

A Life Singular

Dedication

Twenty Years On

'Y'know what I like about coming here, angel?'

Lynn smiled at her husband's playful wink. 'You're going to say nothing ever changes.'

'I was,' Jeff shook his head. 'How'd you know?'

The black Land Rover Discovery turned into the lane towards the rear gates of the vast Benloch property. The couple's shared observation was as false as it was true... On the face of things, remarkably little had changed in the twenty-three years since the songwriter and his muse first drove his ageing, rusty Ford Fairlane along this narrow track, too fast over the gravel and kicking up dust behind them.

Heavy electric gates rolled aside as it identified the vehicle, barely escaping a helping hand from the roo-bar when the car accelerated towards them.

'Well, that's changed, for a start,' the beauty countered. 'Before, you would've tried to run me over while I punched in the code.'

In the back of the car, Kierney dug her brother in the ribs. 'Wake up. We're here.'

For a moment not recognising where he was, Jet opened his eyes and groaned. He had flown in from the UK that very morning, having started his journey home from Cambridge University some thirty hours before.

It had been the lad's first Christmas away from the family, permission for which he had negotiated carefully when he found out an exquisite Russian archaeology student was staying in college over the holidays. However, he had later confessed to his father that his plan had been an almost total waste of time and he regretted not coming home to Melbourne as planned. The girl had not turned out to be quite as exquisite as he hoped, leaving the young buck to beat a hasty retreat from her room first thing on Boxing Day morning.

The eighteen-year-old sportsman had received a sympathetic hearing from his dad, who then undoubtedly passed on the juicy snippets of information to his mother, judging by the knowing smile she had given him later in the day. Jet didn't mind. He was very pleased to be back *en famille*, even if it did mean his kid sister was on hand to give him a hard time.

'Grab this, please,' Lynn asked her son, pointing to a large black suitcase.

The young man lifted the case out of the car as if it weighed next to nothing, his six-foot-four-inch frame beginning to fill out as he headed towards the end of his teens. He carried his own bag in the other hand and a folder of paperwork under one arm, stopping to kiss his grandmother in the doorway as he passed through into the house.

'Are you tired?' Marianna asked. 'You mustn't know what time it is, dear.'

'What time is it, Grandma? Sorry? What did you say?' the larrikin teased. 'Nice to see you. Happy Old Year.'

Jeff clipped the top of his son's head with the fingers of his right hand, and bent over to kiss his slowly-shrinking mother-in-law. 'Ignore him,' he told the elegant lady of the house. 'He thinks he's funny. We haven't got the heart to tell him the truth.'

'Good morning, Jeff,' the gracious woman replied. 'Twenty years. Can you believe it?'

'Definitely not. Feels like forty.'

'*Papá!*' Kierney shrieked from behind him. 'That's so mean! You think *you're* funny...'

The father turned round and gave his daughter a playful grin. 'I mean I *wish* it were forty,' he quipped.

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Once inside and with everyone suitably greeted and kissed, the Diamond family disappeared straight upstairs to unpack for the New Year's Eve celebrations. The air-conditioning system made sure the temperature in the big house was comfortable, and sparkles of sunlight glistened on the outdoor pool down below, enticing the couple as they looked over from the balcony.

Jeff looked at his watch. 'Are we all having lunch, d'you think?' he asked his wife. 'Or can we just relax for a while?'

To his delight, Lynn walked towards her husband and wrapped her arms around him. She was wearing a new perfume, and it turned him on; just a hint of mystery about the woman he knew so well. He had missed out on their usual morning liaison earlier that day, since mother and daughter left home before dawn to collect Jet from the airport and to squeeze in some valuable driving practice for the sixteen-year-old.

'I have no idea,' his wife answered, her hands rubbing his chest and stomach, heading towards his belt.

'What are you doing?' Jeff asked, kissing her with wanton lips. 'This is your parents' house.'

Lynn backed off, leaving her husband looking crestfallen. 'You're right,' she replied. 'I'm going downstairs to help Mum.'

'Good,' he agreed. 'Go on then.'

Strong, guitar-playing hands slipped inside his wife's shirt and began to fondle the underside of her breasts through the silky fabric of her bra. She leaned into him, their bodies drawn together by an unseen force as always. After a short while, the handsome man turned around to lock the bedroom door.

'I'm sick of living dangerously,' he smiled, seeing blue eyes flash their approval. 'Take me to bed.'

Jeff steered his dream girl towards the bed which had been hers since she was fifteen years old, and they made love with all the intensity that had built up over the last two spectacular decades. They had grown together, maturing both as lovers and as leaders. Both children were already older than Lynn had been when she first invited her dark-haired mystery man back to the family's farm for the weekend.

'How many songs have you brought with you for tomorrow?' the blonde star asked, caressing his chest as they moved together.

'Songs?' he gasped in pleasure. 'What are you talking about?'

His wife laughed. 'OK. Sorry I mentioned it.'

'Why? Is there something special going on this weekend?' the joker enquired with an innocent smile on his face.

His eyes were only half open as Jeff arched his back and kissed his wife's forehead. Then without warning, he whipped them both over so that he lay on his back, with Lynn's long, golden hair falling over her shoulders and breasts.

'Can you believe it's twenty years?' she asked, between moans of sweet delight.

'Nope,' the musician replied. 'I still remember being in this room for the first time. Can I make you scream like I did back then?'

'I hope so,' his lover sighed, lying down onto his stomach and feeling her orgasm closing in.

'Scream so your parents can hear,' Jeff urged, his breath hot on her face. 'Scream loud enough for them to know how much I love you.'

'Oh, I do love you,' Lynn moaned. 'I've loved you forever.'

Taking in his wife's pleasure with all his senses, the forty-three-year-old came in a huge rush moments afterwards, locked in a deep kiss. They lay motionless for several minutes, each lost in memories of their time together, their hands idly wandering over each others' tingling flesh.

'Two,' the rock star announced, breaking the silence.

Lynn glanced across. 'Two songs? Damn! I've only got one.'

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'Par for the course,' he teased. 'I'm used to it. I had four but dumped a couple 'cause that would've been just too embarrassing for you.'

The beautiful woman sat up and dealt her husband's chest a playful slap. 'It's quality not quantity. I thought we might disappear to the dam tomorrow morning early, if we can get away with it. Would you like that?'

Jeff rolled his eyes in ecstasy and squeezed the champion's tight obliques. 'What do you think?'

'I don't want to take things for granted,' Lynn shrugged, 'even after twenty years.'

'Ha!' the songwriter laughed, easing the gorgeous body off onto the mattress and heading towards the bathroom. 'Go ahead, angel. Take me for granted. I've been waiting a long time to be taken for granted. I'm all for new experiences at my time of life.'

Lynn smiled. She was ecstatic to see her husband so happy and contented. The Fabulous Foursome was together for the special occasion, and her gorgeous lover had an extra spring in his step and a glint in his eye. Nineteen-ninety-six was set to be a phenomenal year for their whole family. They had all been phenomenal years in fact, and each one better than the last.

Downstairs, Kierney had gone in search of her cousin, Jazz. They found each other by the pool, with the younger of Jazz's two brothers, Bruce. They had all spent time together over Christmas, so there was little news to catch up on, except for the fact that Jet was home. The others laughed at Kierney's tall tales describing her brother's many romantic escapades.

Known by this apt nickname, as most of the Dyson family were, Ryan Diamond was the eldest grandchild of Bart and Marianna Dyson, followed by Sonny, Bruce's big brother. Jazz was the youngest, having only recently turned the corner into her teens, and she lived vicariously through the exploits of Kierney, the willowy, sixteen-year-old gipsy. A sixth grandchild was expected next year, the first baby for Lynn's much younger sister, Anna. It was exciting to think of a new arrival after so long, and the two girls swapped name suggestions, hoping it would not be another male firstborn.

By the time the anniversary couple had changed and reached the pool, almost the whole clan was assembled. The only person missing was Bart, the head of the dynasty and the man largely responsible for putting Australia at the top of the sporting world. Even now, at sixty-three years of age, his dedication to the Olympic movement and his determination for the national team to succeed meant his family almost never saw him, even during the holiday season.

'Mum,' Lynn asked, 'what would you like us to do? Can I help with lunch?'

'Shortly, dear,' Marianna responded. 'You guys relax. There's not much to do.'

