruising. The layers of putty that gave her nose that authentic Arab look (so Lester said) were checked for cracks, and repowdered. The putty took forever to apply, and itched like hell. There were fingers at her shirt, undoing another button – 'Lester wants more cleavage' – and smearing the tops of her breasts with something to make them look slick with sweat. She climbed back onto the set, where Jackson was holding a tiny spray can to his mouth. 'You'd better have some of this, too,' he told her, angling it towards her. Paige dug her nails into her palms, suppressing a rude retort, then opened her mouth obediently so he could give her a squirt of minty breath-freshener before tossing the can to one of the crew.

Lester and the cinematographer took one last look through the view-finder. Paige and Jackson got into position, in front of the blank blue screen onto which SFX would later project the desert background that was already in the can.

'Final touches!'

‘Rolling. Quiet, please!’

‘Speed.’

‘Action.’

The clapper board snapped its jaws, and here they were again. *Scene 34. Exterior. Lebanese desert. Hart and Salima confess their love.* Paige gazed rapturously into Jackson’s square, handsome, hateful face, focusing on his startlingly blue eyes (tinted contacts). Close up, his cheeks looked puffy under the make-up. Too much junk food, booze, partying, et cetera. Especially et cetera.

Concentrate! This was the man she loved – admired – desired, just like ... well, like no one she knew, actually, or might ever meet, the way things were going. ‘Paige Carson, twenty-nine and currently single’, as the movie columnists loved to describe her.

Jackson was holding his head higher this time, as he gazed out across the non-existent desert and ruminated about King Edward: he must have noticed his double chin on the monitor. The studio had hired a full-time nutritionist to stock his fridge with wheatgrass juice and yoghurt and accompany him to every meal, but it would take an FBI surveillance team to keep him away from the bagels, cherry pies and giant subs provided in truckloads by the caterers, plus the other substances smuggled in by his entourage. It was so unfair that guys could always get away with a couple of inches on their gut, as if beefy was macho, while everyone freaked if a female actor gained a single pound. The reason so many actresses adopted babies was that they’d wrecked their ovulation by being forced to lose weight. Paige couldn’t help the way she was built. Thanks to her dad she was tall and big boned; from her mother she’d inherited an

exuberant bust that refused to shrink below a C cup, however much she dieted. Right now she'd kill for just one sugar-coated, fat-drenched doughnut.

Concentrate! Here was the part where she had to cry. Time for Skipper. Paige's face began to crumple as she pictured the beloved dachshund of her childhood, run over by a car on her tenth birthday. Darling Skipper ... Limp. Lifeless. His cute little paws still for ever. That time after he'd died, when she'd found the rubber ball that still bore his teeth marks. Tears welled in her eyes.

This time Jackson remembered to call her Salima. Now they were about to kiss. Paige did her droopy, swoony thing and fluttered her eyelids shut. Ew, his face was scratchy. Forget it! This was the man she loved. Rick and Ilsa. Inner passion. Now slide your hand up to his hair. But remember the camera. Don't hide his face.

His hands tightened round her neck and ribs. His mouth pressed against hers. She pictured the way the camera would capture the surrendering curve of her neck and the red-gold sparks in her dark hair as it swung free. But something was wrong. This wasn't the way they'd rehearsed it. Jackson was holding her way too tight. She couldn't breathe! She tried to ease away without ruining the shot. He must have felt her move, but he just grabbed her tighter. Bastard! The blood was thrumming in her temples. Sweat prickled her skin. In a moment she was going to pass out. She yanked herself free, let out her breath in an explosive hiss and gasped in fresh air.

'Cut!'

'Sorry, Lester,' Paige panted, fanning her face. 'Couldn't breathe.'

‘Yeah, OK. Let’s go again.’ Was there a tinge of exasperation in his voice?

‘It’s not my fault,’ she couldn’t help saying. ‘It’s just that in rehearsal we—’

‘It’s nobody’s fault.’ Lester cut her short.

Paige twisted round to the camera crew, looking for confirmation. It must be obvious that Jackson had deliberately sabotaged the shot. The focus-puller, an old pal, raised his eyebrows at her in sympathy, but no one dared say anything.

Then Jackson’s mellifluous voice rolled out across the sound stage, low and regretful.

