

Prologue

Dannie's shift ended unexpectedly early at the leisure centre. The kids she had been expecting from the local children's home for their basketball coaching had not turned up, which gave her a free half-hour before the next bus home. Munching her way through the squares of a chocolate bar, she stared out of the window. It was a typically cold, wet, dreary day in Glasgow, and she decided to wait inside the building, hoping not to get too distracted and miss the bus pulling into the stop in the rain.

The ambitious youngster reached into her backpack and lifted out the book she had brought with her to school that morning. She had refrained from starting it while eating breakfast, predicting the definite danger of it making her late, unable to put it down once she had turned the first few pages. Now faced with thirty minutes to spare, she opened it with a distinct sense of excitement, at the place where her dog-eared bookmark stuck out: right at the very beginning.

The weighty tome was the combined autobiography of superstars Jeff and Lynn Diamond, published back in nineteen-ninety-seven. Somehow this famous story, which was sadly over before the young Scot was even born, had left an imprint so strong on her mind that she had read the bestseller four, perhaps five times already, and had decided to embark on it yet again.

"A Life Singular" had been the most important influence by far in the avid reader's short life. The first time she had read it, the sheer scale and impact of the couple's life had amazed her. On subsequent readings though, she had managed to sink deeper and deeper into the insightful rhetoric and comforting subtext, which had been so cleverly written that *La Grande Oeuvre* had won several literary prizes that season. Throughout childhood and adolescence, Dannie had used its candid lessons and uplifting messages to summon the motivation she needed to pursue her own lofty goals and to break out of a humdrum life in rainy Scotland.

Each time the senior year high school student immersed herself in the rich, humanistic language, she found yet more ideas and boundless inspiration for directing her energies. The paperback was a large volume, with four sections of photographs of the young woman's idol, his sublimely beautiful wife and their two children, Ryan and Kierney, who had since both become important world figures in their chosen careers. However, the magic of this book for the driven teenager from the southern highlands lay in the way the author challenged its many readers on topics of right and wrong, and the well-crafted chapters never failed to guide her when it came to making the best decision.

Snapping out of the daydream and once more checking outside in the dusk for the bus, the index finger of Dannie's left hand traced the letters of the iconic "JL" symbol in the cover's top-left corner, while she flattened out the pages and re-read the simple dedication.

"To those we loved and who loved us, we give you 'A Life Singular'. JL"

She turned the page, and a strange but familiar shiver ran down her spine.

Golden Opportunity

Jeff arrived at work that morning a good twenty minutes early. He unlocked the door of the computer room and switched on the lights. Nothing unusual was afoot, with the three rows of gleaming, off-white cabinets flickering and whirring as they should, under the crude, deafening extractor fans. His checklist complete, he went to the tea stand in the tiny office in the back corner and made himself a cup of instant coffee. This was Melbourne, he thought; the city famous for good coffee. *Oh, well...* He would buy a real one later from Pellegrini's on his way home.

The printed timetable affixed to the wall informed him that the Melbourne Academy class was due to commence at ten o'clock. That was still almost two hours away. The student settled down to work on an assignment which was due for submission the following evening. He had completed another very similar during the previous semester, and the boredom of regurgitating the same content for a second time rendered him easily distracted. He was brimming over with nervous energy, even more so than normal.

The lecturer arrived just after nine, flustered and bad-tempered. He was a quirky man, and Jeff was beginning to warm to him in spite of his idiosyncrasies. Professor Martin was his name, and he didn't care to be called anything else. He had lost his hair early, old beyond his years in most other ways too. His new offside had regularly been able to prove him wrong when he came up with ideas and theories, which had sparked a rivalry from the outset.