Bart Dyson Junior, Lynn's elder brother, sat himself next to the dark-haired superstar and extended his hand. 'A day early, I know, but happy anniversary, mate.'

'Cheers, Junior,' Jeff nodded, before impersonating his father-in-law's booming voice with surprising accuracy. 'Remarkable achievement.'

The group of grandchildren turned as one in amusement, before continuing to lark about in the water. Lynn came over to kiss her brother and to receive her dose of the congratulations. She sat between Junior and her husband, opening her book and feigning ignorance of both of them.

'So what does it feel like to be an old married woman?' the footballer teased.

'Great, thanks,' the beautiful woman smiled, surveying the scene. 'Where's Jetto?'

'I expect he's fallen asleep up there,' Marianna suggested. 'We'll wake him before lunch.'

Jeff and Kierney exchanged furtive glances. There could be any number of reasons for the young man's temporary absence, virtually none of which suitable to share with his grandmother.

'He'll be checking his e-mail,' Lynn informed their host, which was code for arranging one or more hot dates for the coming nights.

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That evening the Dyson family hosted a New Year's Eve party in the courtyard behind the house, as they did most years. The Diamonds had vetoed a large combined extravaganza for their anniversary, saying they would much prefer to a quiet, simple celebrate where they weren't the centre of attention. Nineteen-ninety-five had been an exceedingly successful year for them, and they had attended enough swanky parties all over the world to become bored with dressing up to the nines and having to revel in sycophantic praise.

They were also conscious of Junior's recent divorce, and although he and Julie had separated amicably, the everlasting pair was sensitive to the fact that he was only beginning to adjust to sole parenthood. He had admitted to Jeff to being annoyed with himself for failing to make his marriage last like his sister's.

Next morning, the house was bursting at the seams with leftover party guests. The hustle and bustle of a breakfast barbecue was too much for many heads and stomachs, including Jeff's. Staring into the bathroom mirror, he examined his bloodshot eyes and the extra grey hairs he could have sworn had appeared overnight on his head, chest and arms. He watched as his reflection rubbed the tattoo on its right pectoral muscle, before looking down to his left at the real thing.

'Happy anniversary, mate,' he wished the bloke in the mirror, dipping his razor into the hot water and beginning to shave.

Off to Coldwater Creek this morning, the celebrity's fuzzy mind reminded itself. *¡Excelente!* It had always been the couple's special place. They had spent many happy hours there, writing songs together, talking endlessly about the meaning of life and sharing each other's bodies in the splendid isolation. Despite his hangover, the vision of his dream girl lying naked on a picnic rug beside the deep dam aroused him in an instant.

His wife frowned in amusement on seeing his excited state when the superstar returned to the bedroom. 'Thinking about going to the creek, were you?'

'Maybe,' he smiled, throwing on some shorts and a T-shirt. 'I suppose we've got to get through breakfast first again. You're always so mean to me, making me wait like this...'

Lynn stood up and kissed him, as he grabbed her hand and pressed it against his predicament. She snatched her fingers away.

'The suspense is killing you. I know and I'm sorry. It'll be worth it.'

'You always say that,' Jeff moaned, putting on a sad face. 'One year we'll have to go straight over there as soon as we wake up and see if you're right. If the sex is still good, I'll finally know I've been duped all these years.'

'And if it's bad?' the blonde beauty asked.

Her husband shook his head, knowing full well that sex between them could never be bad. 'Yeah, well... That's where my argument sort of collapses.'

Breakfast over and hangovers clearing, Lynn and Jeff piled their stuff into a ute and picked their way over the ruts following the paddocks' fence-lines until they reached Coldwater Creek, as they had in all weathers at this time of year since they had known each other. A large number of hit records had been created there, and many a grand scheme was hatched. Moreover, they were fairly sure their son had been conceived in this idyllic spot, or at least they chose to think so.

Twenty years was a long time, they agreed in the warm country air. Twenty years with the same partner, never once wanting anyone else, was no mean feat, particularly in the showbusiness world. In all that time, they had never grown tired of the songs one wrote for the other, nor the hair-brained ideas their

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partnership spawned nor being able to share the endless pressure of staying on top of their game both personally and professionally.

For this special anniversary, Jeff submitted one slightly ironic and sarcastic lyric and another more optimistic and romantic. They had been set to music and recorded before Christmas by an up-and-coming British singer whom he had signed to their label, and the prolific songwriter was pleased with the results.

And for her husband's gift, Lynn's theme was also nostalgia, with heartfelt lyrics and a simple melody. She had produced the song herself while Jeff had been away in Europe in the weeks before the holiday season. While his gorgeous wife sang, picking out a lean accompaniment on the acoustic guitar, the happiest man on Earth lay back in the sun and listened with his eyes closed and his heart wide open.

Making love in the fresh air, with always the faint possibility of being discovered by a farm worker or some local *Daundwurrung* or *Woirurrung* people looking for a cooling swim, the pair of Diamonds enjoyed their own private celebration. Ahead of them was another huge twelve months that would see the family dispersed still further across the globe. Nonetheless, they were looking forward to it with great excitement for the new challenges on which all four would be embarking.

Jet would shortly be heading back to the UK to continue his second year at Cambridge, and Kierney was impatient to start her first semester at Sydney University. Turning seventeen this coming February, their daughter was also itching to take her driving test, which in her mind was the last obstacle standing between her and independence.

Lynn's diary had several successful artists blocked in to record new albums in her studio and to have their music crafted by one of the most highly respected arranger-producers in the business. She was also due to complete an ambitious film project as a gift for her husband, hoping to have it finished in time for their special occasion. Given how hectic the year had turned out however, the personal endeavour had fallen behind schedule for several worthy reasons. And if these commitments didn't make her busy enough, now the children were almost self-sufficient, she was keen to explore new ways of influencing the country's governing classes beyond the years of effective activism afforded to her causes by her very public profile.

And for Jeff, this would be another year when too many hours would be spent on aeroplanes or locked securely in hotel rooms all over the globe. There would be no touring at least, since the "Live On Earth" series of concerts had finally come to an end in Los Angeles a few months ago. Instead, he had planned to devote more effort to the peace negotiations he was spearheading in the Middle East, Northern Ireland and his beloved Africa, while in the background working on a plan to pare down the travelling and to focus on developing both his golf swing and his wife's career.

'The change'll be good for us, I think,' his beautiful best friend ventured, stroking the hair on her man's chest and abdomen. 'Change is as good as a rest, they say. Do you need a rest?'

'Sex is as good as a rest,' he quipped, not even opening his eyes. 'Old Italian proverb.'

The patient woman sniffed. 'Of course. Attributed to?' she asked, only too aware that she had also been massaging his ego. 'Rudolf Valentino? Or Casanova?'

'That'd make it an old Spanish proverb.'

Taking his dream girl by surprise, the know-all grabbed her wandering hand and pulled it to his mouth for a kiss. Both sat up and embraced once more for luck, knowing that time was passing and their presence would soon be required back at the house.

Lynn had a broad grin on her face. 'So I suppose you were Casanova in a former life too?'

'Expect so,' Jeff shrugged with a trace of *macho* conceit. 'If you say so.'

The lovers dressed and gathered up the rug and water bottles, ready to throw into the ute's tray. Lynn placed the old guitar into its case until the next visit, and they turned the car round to return to the present

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tense and their family. No matter how many times they came to this oasis, it never lost its ability to transport them somewhere special.

'I *am* getting tired now,' the billionaire philanthropist confided, bumping over the dried-up tyre furrows to reach the road back to the house. 'I feel like I've been around for two hundred years. I think I'm turning into a self-satisfied fat cat at last.'

The stunning blonde laughed. If there was something she knew her husband was incapable of becoming, it was their fabled self-satisfied fat cat.

'Yeah, right,' she teased. 'So when are you going to cut up your frequent flyer card? And what makes you think I want you hanging round the house anyway?'

'Easy fixed,' Jeff returned the favour, swinging the vehicle into the garage. 'I'll hang around someone else's house then.'

His wife put on a sad face. 'Oh, alright then. You win, Felix.'

Hand-in-hand, the happy couple trudged across the gravel and entered the luxurious farmhouse through the rear door, preparing to re-join the rest of the clan.