‘No, she’s right. Lester. It’s my fault. I was so in the role. I just, you know, *went there.*’

Yeah, right. Was Lester going to swallow this shit?

‘That’s what we want, Jacko,’ Lester crooned back. ‘Don’t apologise. It was looking great until ... Anyway, you OK now, Paige?’

She nodded. What else could she do? As they eased into position again Jackson shot her a triumphant smirk.

It had been like this right from the beginning. Before this movie Paige had never met Jackson, apart from exchanging a casual ‘hi’ at parties and awards ceremonies. He had a reputation for being difficult, but the best actors often did – herself included. Their first encounter had been at the so-called chemistry reading, when the studio suits checked that there was enough sizzle between the co-stars. It was humiliating to recall how eager she had been, how flattered and flattering, with every polished tooth on show, every nail buffed, every extraneous hair removed, and an outfit that had been painstaking-

ingly devised by her manager and acting coach to strike the perfect balance between credible CIA competence and screen sexiness. Jackson, by contrast, had slobbered unshaven into the meeting, wearing jeans, T-shirt and flip-flops. The first thing he had done was to apologise loudly for not having seen her work – ‘except *Biker Boys*, of course’, he’d added with a lecherous grin. ‘My son’s got the poster on his bedroom wall.’ Paige hadn’t been sure how to react to this. Jackson was Australian: maybe he thought this was a compliment. She’d giggled inanely, wanting him to like her.

But he didn’t. Usually actors helped each other out at these readings; they were on the same side. Jackson had mumbled his lines as though half asleep, deliberately giving her no help, insultingly casual. She’d practically faked an orgasm to get him to react. It was even worse than those early auditions when you had to go in cold and then suddenly ‘be’ a hilarious waitress or the terrified victim of a serial killer. When the reading was finally over he’d taken a piece of gum out of his mouth and stuck it to the table.

But somehow she’d persuaded the suits. She was an actor, after all. And maybe it had been an off-day for Jackson, who was in mid-divorce following several well-publicised affairs. So when location shooting started in the Nevada desert (the insurers wouldn’t cover Lebanon), she’d flown off feeling optimistic. Even if Jackson didn’t like her (and why the hell not? she’d like to know), he would surely behave like a professional. His fee was about four times the size of hers; he could afford to be nice. But no. He ignored Paige except in their scenes together, where he constantly found subtle ways to upstage or wrong-foot her. He insisted on

shooting scenes over and over until his performance was perfect, while for her the first take was usually the best, after which energy leaked out of her like steam from an espresso machine. Most nights he spent in a men-only huddle with his coaches and Lester, which resulted in his part getting bigger, and hers whittled down to a two-dimensional sidekick. This wasn't an ego thing – well, not *just* a ego thing. Jackson was unbalancing the picture. Its pitch-line was: 'She rescues him from the valley of death – he restores her soul.' But Jackson's re-writes meant that President Hartman pretty much rescued himself via manly courage, self-reliance, painful insights into his own heart of darkness, blah blah, while Salima looked on admiringly and gave him someone decorative to emote at.

Almost worse, Jackson cut her out of the camaraderie that developed between actors and crew on location, which she'd always found one of the best parts about making a movie. Jackson was always the one who got to organise treats for the crew: a Ben & Jerry's ice cream truck, or a bunch of Mexican chefs flown in from LA to make everyone tacos. One weekend, Paige ordered in some crates of beer: nothing too ostentatious or competitive, just a way to get a good vibe going. Somehow Jackson found out about her simple plan and trumped it by having his Harley Davidsons shipped out so he could race them over the sand with Lester and the 'boys'. They drank her beer and toasted Jackson.

Eventually, egged on by Gaby, who'd reminded Paige that she was a uniquely talented human being and must not allow this situation to fester, Paige had confronted him one evening alone in his trailer. It was the latest luxury model, with Jacuzzi, plasma screen and all the

techno trimmings, overlaid with a personal litter of clothes, CD cases and empty potato-chip bags; and stank of pot. Jackson was sprawled in a leather chair, wearing a towelling robe and smoking. He showed neither pleasure nor surprise at her appearance. Standing tall and dignified, Paige came out with the speech she had rehearsed with Gaby. She respected Jackson so much. It was an honour to be working with him. But she felt there were issues between them. Was there a problem he wanted to share? Was it personal, or perhaps to do with her style of acting?