Over the weeks however, Professor Martin had come to respect his younger colleague for his persistent attitude and ability to think laterally around problems of all shapes and sizes. He had been forced to admit that this upstart recently arrived from interstate was highly intelligent and personable, if a little too cool and hard-edged for his liking. The Vice-Chancellor had impressed upon the university's staff, after receiving the undergraduate's glowing references and some startling details of his life history, that they were fortunate to have a brilliant mind joining them. According to his sponsored application, the teenager had been shepherded through the New South Wales education system as a case study for disadvantaged children who showed promise despite their circumstances. Therefore, there was considerable political mileage to be gained by the university from being seen to help this long-haired and loud-mouthed lanky lad, whose casual manner belied an immense intellect. And there were precious few in the Computer Science department who could be described as cool, making this enigmatic young man a definite asset when encouraging new blood onto its courses.

Today was a Tuesday, the fifteenth of February nineteen-seventy-two. Jeff Diamond had arrived at RMIT, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, fresh from Sydney for the start of the new academic year. He had completed the first year of his Bachelor of Science degree at the University of New South Wales and had negotiated a deal whereby he could transfer his completed units for full credits towards the equivalent RMIT degree. The unlikely student had been the recipient of a tertiary scholarship from the State Government, which meant that the various authorities were also duty bound to help him succeed, just in case the country's press was watching.

The boy's passage through the state's school system had been an unusual one, and a string of teachers had either hailed him or loathed him. As long as the extremely talented but wild child chose to listen, so the rest of the unruly mob would be quiet. However, as soon as Jeff Diamond lost interest, mayhem would invariably ensue. The more astute teachers learned to capitalise on the tearaway's thirst for knowledge, along with his Pied Piper ability to corral the class, to help them gain control of their lessons. The less astute did not, and paid a high price for their ignorance. Most branded him a troublemaker, but certain others lauded him as an irreverent genius. Either way, this dangerous character from the Stones Road escaped no-one's attention.

It was due respect that the young man had been seeking all along; nothing more and nothing less. The way he saw it, the local high school was obliged to provide him with an education, regardless of his lowly

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beginnings and the bad reputation which clung to him and his older sister by dint of their memorable surname. If teachers gave some respect, they were given some in return, and against all expectations, Jeff systematically racked up a series of school certificates and other academic distinctions, finally graduating in December nineteen-seventy with the top HSC score in the state.

As a teenager, the swarthy, good-looking kid was hugely popular with girls and boys alike, despite spending hundreds of hours in the library and at home, garnering knowledge about anything and everything and constantly firing his imagination. Added to this were a solid sporting prowess and musical talent, leaving officials at the Education Department frequently flabbergasted at the youngster's natural capacity to lead his peers. And, as many people had found out along the way, once Jeff Diamond was on their side, he would look after them forever. Professor Martin was beginning to learn this too, much to his annoyance.

Only a year into his bachelor's degree, the restless student had jumped at the chance to make a fresh start in Melbourne when his close friend, Gerry Blake, was asked by his father to head up the Victorian state office of the family firm. The two lads had been best mates since Jeff was twelve years old. Another outstanding achiever, Gerry was three years older and had graduated with honours in Accounting from Sydney University a couple of years prior, having completed his Chartered Accountant qualifications straight afterwards, under his father's watchful tutelage. Born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth, the former Sydney Grammar School Head Boy had found himself a luxury apartment near Toorak Road, and he and his girlfriend had driven down the Hume Highway in his brand new BMW to start new chapters of their lives in Melbourne.

Jeff Diamond, on the other hand, had loaded all his worldly goods, which amounted to very little, into his dark blue, nineteen-sixty-two Ford Fairlane and had driven the seven hundred or so kilometres southwards on his own, past Canberra and into Victoria, finally ending up in a bed-and-breakfast in Prahran.

As soon as he could, the independent and solitary young man had rented a one-bedroomed flat in the run-down suburb of Richmond, about a kilometre from the majestic Melbourne Cricket Ground. Jeff was a budding songwriter in his spare time and had earned a lump sum in royalties for a couple of songs that had been recorded by some well-known artists. With these proceeds, he had been able to pay a full year's rent upfront and buy a few basic items of furniture, which had taken the pressure off student life for the time being. Gerry had told him he was mad to blow so much money at once and that he should look for shared accommodation, but his younger friend needed his own place. He had lived on his own since the age of fourteen, in spite of many attempts by Social Services, his grandparents and several interfering but well-meaning neighbours to make other arrangements on his behalf, and he was not inclined to forgo this vital sanctuary too easily.