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A Life Shattered

Lynn, Jeff and Kierney celebrated another milestone in the youngest family member's journey to adulthood on Thursday the fifteenth of February nineteen-ninety-six, just a few days after her birthday. She had arrived at the restaurant on Beaconsfield Parade in her own car, brandishing her new driver's licence and a large bouquet of flowers for her mother.

'Let me see!' the proud father fuelled her excitement, taking the plastic card from her waving hand and examining the photograph. 'That's not you. It's a fake.'

Kierney stuck her tongue out at him and snatched the licence back. 'It's not. It's real,' she insisted, passing it to her mother. 'Let's see yours then. Let's see if yours looks like you.'

Her dad obliged, removing his wallet from his back pocket. It was a warm summer's evening, and the famous family had risked a table outside in the casual dining area of the restaurant, looking out over the bay. Other patrons sat around them, doing their best to ignore the celebrities, who in return were doing their best to be ignored. Somehow, neither party ever quite succeeded at this game, and certainly not in their home town.

Before passing his own licence to his daughter, the forty-three-year-old took a look at the mug-shot which was now over five years old. He held it up to his cheek for the women to adjudicate.

'Which me do you prefer?' he challenged. 'The nineteen-ninety model or the current model?'

His wife smiled, love gleaming in her blue eyes. 'The current model, of course. Distinguished and sophisticated.'

'Grey and wrinkly,' Kierney countered, eager to examine the detail on her father's licence and comparing its format to her brand new one.

Jeff chuckled. 'OK. I know who's paying for dinner tonight! Somewhere between the two responses would've been nice.'

While they waited for their drinks to arrive, Lynn telephoned Jet in Cambridge, for Kierney to pass on the good news to her brother. He didn't answer, so they left a quick message and focussed on the menu. One after the other, they discussed their own driving test memories and shared the feeling of elation each remembered on passing.

'Sounds like the legal ability to drive on our own was a long time coming for all of us,' the sportswoman reflected, turning to her husband. 'Do you remember those lessons you gave me out on the deserted roads near the airport?'

'Yep,' Jeff nodded, screwing up his face at a rare less-than-happy memory. 'In our blue period. We were so short-tempered with each other. And then your first licence was your Californian one, after all that.'

'Yeah. My God, that test was pathetic!' his wife laughed, casting her hand around as if describing an open space. 'Here's a car park. If you can drive once around without hitting any other cars, you pass.'

'Was that it?' Kierney queried in amazement. 'Were you driving before you got your licence too, *Papá*?'

Coughing comically, and looking around to check no-one could overhear, Jeff answered. 'Um, yes. I bought a car when I was sixteen, but I didn't drive it much. Couldn't afford the petrol. It was still a good feeling to finally get a licence though. Proof that I was a *bona fide* citizen, I guess.'

The teenager smiled. 'That's exactly how I feel too. A passport doesn't make you autonomous, because I've had one since before I could walk or talk. At least with a driving licence, it proves I'm somewhat responsible for my own actions.'

Her mum chuckled. 'Listen to us! We're all so similar. It's amazing how being accountable is so much part of our *ethos*. Other people shirk responsibility until they die.'

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'Viva apathy!' the peacemaker toasted, just as their meals arrived at the table. 'I hate the world but I can't be bothered to change it, so I'll just spend the rest of my life moaning.'

The *trio* swapped more driving stories over dinner, laughing and joking like the tight-knit family they were. They made plans for Kierney to drive down from Sydney to meet them at Junior's farm in Narrandera for the Easter weekend, which would be the next big get-together.

'You can bring someone if you like,' Lynn invited their daughter. 'Are things OK with you and Dylan? You seemed a little distant on your birthday. Are you still going out with him?'

'Yeah. Technically we are,' Kierney confirmed, 'but I'd rather come on my own. I want to enjoy being *en famille* before getting dragged into uni' life.'

'That's cool,' her dad said, leaning over and kissing his daughter's temple. 'It'll be great to be together in the wilderness for a few days, as an antidote to all the madness. Jeez, we're going to be busy, angel. Shame Jetto's not here. But hey, Kizzy... Exactly what does going out with someone technically entail?'

Lynn grinned as she waited for the youngster to come up with a suitable response, knowing how alike the two dark-haired Diamonds' brains worked. It was becoming increasingly difficult to embarrass the children these days, given their rapidly increasing levels of experience with the opposite sex.

'Oh, you know... We get cosy every now and again,' the seventeen-year-old explained with a shy grin, 'in a technical way. But then we do our own thing when we want to.'

Jeff shook his head. 'That makes no sense at all, *pequeñita*, but I'll let you carry on living in your misguided reality.'

'Whatever, *Papá*,' Kierney pouted. 'I don't meddle in you guys' sex life, so I'll thank you not to meddle in mine.'

'Sounds like a good deal,' her mother agreed, moving swiftly along. 'Did you want us to check anything out for you in Sydney this weekend?'

The student shook her head. 'Can't think of anything, thanks. If I do, I can ring you. Are you staying at the Blakes?'

'Not tomorrow night, but at the weekend we are,' Jeff answered. 'We've got to help Celia convince Gerald to stop drinking.'

'Oh, why? Is he ill?'

'Yep,' her dad nodded again. 'Blood pressure, heart problems. All sorts apparently. He needs to stop smoking and drinking so much.'

'Unfair, isn't it?' Lynn added, her eyes staring out across the bay. 'You reach the autumn of your life, and your body starts denying you all the pleasures you've earned during the hard-slog years.'

'*Exactement*,' her husband agreed. 'Still, it's a choice. Keep going at the same pace so you go out partying, or slow down and gradually bore yourself to death.'

Kierney laughed. 'Neither of those options sounds very attractive. Somewhere in the middle perhaps? Please give him my best wishes.'

'We will. That's kind, darling. Everything in moderation,' Lynn offered, mimicking her own mother. 'For all the new fad diets and advances in healthy living, that old adage still works the best.'

'Jesus!' Jeff exclaimed. 'Enough of this sensible talk, Grandma. We sound like the Grim Reaper, warning everyone to steer clear of danger. It's his choice, as long as he makes it knowing the likely effects on everyone, not just himself.'

Kierney's mobile telephone rang from inside her handbag.

'That'll be Jet,' her mum guessed.

'Thanks!' the teenager shouted into the phone. 'Yeah. It's awesome! Thanks for ringing back. How's things over there? We're having dinner in Port Melbourne, on the bay. It's very hot. Ha, ha! Tough luck!'

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The handset was passed around each family member in turn. Luckily, by this time, there were no other patrons nearby whom they could disturb. Jet was envious of the summer weather and sorry to be missing out on their celebratory dinner. The university term having restarted in earnest, the student's workload was already mounting, now almost halfway through his degree.

'See ya, son,' Jeff shouted over the wind and traffic noise. 'Talk soon. Have fun at the weekend. Stay safe.'

'So he bought that bike,' Kierney said, referring to the Triumph motorcycle her brother had been eyeing up since before the end of the previous term. 'I knew he would.'

'Yes,' her mother replied. 'He said he managed to negotiate the price down, so the guy must have been keen to sell it to him. Hope it's not about to fall to pieces.'

Jeff nodded, leaning back in his chair and savouring the small amount of wine left in his glass. It would be a useful lesson for their son if the bike were to break down, but he wasn't game to voice this opinion right now. Both children were fully automated these days, self-sufficient and confident. *Not a bad job done*, he thought. The handsome man winked at his wife fondly.

'We have no purpose now,' he rued. 'Parental pasture looms. Where shall we retire to, angel?'

'No!' the pretty, dark-haired teenager cried out. 'Don't retire! I still need you.'

'Crap!' her father objected. 'Kiz, you haven't needed us since you were out of nappies. Get outta here!'

'OK. But don't go too far away. Driving distance only.'

With darkness descending on Port Phillip Bay, Lynn paid the bill, and the threesome left the restaurant, crossed the road and walked hand-in-hand along the promenade towards Station Pier. The "Spirit of Tasmania" had docked recently, with another, much larger ocean liner moored alongside it, dwarfing the ferry that ran daily between Melbourne and Devonport on the apple-shaped island state to the south. Passers-by waved and shouted cheerfully to the famous family, receiving a smile and a quick greeting in return.

'Hey!' Kierney remembered something. 'You guys remember Youssouf Elhadji?'

'Yeah,' her father nodded. 'Did he reply to your message?'