He'd looked at her with eyes narrowed against the smoke. 'What acting?'

'Excuse me?'

'I'm sorry, I wasn't aware you were an "actor".' He loaded the word with sarcasm. 'Did you, for example, go to drama school?'

'Of course!' OK, not *school* exactly, but she'd had the best coaches and taken classes, dozens of them, even stunt horsemanship and sword-fighting. Anyway, acting was instinctive. It was just something she could do.

'Did you sweat and slave to scrape the money together, wondering every single week if you'd have to drop out?'

'Well, not exactly. But I don't see—'

'Have you taken Shakespeare out into the bush, putting up the set every night and taking it down again just so you could say "Yes, my lord" in Act Two, Scene Three? Did you live four to a room with no air-conditioning in downtown LA, and work in Home of the Pancake for eight hours straight every night, so you could go to auditions during the day? Did you pawn

your grandfather's watch so you could turn up to those auditions without holes in your shoes?' He jabbed his joint into an ashtray and leaned forward, forearms on knees. 'No, you did not! You just got bored with parties and shopping and maybe a little light modelling work, and sailed straight into Hollywood on a wave of privilege and Daddy's money.'

'That is so not true!'

'The reality is that ten years ago you made one movie that hit the spot for reasons we both know – and it isn't what I call acting. Since then, what?'

Paige could not believe what she was hearing. She punched her fists into her hip-bones. 'Only one of the highest-grossing movies of all time. Have you forgotten *Journey to Mount Doom*?'

'You played an elf. For about three minutes.'

'It beats saying "Yes, my lord" to two sheep shearers and a kangaroo.'

'That's where you're wrong. Acting's about experience. Acting is a craft. It comes from here.' He tapped a forefinger to his temple, then raised his eyebrows at her. 'Hello-o, anyone upstairs?'

The arrogant bastard was calling her stupid!

'There's a lot more to acting than hitting your mark, or looking pretty. Which I admit you are.' He relaxed back into the chair, and clasped his hands behind his head. His towelling robe gaped. 'Fancy a fuck?'

'What?' Paige stared at him in disgust. 'You cannot speak to me like this. I am a p-p-professional person!' Shit. Her brain was starting to lock in that familiar, dreaded way. She'd rather die than stutter in front of him.

'Oh, come on,' he drawled. 'You need me. I'm your

ticket back to the big time. We're stuck out here in the great bugger-all. Might as well have some fun.'

She turned her back on him and yanked open the trailer door, using the time to pull in a series of quick breaths so she could get a run at the next consonant. 'Wait 'til my agent hears about this. And Lester.'

He laughed. 'Do what you want. You think anybody's going to fire me off this picture because Princess Paige has her nose out of joint?'

She was so angry that, ignoring the steps, she jumped straight out of the trailer, misjudged the distance and sprawled ignominiously on her hands and knees in the dirt. Scrambling to her feet, she marched into the chill desert darkness, bruised and bewildered. She *was* a good actress. She was a star. She was Paige Carson. (Shit, where was her trailer? Oh, it was back that way.) How shocked Lester would be when he heard how Jackson had spoken to her! Lester would make him apologise. The crew would find out about it, as they always did, and take her side. *Code Red* would be a smash hit. She and Jackson would both be nominated for Academy Awards, but only she would win. She would not even mention him in her acceptance speech.

This fantasy sustained her until she was back in her own trailer, and cold reality set in. Princess Paige ... that's what the celeb garbage press had called her when she'd pulled out of *Prime Rib* the day before filming started. They didn't say why she had quit – because she'd discovered that her part had been totally changed in the latest re-write, and that she was going to have to play the *mother* of a twenty-year-old boy. The actor was twenty-two, she was twenty-nine. Go figure. But naturally, this was never reported, and she was stuck

with the 'diva' label. It might not look good if she walked off another picture. Jackson obviously had some weird hang-up about her, and was deliberately goading her, hoping she'd quit or be fired. Well, she would not give him that satisfaction. She'd tough it out.

