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WHEN Jackie C. strode into the Polo Lounge of the Beverly Hills Hotel, half the room stood up to greet her. It wasn't hard to see why. A lush mane of dark hair, expertly teased out. Impeccable, but understated, make-up. An effortlessly classy black jacket and slacks. Strappy high-heeled sandals. A wide but simple swathe of Cartier diamonds completed the look. Diamonds always helped.

She was in her 70s, but looked at least 40 years younger. Botox was not the reason. Among this throng of surgically aided women and men, blowing air-kisses towards her from their puffy chipmunk cheeks, her unwrinkled glow came from sheer power. She loved it that the waiter fussed her, pushed in her chair and already had her sparkling water poured. She loved it that age—not that she felt it for one moment—let her do what the fuck she liked.

There was probably no one in the room who knew Hollywood better. She was its resident anthropologist, anatomiser and guide. The Grill for lunch. Mr Chow's or Cecconi's for dinner. Soho House for the best view of the whole staggeringly beautiful city of Los Angeles. Neiman-Marcus in Beverly Hills for shoes and jewels.

But this was only the start. Jackie C. also knew the places of furtive whispers and hot sheets. All of them. She had experienced 90210's wicked side ever since the age of 15, when she made Errol Flynn chase her round a table in the louche Chateau Marmont Hotel and fought off Sammy Davis Jr. Ever since she'd two-timed a couple of car mechanics on Sunset Boulevard. And ever since Marlon Brando, at a party, had admired her magnificent 39-inch breasts at the start of their brief but fabulous affair. Now for trysts she recommended the Bel-Air ("very discreet") and Geoffrey's at the Beach for waves, lights and general sexiness.

Yet this was still not why she was the most potent and dangerous person in the room. She was a writer. Over the years, quietly and intently, she had watched what the denizens of Hollywood were doing, and listened to what they were saying. Who had ditched whom. Who was eyeing up whom. Who had slept with whom, and full details. From her corner table at Spago's, or half-hidden by a drape in a nightclub, or under the dryer at Riley's hair salon, she would gather every last crumb of gossip and rush to the powder room to write it down. She turned it into sizzling novels in which, every six pages or so, enormous erections burst out of jeans, French lace panties were torn off and groans of delight rang through the palm-fringed Hollywood air. There were 32 books in all, with titles like "The Stud", "The Bitch", "Lethal Seduction" and "Hollywood Divorces". She had sold half a billion of them worldwide. Anyone she met might turn up there. Stars would beg her not to put them in her stories, and she would tell them they were there, toned down, already. *Hard luck.*

The ultimate aphrodisiac

She could not be suborned because she was not one of them. For a start, she was a Brit from north London, with that cute and surprising accent. When she was not thinking, she might still drive on the wrong side of the road. She had come out to Hollywood for good in the 1970s in the wake of her elder sister Joan, an actress who was slightly more famous and almost as good-looking. They got on wonderfully, as long as Elder Sister did not try to write books.

When pushed, too, she showed her wild and stubborn side. She lived life on her terms, absolutely. Her schooldays had come to an abrupt end when she was expelled for slipping off to bars in Soho. Every sexual position and practice she wrote about—in taxis, in elevators, off dinghies, *en plein air* or, best of all, tantric—had been personally researched. Her heroines were insatiable. They also had balls of fire, as they never did in fiction before she got started. They kicked ass, and so did she. Her favourite, Lucky Santangelo, star of her grittier Mafia novels, ended up running a chain of casinos in Las Vegas. Channelling her, Jackie C. sported oversized Gucci bags that might just conceal a gun, and reacted to an attempted carjack by reversing at speed. Never fuck with Jackie C. Her mascot was a panther—lithe, elegant, fierce.

And unpredictable. No stylist and no driver for her, though she had made a fortune from the novels and the TV spin-offs and could afford all the staff she liked. She designed her own mansion, did her own nails, executive-produced the films of her own books. And despite the orgiastic goings-on all round her, she stayed faithful—mostly—to her own men. She helped her first husband through methadone addiction and her second and third through terminal cancer. She sent her daughters to strict Catholic schools. Between the exhausting research-gathering and writing she cooked great meatloaf. Quite the Beverly Hills Housewife, in some ways.

Yet in other ways she never was. Writing gave her a power like no one else's, the ultimate aphrodisiac. Glancing now round the hotel lounge, taking in the bizarre bimbos and blond toy-boys and producers with gold chains in their chest hair, she knew she exuded more sex appeal than all of them together. And as for the bulging-tight trousers of the gloriously handsome Italian waiter who bent to serve her, that careless come-on swivel of the hips...