'More than! He wants to record something else with me. He's become a Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF. Can you believe that?'

'That's amazing. Well done!' Lynn praised. 'When do you want to work with him?'

'Don't know yet,' the proud teenager answered. 'Probably in July, at the end of term, depending on my exams. I could visit Jet and meet him in London. What do you think? I can hardly ask him to come here, can I?'

'No. Not really,' Jeff agreed. 'London or New York. Or what about Paris? I'll come with you. You should produce it, angel.'

'Thanks. I'm more interested in talking to him about the United Nations,' their ambitious daughter explained. 'So New York would be perfect. He could show me around, if that's allowed. I might even marry him.'

'Might you?' her dad enquired in surprise, opening the car door for his wife. 'No wonder you want to leave Dylan behind at Easter. I didn't know you had the hots for him. Isn't he already married? Technically?'

'I don't even know,' Kierney swooned. 'Probably. *N'importe pas*.'

'Right,' Lynn smiled at the youngster's free and easy attitude. 'We'll leave that one in your capable hands. See you at home.'

The parents drove off before their daughter pulled out of her parking space up ahead of them, not wishing to put any pressure on her early driving career. Gazing into his rear-view mirror, Jeff couldn't stop

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himself from checking the little silver hatchback was following them. Lynn caught his eye and scolded him gently. Letting Kierney grow up and spread her wings was truly the hardest thing for her husband.

'Shit! I am so old,' he groaned. 'How can our little girl be thinking of getting married? This is not right, baby. Now I know how your parents felt.'

'What goes around comes around,' the empathetic superstar sighed, stroking her husband's strong left arm as his hand shifted gear in the sleek, black sports car. 'My mum tried to tell me you'd behave the same way as Dad if you ever had your own daughter.'

'Did she?' Jeff asked. 'When you were sick that day in our apartment? While I duelled with your father for your hand on the balcony?'

'Yes. That fateful day,' the beautiful woman confirmed. 'I remember disputing her opinion and saying that at least you'd ask your daughter what she wanted first.'

'No way! That's not going to happen,' her husband denied with a half-smile, shaking his head. 'I'm going to put my foot down. No free thinking allowed 'til she's at least thirty.'

'Come on! You'd love to have Youssouf Elhadji as a son-in-law,' his wife chided.

The songwriter nodded, turning towards her and grinning. 'I would. Awesome!'

Lynn laughed at his impersonation of their exuberant girl-child. After a few more minutes winding through Melbourne's sparse evening traffic, the couple turned into the car park of their city apartment, and before the gates had fully opened, Kierney had pulled up behind them in her pride and joy, her silver Volkswagen independence machine.

'Kizzy, we're leaving,' Jeff announced, knocking on his daughter's bedroom door. 'Can I come in?'

'Yes,' the youngster called out in reply, swinging her legs off the bed to meet her dad with a kiss at the door. 'Right now?'

'Ten, fifteen minutes,' the smartly-dressed businessman confirmed, his eyes alighting on a piece of paper with a series of verses written on it. 'What's this? May I read it, please?'

'A-course ya can,' Kierney joked. 'It was inspired by Auntie Lena, after that dinner we nearly didn't share in Sydney last year. Hope you don't mind the subject matter.'

The seventeen-year-old disappeared into the bathroom, leaving her father hypnotised by a very adult song lyric that lamented the disdain often served upon sex workers for taking cash for their time, as opposed to the jewellery, cars and comfortable houses for which the more refined gold-diggers were known to opt. He shivered at some of the callous images the words conjured up, particularly when he focussed on the unfeeling monotony of such a life.

If this song was his sister's story, it was not one Jeff recognised. Had Madalena really opened up to this extent to her niece that night? He doubted it. If she had, he was sure the teenager would have told him sooner. Throughout their very separate lives, growing up in Sydney's neglected western suburbs, the siblings had evolved into vastly different people as a result of the wounds inflicted in their formative years. The young lad had gained a surfeit of emotional intelligence and self-awareness, whereas his older sister had closed her heart and mind to any outside influences, whether subconsciously or otherwise.

Deep in contemplation, the father jumped as the bathroom door clicked shut behind him, and he felt his daughter's presence at his side. 'This is good,' he said, flapping the page in front of her face. 'I love the last verse, even though you shouldn't be so cynical so young. *Mamá*'d try to discourage you from thinking this way, but I'm too much like you to get away with it anymore.'

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Kierney giggled, accepting the lyric sheet back and placing it on the desk. 'True. Chip off the old block. I'm glad you like it.'

'I do, baby,' Jeff affirmed. '*Pero dígame...* Did Auntie Lena really talk about some of those things? That she longs to be touched by someone who cares? It just doesn't sound like my sister. Are you sure you had dinner with the right whore?'

'*Papá!*' the young woman sounded offended, slapping his arm. 'I'm not that stupid. It's not Auntie Lena's story. We talked about working girls *generalmente*, and she told me some stories about people she knew. It was interesting, how different women deal with being a prostitute. That's all.'

'But why do you want to know so much about that seedy lifestyle?' her father enquired, keen to lighten the mood before their departure. 'United Nations lost its appeal?'

'Maybe,' the teenager teased, batting flirtatious eyelids. 'I'll need some pocket money while I'm going through uni'. It's the oldest profession, isn't it? I was always told the professions are reputable careers.'

The musician rested an affectionate hand on top of his daughter's untidy head of hair and shook her gently, and she reached both arms around his waist to hug him in close. A few years ago, he would have held her at arm's length while she tried in vain to punch his ribs with flailing fists, but these days she chose to cuddle into him. Kierney Diamond loved her *papá* best of all.

'Enough with the smart remarks, *hija mía*. If you need pocket money to get through uni', our combined songwriting careers must definitely have hit the skids,' the billionaire scoffed. '*Mamá!* I'll bail you out. She's good like that.'

'The last line did come from Auntie Lena though,' Kierney smiled, chasing him back towards the kitchen.

'Did it?' he responded in amazement. 'The thin line reference? I didn't think she'd think that way. Who was she referring to?'

'Oh, no-one in particular. Maybe Michelle? She was saying that women who got married to rich men so they could have kids and nannies and never work again were selling sex just as much as prostitutes do. And I see her point. Is that mean?'

Jeff stopped and turned to this gorgeous creature who never wanted to hurt anyone, even with the truth. She knew the answer to her own question. He could see it in her big, brown eyes.

'It's a song, not an affidavit, *pequeñita*,' he smiled, pointing to his daughter's heart. 'As long as you understand that in here...'

'I do,' the young woman nodded.

'I know, and generally I agree with you,' the philosopher added. 'It is a really thin line, as your song says. I suppose people get as addicted to jewellery shopping and a new car every year just as much as they can to drugs and drink. Jacinta might fall into that category, but she'd certainly think you were being mean. Tammy too. They're both pretty much ladies of leisure these days, courtesy of their husbands' big, fat portfolios.'

Kierney laughed. These two names referred to the sisters of the Diamonds' long-suffering manager, all of whom her father had known since he was a boy. Michelle England was her mother's best friend from school, and she and Madalena had been fellow bridesmaids at Lynn and Jeff's wedding twenty years ago.

'But it's not true for Michelle,' her dad continued. 'You shouldn't discount unpaid work. Michelle serves on a few non-profit boards, like *Mamá* does, and she takes care a lot of our legal stuff *pro bono*. She actually works pretty hard. Auntie Lena wouldn't understand that sort of work. You have to dig up roads or stand up all day as a supermarket checkout chick before Lena thinks you're working.'

The student looked guilty, causing the charitable father to feel sorry for her. He didn't need to labour the point. The two walked into the kitchen where Lynn was putting away their breakfast things.

'*Buenos días, Mamá,*' Kierney chanted, kissing her mother. 'When are you back?'

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'Buenos días, Kizzy. Tuesday morning,' she answered. 'We're planning to go straight to the house though. What are you doing?'

'Don't know yet,' the seventeen-year-old frowned.

'What? Question too hard?' her dad scoffed. 'Come on, for Christ's sake! Get with the programme. Don't you know your diary off by heart by now?'

Father and daughter regularly joked about her mum's requirement for much more rigorous planning standards in comparison with theirs. Somehow, she was able to retain her every appointment in her head, along with those of the rest of the family and some of her friends too. Dark-haired Diamonds didn't do detail, which was always a source of intense frustration for the super-organised, blonde beauty.