The location work had been just about bearable. They'd mainly concentrated on the action scenes, which involved her running with Jackson through a hail of bullet fire and shouting things like 'Make for the wadi! Go, go, go!', or being drenched repeatedly in water as they emerged from faked marshland in take after take. Even then, she'd had to keep her lip buttoned. Before one scene Jackson asked her, 'Do you know your lines?' Of course, she'd answered. Then he said, 'Do you know *my* lines?' Yes, those too. Then he'd had the nerve to make her feed them to him, as if she were some eager-to-please bit-part actor instead of his co-star.

But being on the lot was even worse. Their scenes together were developing the romantic sub-plot between Salima and President 'Hart' Hartman in close-up. Hart's wife, Catherine, had been confined to a wheelchair after her tragic water-skiing accident; there were certain needs she couldn't satisfy. Would Salima step into the breach? Would Hart leave his wife? *Code Red* was not just another action movie, but a multi-layered, bittersweet human drama that would keep the audience guessing until the end. That's what Lester said, anyway.

Paige thought it would be so much easier if Salima had turned out to be a baddie after all, and could just shoot Hart dead. Following his Oscars nomination, Jackson was more impossible and more fawned-over than ever. His lamest joke was hilarious, his most casual 'thanks, doll' received like an honour. Even his daily arrival on

the lot was treated like breaking news. ‘Mr Rolfe’s car is on its way.’ ‘Mr Rolfe’s car has arrived.’ ‘Mr Rolfe has exited his car.’ Finally he’d appear in person, pumped up for action, flanked by his acting coach and personal publicist like a mafia don with his hoods, and send the whole place scurrying. Paige had to admit that he was a fine actor, but the heat of his ego scorched everything in its path and devoured every last atom of her creative oxygen.

Today was his birthday. She’d forgotten this until, at the end of one take, Lester called a break and summoned everyone over to the snack table. The usual calorie-fest of cookies, candy, and bagels had been pushed to each end, and in the middle of the table sat a giant cake in the shape of a motorbike, with marshmallow handlebars, chocolate tyres, and wheels of spun sugar spiked with forty-five candles.

Everyone sang ‘Happy Birthday’. Lester gave a speech. Jackson cut into the cake, receiving a huge round of applause when he pretended the cake-knife was stuck and reprised his lines from the King Arthur movie before triumphantly extracting the knife and waving it aloft. A camera assistant got the whole thing on video: one for the gag reel that would be shown at the wrap party. Paige smiled until her face hurt, and gave him the present that her assistant had bought gift-wrapped for the occasion. It turned out to be a fancy Italian aftershave. ‘My co-star thinks I stink,’ Jackson quipped through a mouthful of cake crumbs. Cue for thigh-slapping guffaws.

Finally they got back to work. Paige glanced at the big digital clock on the wall that flashed up the ticking seconds: almost eleven o’clock. Today’s call-sheet had

shown her due on the set and ready to go at seven-thirty a.m. Her day had started with a wake-up call at four-thirty. She'd been living on the lot for three weeks now, in her trailer parked in its designated bay outside the sound stage. By five-thirty she had done her yoga, showered, eaten her fruit-and-wholegrain breakfast, and given herself over to Hair and Make-up. One hour later she was ready for Wardrobe. Then she'd hung around while the lighting was adjusted using stand-ins, and a further half-hour waiting for Jackson to finish a promo interview. So far she'd done twelve takes of this scene. Would it be lucky thirteen?

Scene 34. Ext. Lebanese desert. Again. Paige stood on the set, arms folded, while she waited for Jackson to return from his bathroom break. She was tired and hot. She hadn't been off the lot for five days. She wanted her break, her massage, her pomegranate juice, and the sushi lunch that was specially prepared for her and helicoptered over to the lot each day. (She suppressed a stab of eco-guilt about the helicopter: plenty of actors demanded this service for their *pets*.) During the happy birthday break the grips must have slid the huge side-doors of the sound stage briefly open, for Paige saw that the camel was now in its pen, ready to be led on set by the animal wrangler dressed in Arab costume. This was an encouraging sign that Lester was at least thinking of moving on; the camel part was in the next scene. Paige resolved to make this the best and final take. Ten out of the eleven scheduled weeks of filming were behind her. There were only a couple more scenes with Jackson. If she kept her cool, and did her job, she'd soon be free of him for ever.