Ten o'clock on this particular morning represented a most important milestone for the boy from western Sydney. It had been weeks, if not months or even years in the planning, depending on how he looked at it. He was anxious and excited, but desperate to remain calm and for nothing to go wrong. He had rehearsed his lines all the previous sleepless night, and even now his overactive mind was busy thinking of all the contingencies. What if there were a change of plan and the class were cancelled? They couldn't do that at this late stage, could they? The timetable was set in stone. What if the registered students didn't all show up? He cursed his own pessimism, knowing he should stop obsessing about all the things which could go wrong and focus on what he would do if events went according to plan.

Jeff looked at the clock again. Professor Martin was preparing his acetate slides for the overhead projector, making sure his notes were in order. The first Melbourne Academy class of the new year was a significant component of the annual marketing programme run by RMIT to attract the best and brightest to the university for the following year's undergraduate courses. Computer Science was an emerging subject, and the staff typically struggled to leave a lasting impression on these students, who had received a very

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traditional education thus far. A very privileged education, in fact. One might even say an over-privileged education, if one was your typical, left-wing career academic.

‘Let’s see how this year’s beautiful people stack up,’ Professor Martin had resentfully shared with his technical assistant when they had left work together at the end of the previous day.

It was now nine-forty-five, and the young man’s heart was in his mouth. He took a cigarette break and smoked two in quick succession in an attempt to calm his nerves. It was a warm day, and there were already many students milling around campus. He searched the crowd for the bunch of clean-cut kids in uniform whom he was anticipating. There was a bus in the car park at the far end of the quadrangle, but its signage was obscured by the wall of another lecture hall. With time running out, Jeff jogged back to the computer room to watch his fate unfold. Or not.

‘Here they come, those lucky, lucky kiddies,’ sneered the sarcastic lecturer, with a glint in his eye. ‘Look at them, with their sun tans after their summer holidays down at Portsea and Sorrento, sailing around on Daddy’s yacht, or visiting Granny for Christmas in the Home Counties. Oh, look there! I say, old boy! There’s even one who went skiing in the French Alps on the way back.’

It was true, Jeff had to smile. A beanpole of a boy was struggling up the steps of the tiered seating on crutches, with a plaster cast from his toes to just below the knee. He laughed more to appease the professor than because he found it funny. If he were honest, he considered the bald man’s frequent snide, political tirades a little tiresome, often goading him on subtly for a bit of sport.

After today’s presenter had left to introduce the class, his impatient assistant peered through the window from the computer room into the lecture theatre. He scanned the rows of young faces, dressed in black blazers with red trim and the Melbourne Academy crest on their breast pockets. They all wore ties, and the girls with long hair had it tied up, away from their fresh, well-scrubbed faces. They were a noisy bunch, he thought. They didn’t look particularly special either.

And then at last he spotted her. Three rows from the front, about six seats in from the left, chatting idly with a redhead who was sitting in the adjacent seat. Jeff scanned the class again to make sure he wasn’t mistaken. Could it be someone who looked like her? A decoy to divert attention from the real thing? No, it was definitely her. His plan was working, heaven help him! Christ Almighty! Now he had to go through with it...

The dark-haired student stared at Lynn Dyson for what seemed like five minutes. In reality, it was probably less than thirty seconds. The radiant face wasn’t exactly smiling, yet her gaze was wonderfully warm nonetheless. She had looked straight at him, through the glass. He hadn’t been prepared for that, and his nerve nearly failed him. He managed to hold on to the pair of blue gems in a steely, purposeful gaze, and it had been she who had finally looked away. Eye contact was another step in the right direction, deserving of a small amount of self-congratulation. *Patience*, he urged his heart, which was now beating so hard he could almost hear it, not to mention the contortions taking place in his jeans.

Professor Martin droned on and on about the history of the computer, about IBM and the Americans, and about the evolution of tape storage and databases. Why in the world would anyone want to learn about this in an introductory session designed to encourage youngsters into a new and exciting profession? What a turn-off! This was the Sydneysider’s main problem with the degree course; it was far too theoretical and dry. It completely failed to explain the promise of the many powerful ways in which computers would undoubtedly improve real people’s lives over the coming years.