Kierney shrugged. 'Terribly sorry. I'll try to get all the spontaneity out of my system before you return.'

'Good thing too,' Lynn mocked, giving her daughter a hug. 'Enjoy yourself this weekend, and don't forget to ring if you want us to do anything while we're in Sydney.'

'I will and I won't,' the teenager responded, taking a swift look around the kitchen. 'What about here? Is there anything I should do?'

'Nope,' Jeff shook his head. 'Everything's under control. Just drive carefully and don't go getting married until we get back.'

Mother and child both laughed aloud, sharing sympathetic glances at the uneasy father figure. After final kisses goodbye, Kierney stood in the hallway in her pyjamas until the lift doors closed on her parents, on their way to the airport. Again.

The commuter flight to Sydney was uneventful but crowded, and it had taken quite a while to reach their rental car, by the time the Diamonds had hung back to avoid the throng at baggage collection. Cathy Lane, their trusty administration wizard, had arranged a little Mercedes AMG sports car for their few days in Sydney, and it was husband *versus* wife to be the first to drive it.

The silver dart sped towards the Central Business District, weaving through the traffic as best it could. The couple were due at a charity luncheon at eleven-thirty and decided first to check into their favourite boutique hotel, The Pensione on George Street. Jeff pulled into the semi-circular, covered driveway at speed, negotiating the curves expertly and coming to a halt only centimetres from the kerb. The doorman was impressed, and then startled when the passenger door opened and out stepped none other than Lynn Dyson Diamond.

The tall, elegant lady signalled to the *valet* that her husband wouldn't require him to park the car. 'He knows where to go,' she told the open-mouthed fan. 'He's like a boy with a new toy in that thing. I'm sure he thinks it's a go-kart.'

The stocky young man gave a tentative laugh and opened the glass side-door beside the main entrance to let the superstar pass through into the hotel lobby. Lynn approached the reception desk, greeted by a row of waiting smiles. The staff were eager to see their special guests again.

'Welcome, Ms Diamond,' the receptionist marked "Miriam" effervesced. 'How are you today?'

'We're very well, thank you. A bit stressed. It took a long time to get out of the airport this morning. Jeff's bringing the luggage around from the car park. How are you all?'

'Good, thanks. And thank you so much for choosing to stay with us today, Ms Diamond,' Miriam added, dripping with sincerity. 'It's lovely to see you again.'

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The VIP was handed two keys and a pair of envelopes that had been left at the hotel for the couple. She turned to watch the same doorman wheeling a trolley towards her, ready to take their luggage up to the room. A telephone rang on the counter, and one of the other receptionists answered it.

'Excuse me, Ms Diamond,' Hannah called out, seeing the celebrity walking away. 'There's a 'phone call for Mister Diamond.'

'I'll take it,' Lynn replied, turning back. 'Thanks.'

Miriam instructed her more junior colleague to put the call through to a courtesy telephone in the lobby, next to a comfortable leather couch. The girls watched their famous guest closely as she walked across the tiled flooring, self-assured in a tailored suit and high heels. It was the first time the younger receptionist had seen Australia's favourite lady in the flesh, and she felt as jealous as the others. To think she was now forty years old. It was hard to believe the woman in front of them had children already in their late teens.

Lynn Dyson Diamond was everything a woman would want to be: tall and slim, with long, blonde hair and a tanned, radiant complexion. In fact, the receptionists remarked to each other that they remembered seeing photographs of Anna Dyson's wedding two years earlier, at which this lady had been her sister's Matron of Honour. It had been difficult to tell who was the younger, although Anna was over ten years Lynn's junior.

'Please take a seat over there, Ms Diamond,' Miriam invited the celebrity, pointing towards the telephone. 'The call will be waiting for you.'

The celebrity did as she was told, mouthing a quick thank-you. Lifting the receiver to her ear, she sank into the sumptuous cushion and crossed her long legs, as ever stately and regal.

'Hello? This is Lynn Diamond.'

There was a gruff, nervous voice at the other end of the line, which asked again to speak to her husband.

'No, I'm sorry. This is Lynn Diamond,' the patient woman repeated. 'Can I help you instead?'

But there was no further conversation. With the faintest of sounds, the celebrity's head was whipped back against the wall behind the couch by an invisible force, and she exhaled suddenly. Elsewhere, the reception staff continued about their day's business. Nobody noticed the trickle of blood running down their beautiful guest's forehead, where a bullet had penetrated her skull. Her eyes were open and staring over towards the hotel entrance, as if looking for her husband. She was frozen in time while the world carried on as normal around her.

A few seconds later, something made Miriam look up and check on the telephone call taken by her distinguished patron. She screamed at the top of her voice, causing everyone within earshot to stop in their tracks and follow her frightened gaze. Pandemonium broke out in the lobby, as staff and guests quickly became aware of the frightening occurrence.

Outside, Jeff reached the revolving doors leading from the driveway into the hotel, only to be greeted by loud screams and the sound of a man shouting. He had a suitcase in each hand and the parking ticket in his teeth. Approaching the grand entrance, he stopped to put the docket and receipt in his wallet, wondering what all the noise was for.

'Please keep calm,' the hotel manager's voice spoke authoritatively, looking from one side of the lobby to the other with wide eyes. 'No-one leave the building, please.'

Just as the handsome musician picked up the luggage again, a small, middle-aged man began to push the revolving doors from the inside. The natural leader stepped back out and met the other man as he was ejected into the open air, standing directly in front of him.

'Did you hear the instruction, mate? You'd better stay inside. What's happened? D'you know?'

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Quite clearly agitated, the small, swarthy gentleman hissed a few words at the celebrity in a language he had trouble recognising as Spanish.

‘¿Qué dices, hombre?’ he asked, leaning over him resolutely.

‘Quería matarlo Ustéd, pero es mejor así,’ the frightened foreigner muttered under his breath.

Jeff’s height and strength were too much for the smaller man to contend with, and he found himself being directed back through the revolving doors towards the commotion. A hotel staff member wearing a security guard’s uniform had been watching the two men outside, ready to take control of the fugitive from their instantly-recognisable guest.

The linguist replayed the muttered sentence again in his head. What had the little bloke said? Something about killing him but that this way was better? What had he meant? And did “him” refer to someone inside or had he directed this statement at its intended object?

‘What’s going on?’ Jeff demanded of the man in uniform, beginning to panic as he saw a familiar figure coming towards him.

‘Mister Diamond,’ the hotel manager said, as white as a sheet and with a shaky voice. ‘Come this way, please.’

The special guest looked from the short, southern European man and the security guard to the smartly attired manager whom he knew fairly well, and began to feel dizzy and nauseous. *No, surely not...*

‘Where’s my wife?’ he demanded. ‘Where’s Lynn?’

The sounds inside the *foyer* were loud and frenetic, and the area had taken on a surreal ambience which reminded the celebrity a little of a film set. But no-one was making a movie here. Something serious had clearly happened, and Jeff was filled with foreboding that he would not be playing the innocent bystander for much longer.

Chris Nichols, his shiny lapel badge sporting the hotel’s logo, was now at the star’s side. ‘Mister Diamond, please come with me.’

‘Why?’ the visitor asked, scanning the scene in the lobby. ‘What’s going on? Where’s Lynn?’

Looking around, Jeff could see the *concièrge* staff had erected a type of screen at the far end of the lounge area, against the wall. He tried to remember the normal layout, yet his confused, swirling thoughts drew a blank.

‘Will someone please tell me what’s going on?’ he asked again, to anyone listening.

The forty-three-year-old’s anxious mind strung the circumstances together and came to the worst possible conclusion. Pushing past Nichols, he strode towards the small crowd now gathered around the screen. The doorman tried to prevent him from going any further, but Jeff Diamond wasn’t the type of man who took no for an answer. He sidestepped everyone’s valiant efforts to prevent him from seeing what he knew by now he didn’t want to see.

Reaching the barrier, the superstar’s head swam at the prospect of the scene he was about to encounter. The sight that met his eyes after one more stride confirmed his worst fear; the one he had been dreading for so many years. His legs buckled underneath him, and he felt his stomach churning wildly, struggling to maintain his equilibrium. Thirty pairs of eyes drilled into him, and the weight of thirty-one heavy hearts charged the atmosphere. Deliberately avoiding them all, the tall, dark, handsome man stepped forwards to where the love of his life was sitting, still with the telephone receiver in her lap.