Maybe it was this thought that gave her a surge of energy. For as she spoke the familiar words for the umpteenth time she suddenly felt inspired – transported – overtaken. She *was* Salima, hungry for passion, desperate for love, a real woman whose heart was breaking. At the same time, the critical side of her brain told her everything was right: timing, voice, expression. She knew in her bones that the emotion would transfer to the screen and burn a hole in the hearts of the audience. Such moments were rare, but exhilarating when they came. It was like magic, like flying, and this man wiping away her tears so tenderly was part of it. She forgot it was Jackson. Her eyes closed. She swooned into his embrace and waited for his kiss. His lips were almost on hers when he stopped short and let out a thunderous burp in her face.

‘Oops, too much cake,’ Jackson chuckled.

The whole sound stage exploded with laughter. Paige even heard some appreciative hand-claps. Jackson was laughing too, though as soon as he caught her looking at him he instantly rearranged his features into a pantomime of contrition. ‘Sorry, Paige,’ he said in a sing-song, little-boy voice. This too was apparently hilarious.

She jumped to her feet. ‘That’s *it!* I’m out of here.’

Hardly anyone heard her to begin with, except a cameraman who pulled his face from the viewfinder to gape at her in consternation as she strode across the set. For a moment she hesitated blindly at the edge of lights, where the animal wrangler was waiting, then began to climb off the set.

‘What’s going on?’ someone asked.

‘I am leaving. I do not have to put up with this. And

screw you, too!’ she told the camel, whose long-lashed eyes were regarding her with disdain.

People were hurrying over to see what was happening, even the catering guys. She stomped past them to collect her bag. Lester had left Video Village and was coming across to meet her. ‘What’s the problem, Paige?’

‘The problem is I am getting absolutely no support here! I will not be treated like this!’

She couldn’t believe it: someone was sitting in her chair! ‘Get your butt out of there,’ she yelled. A scared-looking blonde with her tits on display – one of the many Debralees and Ashlees and Infinites who were only here because they’d slept with someone – jumped out of the way. Paige snatched up her bag.

She felt Lester’s hand on her arm. ‘Now, Paige. Calm down. What are you doing?’

She shook him off. ‘What’s it look like I’m doing? I am leaving.’

‘But, sweetheart, why?’

‘I have had enough. I am releasing my inner fucking passion.’ Her eyes raked the sound stage. ‘Where’s my golf cart?’ she demanded of no one in particular.

There was a gratifying flurry of activity. *Yes, Miss Carson. At once, Miss Carson. Hurry it up, guys! Miss Carson’s golf cart!*

‘Paige, your trailer’s right outside,’ Lester reminded her. ‘You can’t go off the lot now.’

‘I will if I want to.’

‘Wait. We can discuss this. Jacko couldn’t help it. Could you, Jacko?’

Paige saw that Jackson had followed her off the set and was standing next to Lester, pretending to be

deeply concerned. He shook his head gravely. 'It just slipped out.'

'Oh, ha ha ha.' The very sight of him made her scalp prickle with fury. 'Get yourself another Salima,' she told Lester, scything one arm through the air. 'Get Meryl Streep, why not? Or Dame Judi Dench? Maybe they'd be good enough for him.'

She started scraping at her face. There was an anguished wail. 'No, Miss Carson. Please. Not the nose!'

Paige flicked the putty onto the floor and ground it flat with her heel.

'Told you she'd be trouble,' Jackson murmured to Lester.

'I am not trouble!' She stamped her combat boot. 'I am an Artist.'

Her ears were roaring. She couldn't stand the sight of Jackson for a single second longer. Turning away, she headed for the red light above the exit door. The two men followed. Lester was talking to her, but she could no longer hear. Faces blurred as she passed. They looked shocked. Didn't they understand?

'I want my sushi!' she heard herself shout. 'I want my pomegranate juice. I want some respect!'

Here was the door. She grabbed the metal handle. With all the sound-proofing it was heavier than she expected. As she pulled, the weight swung her round and she caught sight of Jackson. His eyes gleamed with satisfaction. This was what he had wanted all along.

'Get lost, c-cake-face!' She yanked her sunglasses from her bag, jammed them in place, and strode into the dazzling sunshine. The door slammed shut behind her.