People all around were crying; some wailing out loud. Their shock at finding Australia’s favourite celebrity mother with a gunshot in her head was now mixing with the distress of watching her husband of twenty years come to terms with the *tableau* before him. It was too much for several people, who collapsed and fainted in their neighbours’ arms.

‘Lynn,’ Jeff whispered, crouching down beside his wife’s long, sexily-crossed legs and placing his left hand on her knee. ‘Baby, what happened?’

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The distraught songwriter took a few seconds to survey the situation as thoroughly as his emotions would allow, willing with all his might that it not be true. Now would be a very good time for his guardian angel to wake him up from this nightmare, as she had done so many times before. Instead, she sat mute and motionless. He picked up her hands and stared at the bullet hole in her head which had extinguished her life. Time stood still, and the cries and murmurs of the onlookers behind him rang in his ears. He lifted Lynn's hands to his mouth before laying them back down into her lap.

Not enough, he thought. To a backing track of sighs and yelps, the performer leaned forwards and kissed inanimate, red lips, which were already much colder than he remembered.

Nichols and his crew were doing his best to steer the crowd away, but no-one was interested in moving. Jeff became aware of sirens in the distance above the incessant whispering, which even on a good day followed him wherever he went. The tears had started to flow from his eyes and down his cheeks as the reckoning hit him that he would never receive an answer to his question.

A hysterical woman rushed forward and threw her arms around the much-loved idol's shoulders, bawling and screaming. Instinctively, the empathetic man stood up and turned around, hugging this strange, grief-stricken well-wisher and staring into glazed eyes.

'Thanks,' he murmured, gently pushing her away and searching for a volunteer in the crowd to come forward to rescue him.

The hotel manager led the woman away, leaving Jeff to turn and catch hold of his wife's staring, blue eyes. He perched on the edge of the couch next to her, being careful not to touch anything. He knew enough about ballistics to assume there were no point in trying to revive her. At first, he passed his hand over her eyes, intending to close them. At the last minute however, he decided he preferred them the way they were and diverted his fingers to stroke the side of Lynn's face instead. By leaving her eyes open, it gave the impression she was still with him. He planted another soft kiss on her forehead, to the right of the fatal wound. His stomach heaved when he smelled the blood on the wall behind him, but his dream girl looked peaceful, almost smiling.

'I'll love you forever, Lynn. Together, Forever, Wherever. OK?'

Chris marshalled his staff to move people out of the *foyer*, begging everyone to give the bereaved husband some privacy. The police had arrived and were soon confronted with the same shocking scene, scarcely believing what they were seeing. Two officers rushed to cordon off the area and make sure this part of the public space was kept clear of gawking onlookers.

'Mister Diamond,' one of the plain-clothed detectives addressed him. 'I'm Detective Inspector Robert Fisher.'

Jeff got to his feet and shook the officer's hand. 'G'day.'

'I'm very sorry for your loss,' Fisher added, embarrassed. 'We need to secure the scene, sir, if you don't mind.'

The great man sighed. He did mind, but what was the point? Taking one last look at his beautiful best friend, he followed the inspector and another detective into a room behind the reception desk, past the stunned workers, who were doing their best to serve complimentary beverages, answer questions and pacify distressed guests all at the same time. All eyes were on the pale celebrity as he slipped into the sanctuary of the back office, and for the first time in many years, Jeff felt completely helpless and totally alone.

'Please sit down, Mister Diamond,' DI Fisher requested, signalling towards an armchair.

'Jeff, please,' the star replied, doing as he was told. 'I have a question for you, before we get started.'

The veteran investigator studied the well-known face patiently as he struggled to utter a phrase he and his wife had hoped neither would ever have cause to say.

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'My wife planned to donate her organs,' he muttered. 'So now I think we can safely assume she's brain-dead, at what stage do you guys take that into account?'

'That's a good question,' the detective replied. 'It's good of you to think about such a thing at this time. The paramedic team needs to be told. They'll be able to advise you.'

'I don't need any advice,' the husband shook his head. 'I just don't want such an amazing physical specimen to go to waste when I know she wanted to help.'

Fisher stood up and left the room, reassuring the impressive celebrity that he would relay the information straightaway. He guessed the Coroner would need the body to remain intact, especially in what would inevitably turn out to be a very high profile case. Another set of vital organs lost to the long waiting list of worthy recipients.

From out in the lobby, Jeff could hear the familiar ring of his wife's mobile telephone, and it brought with it a renewed wave of emotion, along with the sudden realisation that he needed to let his management company know that lunch was off. His own mobile telephone was also in Lynn's handbag.

He turned to the senior receptionist, who was hovering in the doorway. 'May I make a 'phone call, please?'

Miriam nodded. 'Yes, of course, sir. There's a 'phone over there.'

She pointed to the desk on the other side of the room, shuddering with a sudden and sickening feeling of *déjà-vu*. Jeff hauled himself to his feet again and dialled his office number in Melbourne. After a few rings, a woman's voice answered.

'Cath, hi. It's me,' he said, sounding remarkably calm. 'Yes. In Sydney. Listen, I need a huge favour. No, nothing's OK. Is there someone there with you? Good.'

The thought of what he now had to say made him cry again. The second detective slipped out of the room while the bereaved man made his call, lingering awkwardly behind the reception desk. Desperate to stifle his emotions, the billionaire continued, anticipating this to be one of the hardest messages he would ever have to deliver, and a trial run for the even harder version he would shortly need to give to his children.

'Cath, there's no easy way to tell you this, so I'm sorry.'

'Tell me what?' he heard from the other end of the line. 'What's wrong?'

Jeff took a deep breath, wiping tears from his eyes. 'Lynn's dead, Cathy.'

'Dead?' their loyal employee repeated. 'No! How? When?'

Her employer looked at his watch. He had no idea how or when.

'I don't know,' he cried. 'About half an hour ago, I'm guessing. We're in The Pensione. She's been shot in the head.'

By now, his personal assistant was weeping too. 'No. Oh, God. That can't be true. That's terrible, Jeff. What about you? Are you OK?'

'No,' her morose employer replied. 'Can't say I am. Listen... Please could you let the Childlight Sydney people know to make our excuses at lunch today? Don't tell them anything specific. Just say something like "unavoidably detained".'

The habitual showman found himself laughing, instantly filled with self-loathing. How could he think of joking at a time like this?

'Use your imagination, OK?' he grunted at their capable administrator. 'And then close the office and go home. I don't know when the news'll break, so just go home and do your best to forget about it.'

'Forget about it? Jeff, how do you expect me to forget about something like this?' Cathy pleaded. 'Are you sure there's nothing I can do?'

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'Look, I can't talk now,' the celebrity told her, fighting with his own composure. 'I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude. I need to ring the kids and deal with the police. I'll ring you later. Thanks, Cath.'

The boss didn't wait for his assistant's reply and terminated the call, leaning heavily on the desk to catch his breath. The two detectives immediately re-entered the room, thereby eliminating all sense of perceived privacy.

'Jeff, would you like some tea or coffee?' DI Fisher asked.

'Yeah. Thanks. Coffee. That'd be great,' the superstar replied, turning to face the senior man. 'What happens now?'

'Please sit down. And please call me Bob. This is Detective Sergeant Andy Waters. I'll get the coffee on the go.'

Jeff nodded to DS Waters, who had the demeanour of a man completely out of his depth. The two men sat down in an awkward silence and were soon re-joined by the superior officer.

'SOCO's here,' Bob informed his colleague. 'That's Scene of the Crime Officers, Mister Diamond. Sorry.'

'I know,' the civilian raised his hand. 'Jeff.'

It had been a long time since the former Sydneysider had been this close to a police operation, but the terminology was indelibly etched into his brain. He briefly wondered whether the more senior detective was old enough to remember his father's case, but chose not to bother to find out today.

DS Waters left the room, presumably to supervise the SOCO team. A tray of coffee was brought into the room by one of the scared receptionists, saying nothing and avoiding everyone's gaze.

'Thanks,' Jeff said, watching her leave. 'It's tough on these guys. Do they all have to stay here?'

'For the moment, yes,' Bob informed him. 'We need to at least have a brief chat with everyone, and then we'll call each person into "HQ" to make a statement over the next few days.'

'Was the guy I caught trying to leave...'

The musician broke down again. It was hard to come to terms with the fact that he might have apprehended his own wife's murderer. He who was descended from one had fallen victim to another. His old flame Miss Irony's finest hour had come.

'Sorry,' the dejected man sniffed, regaining some semblance of composure. 'Was he the bloke who shot her?'

'He's certainly a suspect,' Bob nodded. 'We have him in custody already.'

'Am I a suspect?' he asked, instantly regretting such a rash question.

'No. Not at this stage,' the detective answered without reacting. 'From what we can gather, your wife was asked to take a 'phone call a couple of minutes before it happened. We don't have any information as to who made this call.'

A trap, the intellectual thought; obviously premeditated. He kept quiet, drinking the hot, sweet coffee while deep in contemplation.

'I have to 'phone my daughter,' he announced abruptly, jumping to his feet again. 'Do you mind?'

Bob shook his head, and the two detectives left the room for a second time. Jeff struggled to remember where Kierney had said she was going to be this morning. It was now that he realised the benefit of knowing the detail of everyone's schedule, yet the person who would undoubtedly know could no longer tell him. He dialled the number for their apartment, but there was no answer. He hung up before the answering machine message began, unable to bear the thought of hearing his wife's voice.

The distraught father couldn't recall the number for Kierney's mobile telephone either. It was programmed directly into his, which was still in Lynn's handbag. He would have to retrieve it somehow. He walked out of the office and found Fisher talking to the hotel manager.

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'Excuse me. Sorry, Chris. Bob, is there any way I can get my 'phone from over there?' Jeff asked, nodding towards the screened-off area.

'Yes. I'm sure,' the inspector answered, smiling. 'I'll ask one of the constables to bring your wife's bag over here. Is that where it is?'

'Yep. I don't know my own daughter's number. How bad is that?'

Fisher dispatched one of the more junior officers to retrieve the victim's handbag, as he described it. Jeff's heart sank a little further at the use of this most dismal of terms.

'None of us'll remember any numbers soon,' the middle-aged police officer consoled him, 'once everything's at the press of a button or two. You're largely to blame for all that, sir.'

The venture capitalist smiled. 'That's true,' he sighed. 'Every silver lining has its cloud.'

Bob laughed without thinking, guilt forcing him to check his behaviour. 'I'm sorry. I should be more careful. That was an interesting observation though.'

'Don't be sorry,' the celebrity dismissed the natural reaction. 'I use it all the time. It's a tired, old expression in our house.'

The young policeman came back with a cream, leather handbag. Jeff took it out of his embarrassed hands, clinging onto it as if it were part of his dearly-departed. He fished out both telephones, needing to check whose was whose by the colour of the casing. The grey one was his. Lynn's was blue, switched straight off and slipped into his right-hand trouser pocket.

'Thanks,' he said, holding the bag out to the inspector. 'Do you need this back?'

'Yes. I'm afraid so,' Bob replied. 'Make a note, Constable, that Mister Diamond retrieved two mobile telephones from his wife's handbag at ten-twenty-three. We'll need to submit both into evidence, Jeff. Please don't erase anything.'

The officer departed, nodding fiercely at his superior. The rock star wondered how often a junior policeman was called to attend this type of crime scene. Seeing the victim's husband searching his telephone for Kierney's number, Fisher left the room again.

'Hi, *Papá!*' his daughter's voice sounded happy. 'What's up? Good flight?'

Jeff's eyes immediately began to sting again. He was about to scatter any goodness from her day. How could anyone be so cruel? His beautiful little girl, with her boundless compassion and enthusiasm for life, was about to find out she and her brother were semi-orphans. Did he have to tell her over the telephone or could he manage to convince her to board an aeroplane without knowing why? She would do so simply at his request, but that wasn't treating her with the respect she deserved.

'Kiz, where are you?' the father asked, hoping she was with some friends.

He had to tell her straight. There was no alternative. Lynn and he had always been up-front with their children and had sought nothing less from them in return.

'Are you OK?' Kierney asked back, hearing a strange tone in her father's voice. 'You sound weird.'

'Yeah. I am weird, gorgeous. Listen... Are you alone?'

'Not completely. I'm in the studio working on some songs. Why?'

'Jesus, Kizzy,' Jeff blurted out between involuntary sobs. 'I need you to get on the next flight here, please. Something terrible's happened, and we need to be together.'

'What, *Papá?*' Kierney asked, sounding frightened. '*¿Qué ha pasado?*'

'Christ! I can't believe I'm having this conversation with you,' he cried. '*La mamá está muerta.* She's dead, baby.'

There was silence from the other end of the telephone line. Several seconds passed when neither father nor daughter made a sound, yet they understood each other perfectly. Jeff patiently waited for a response, feeling a little more stable now that the news had been shared.

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'How?'

'Someone shot her in the head, angel,' he groaned. 'That's all we know. I was parking the fucking toy car they gave us. She took a 'phone call in the *foyer* of the hotel and now she's gone.'

The father was sobbing again, slumped onto the couch with his head in his hand and the mobile telephone stuck to his ear by a mixture of sweat and tears on the side of his unshaven face. He could hear Kierney crying and a man's voice in the background asking her if she was alright. Good, he thought, at least someone was there to help her out.

'¿Papá?'

'Sí. *Estoy aquí, pequeñita,*' he replied. 'I'll ring Gerry and ask him to meet you at the airport. And Grandpa too.'

This was another call he wasn't looking forward to, and his head started to ache with a sudden fear. Why did he always have to be the one to break bad news? It was just like the old days. How did a man tell a father that his daughter was shot dead while he was parking the car?

'Papá, you ring Gerry, and I'll ring Grandpa,' Kierney suggested, business-like and in control, and sounding heart-wrenchingly like her mother.

'Absolutely not,' her father overruled, although sorely tempted to be let off this most dreadful of hooks. 'I can't possibly leave you to give him this news. That's my responsibility, gorgeous. I'll ring them both now, and then you ring Grandpa in about fifteen minutes. Is that OK?'

'OK, Papá. *Comprendo.* Don't worry. I'll be there as soon as I can. I can go right now. I don't need anything, do I?'

'No. Just you, angel,' Jeff sniffed. 'Just you. Thanks, Kizzy. *Te amo.*'

Ending the call, the bereaved man sat staring into space, wondering how the day might unfold. Where was their luggage? Would they allow him see Lynn again? Should Kierney see her mother in this state? When would he be able to tell their son? He played with his black jet-stone ring, so long on his finger that he hardly knew it was there these days. It hadn't moved for several years and was virtually fused to his skin. He swivelled it around on his finger and then, as a reflex action, did the same thing with his wedding ring on the other hand.

'Christ,' he muttered to himself.

No more beautiful best friend. No more marriage. Family in disarray. How quickly life could change. He picked up his telephone again and selected his business manager's name from the list of numbers.

'Jeff, how goes?' Gerry Blake's bombastic voice was as affable as ever. 'Aren't you in Sydney today?'

'Yes, mate,' his most important client replied. 'Mobile 'phones still work outside Victoria, you know.'

'I know that, smart-arse,' his old friend laughed. 'What can I do for you? I was just about to head out for a coffee with the lovely Fiona.'

'Mate, I need your help, please. I need you to get to the airport as fast as you can and fly up here with Kierney.'

'What? Why? Is she OK?'

'No, mate,' Jeff replied, beginning to cry again. 'None of us is OK.'

'Why? What the hell's happened?' the family's manager demanded, sensing this was not the usual hiccough in proceedings for his long-time buddy.

'She's dead, mate,' the songwriter answered, unable to think of any fancy euphemisms or decoration. How many more times would he have to say these words? Jeff felt his heart pounding in his chest.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph,' the accountant murmured. 'Who's dead? Lynn? Tell me this isn't true.'

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The successful Melbourne executive couldn't believe what he was hearing either. He and his new lady had only met the forever couple for dinner earlier that week, and now it appeared that a complete disaster had struck.

'I wish, mate. Fucking hell. It's chaos here. Police everywhere. I think I caught the bloke who did it, trying to leave the hotel.'

'Jesus. How did it happen?' his manager asked in a muffled tone. 'Oh, my God.'

Jeff could hear his old friend was crying too. Lynn was loved by everyone. It was important for him to remember this fact. He wasn't the only one who devastated by her death.

'Shot in the head,' the celebrity recounted with surprising calm. 'Sitting in the hotel lobby, answering a 'phone call.'

'Christ, mate. That's fucked. Are you OK?'

'No. Not the best,' the younger man scoffed, grateful for his friend's innocent response. 'Can you go to the airport, please, mate? I spoke to Kierney about five minutes ago, and she said she'd go straight there. I need you to go fast. And old man Dyson too, if I can get hold of him.'

'Sure thing, mate,' his manager coughed. 'Of course I will. What's her number? I'll see if I can give her a lift.'

'No need,' Jeff told him, forcing a smile. 'She's got her licence. Yesterday.'

'Wow! Already?' Gerry allowed himself a chuckle too. 'That makes me feel old.'

'Yeah,' the doting father agreed. 'Tell me about it. Anyway, I've got to go. There's a bunch of policemen wanting to question us all. I'd better get off the 'phone.'

'Right. We'll see you as soon as we can. Hang on in there. Does Cath know?'

'Yeah. We had to cancel our lunch, and I told those guys to go home. It'd be good if you can call her too. Cheers, mate,' the seasoned campaigner answered, slipping into autopilot. 'Thanks heaps.'

The telephone line went quiet. Jeff leaned forward, elbows on knees, and his shoulders began to shake violently as delayed shock set in. His mind flashed back to the other evening, when his forty-six-year-old buddy had introduced Fiona to his friends. They had all been in high spirits, keen to share in their fun-loving friend's new joy, and having themselves just returned from New York, where the chart-topping performers had received an award from their record company for the "Live On Earth" album.

His numbed mind tried to picture Lynn smiling at him, and he remembered how, drinking coffee back in Gerry's luxurious bachelor pad, he had put his arm around her and squeezed her tightly. She had leaned into him like she always did, because she knew how good it made him feel. They had made love that night, as they always did, with the slow-burning passion of two people who had enjoyed each others' bodies for a lifetime or more.

Dismissing the pleasant thoughts from his head with great reluctance, the billionaire brought himself back to the horrible reality which had befallen them. Time was ticking by, and there was no way he wanted Kierney to speak to Bart Dyson before he had. His heart was pounding, and the blood vessels throbbed in his head as he pieced together some words for his father-in-law to absorb. How would he react? Where was he even?

The widower stood up and pulled the second mobile telephone out of his pants pocket. It took a while to start up, and he was gripped with fear at the prospect of breaking the news. He walked over to the door and closed it, transcribing the switchboard number onto the keypad of his own handset.

'Dyson Administration,' a bright voice answered. 'How may I direct your call?'

'Good morning,' Jeff croaked, forcing his vocal chords to speak as normally as possible. 'It's Jeff Diamond. Is Mister Dyson in the office?'

'I'll put you through to his "PA",' the operator responded.

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The line clicked twice and was picked up by Penny, Lynn's father's personal assistant. The musician took a deep breath and repeated his question.

'Mister Diamond, it's lovely to hear from you,' came the cheerful reply. 'Mister Dyson's in an important meeting and has asked not to be disturbed. I can ask him to call you back as soon as he's free.'

'No,' the son-in-law countered. 'This is more important, Penny, actually. It's urgent that I speak to him right now, if you don't mind.'

The hesitation in the woman's voice made him even more nervous. 'Oh, I see,' she faltered. 'Is something wrong?'

'Yes. Something's very wrong,' Jeff threw his head back in impatience. 'Please ask him to come to the phone. I have to talk to him now.'

'Of course, Mister Diamond,' the well-spoken woman acquiesced, hearing the great man's insistent tone. 'Hold on, please.'

The frantic caller had no choice. He held on for what seemed like an hour, going over and over the words that seemed so inadequate to describe the tragedy. He had broken out in a cold sweat, just like in the old days, and the telephone slipped in his hand.

'Jeff, how are you?' Lynn's father blustered in his inimitable fashion. 'I gather you need to talk to me urgently. What's happening?'

Momentarily tongue-tied, the younger man rocked back on his heels to stop himself from falling over. He who was never lost for words was dumbstruck. As he pieced an opening sentence together, he felt his legs buckle under him, and he slumped down into a chair.

'Bart, I have some terrible news,' the newly-widowed man opened.

'Terrible news?'

'Yes, sir,' Jeff nodded instinctively, exhaling through pursed lips. 'Lynn and I flew to Sydney this morning for a charity lunch thing, and she's been shot in the lobby of the hotel.'

Silence greeted the end of his sentence, so he continued with his prepared lines. 'I can't believe I'm telling you this, but Lynn's dead, sir.'

Bart Dyson didn't reply. The wait was terrifying, but still Jeff felt compelled to continue. As he had told his daughter, this was his responsibility. *When one's wife is shot while one is parking the car, one cannot shirk one's duty to inform her parents, no matter how much one might want to...*

'We think we caught the gunman,' the widower spoke quietly into the mouthpiece, swapping the telephone to the other ear and drying the palm of his hand on his trouser leg. 'We don't know who he is or why he did it, but she's dead. Stone fucking dead.'

'Jeff... Oh, God,' a much weaker version of the usual ebullient voice eventually squeezed into the caller's brain. 'Oh, my God. Why? Why would anyone want to kill her?'

The bereaved superstar couldn't hold back the tears any longer. 'I don't know. He meant to get me, I reckon. I caught the fucker trying to leave the hotel. He was a bloody nobody. A runt carrying a gun. I don't know why he was there or what his intent was, but he told me he wanted to kill me. But he didn't. He killed your perfect daughter instead.'

'Oh, my God,' the older man repeated.

'I'm so sorry, sir. So sorry.'

Seeming to have surmounted the worst of the shock, the Olympian's tone became louder and more forceful again. 'For God's sake, don't apologise to me, Jeff,' he told the sobbing man. 'She was your wife. Bloody hell. This is a day I've always dreaded. Where do these lunatics come from? And why do they single out the people who do the most good? And the mother of your children, Jeff. Oh...'

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The musician leaned back on the couch and listened to his father-in-law crying. This was a day he had always dreaded too, and one for which they had put every conceivable contingency in place to avert. Every conceivable contingency except to always allow the *valet* to park the sports car...

'Jesus fucking Christ,' he hissed, cupping his hand over the mouthpiece.

'Pardon?' Bart checked. 'Sorry? I missed that.'

'No. Nothing. Are you able to get on the next flight up here? Gerry's meeting Kierney at the airport. I don't want her to fly on her own.'

'No, no. Of course not.'

'Thanks a lot, sir. Do you have Gerry's number?'

'Yes. I'm sure we do somewhere,' the sportsman answered. 'And I have Kierney's too.'

'She'll be ringing you about now,' his son-in-law added, his voice cracking again at the image of his innocent, little lady preparing to talk to her grandfather. 'I'd appreciate it if you could ring her first, if you can.'

'Definitely, Jeff. I'll organise to leave right away. Oh, my God. I have to ring Marianna. Two children gone. Jesus fucking Christ.'

The widower had to laugh, but did so as kindly as he could. He couldn't recall ever hearing the fine pillar of society use any form of vulgarity before, and it sounded peculiar, even under these extreme circumstances.

'That's exactly what I said earlier,' he admitted. 'When you didn't hear me. Jesus fucking Christ indeed.'

The older man chuckled too. 'You're a good man. I'll be there as soon as I can. Don't worry about Kierney. We'll look after her. Just look after yourself.'

'Thanks,' the songwriter responded, sniffing and doing his best to maintain control. 'That's great. Safe flight.'

With his head once more in his hands, the desperate man terminated the call and wept with renewed anguish. He was not a good man, despite his father-in-law's endorsement. He had let someone's daughter die. In fact, over the course of his life he had let three people's daughters die. And here he was, waiting for his own gorgeous girl to arrive and make him feel better. Something he deserved even less than the compliment.

Forcing himself out of the depressive spiral he feared already taking hold, Jeff wondered what the gunman had hoped to accomplish by killing either of them. Who was he, this unassuming, Spanish-speaking guy? Was he a lunatic, as Bart had suggested? Or was he championing a cause? What had they done to push him to such an extreme measure?

Through the blur of memories and questions, the star slowly became aware of the two detectives loitering beside him, along with the hotel manager.

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