Yes, the dreamer would have loved to be a musician; the Pied Piper of Richmond. Or a philosopher perhaps, sipping liqueur coffees and poking fun at the pretentious characters who frequented Melbourne’s laneway cafés. But needs must for a boy from Canley Vale, and he had decided on a practical qualification which would open up the world to him on a far more down-to-earth level.

Jeff Diamond had determined from a very young age that he was going places. He had come from nowhere, but had his heart and mind set on going somewhere and being someone. He had been this way

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all his life. Even as a three-year-old, as his mother had recounted to a friend when she thought her son was out of earshot, "That stupid kid asked Lena's teacher if she could tell him the difference between this and that. Why does he wanna know stuff like that at his age?" Unfortunately, mother and son had never been on the same wavelength. Not even on the same planet most of the time, for reasons the boy preferred to keep to himself. His elder sister, Madalena, was her mamá's girl, whereas the young Jeff was simply a tireless nuisance who asked too many questions and reminded everyone of his father.

The clock on the laboratory wall ticked rhythmically, but nowhere near fast enough for the young man's liking. Patience didn't come at all readily to the nineteen-year-old, since vices were so much easier to cultivate than virtues for people like him. Over the last few weeks, he had wondered how on Earth he might possibly get close enough to his dream girl to strike up a conversation, let alone to ask her out on a date. He had staked out her school a few times, as well as the sports centre where she and her family trained regularly, but until now he had never seen her in person and certainly didn't relish the prospect of getting sprung by security for stalking. He had even driven out to the family's enormous homestead, an hour due north of the city, not surprised at being confronted by wrought iron gates of corresponding proportions.

But then today's golden opportunity had truly landed in Jeff's lap. It ought to have occurred to him in those months of planning his southward migration that there would be a close tie between Melbourne's most prestigious schools and the local tertiary institutions of good standing. Yet he could hardly believe his luck when, during staff room chatter, he had discovered the Melbourne Academy Year Twelve induction programme contained several lectures at RMIT.

Back in Professor Martin's lecture hall, the class continued into its second half-hour. The anxious student attempted to concentrate on the newspaper while the boring man cycled through his slides. Every now and then, he glanced up to check if Lynn was still paying attention. She was. Admirable, he thought. A bizarre image flashed across his mind of the nerdy, tweed-jacketed academic being in his shoes and about to take on his challenge, which he dismissed with a lazy chuckle.

Jeff wondered how closely the real Lynn Dyson would resemble the television personality, or indeed the perfect being who had occupied his thoughts and sexual fantasies ninety-nine percent of the time over the last few years. He was hopeful but had realistic expectations. He could handle disappointment. He had no fear of that, but would rather not have his illusions shattered just yet. To him at this precise moment, sitting there in her school uniform, the famous blonde teenager seemed much younger than her public self. She looked as if she needed to be taken care of, as did he...

The troubled soul dismissed this foolish notion too, hating the way his insecurities always got the better of him. During personal appearances, at concerts or sporting events, the Lynn Dyson whom the dedicated fan recognised so fondly gave the impression of being mature and self-assured. Sitting in Professor Martin's class however, she looked exactly like she should: an attentive, sixteen-year-old private school girl scribbling in her exercise book, with a pencil case in front of her on the desk and surrounded by classmates.

Only sixteen... The young buck from New South Wales had keenly watched this significant birthday click over during the previous September, just before he, Gerry and Suzanne had become serious about their move down from Sydney. Was sixteen too young for Australia's most promising society girl to associate with a nobody from the western suburbs? He suspected so, but was determined to go through with his plan nonetheless.

The noise of creaking wooden benches jolted the songwriter out of his daydream. Suddenly the class was on its collective feet and filing out of the lecture theatre.

Here we go, Jeff murmured to himself, closing the newspaper.

No time to think about it any further. The man on a mission slipped out of the back door of the adjoining laboratory, which led directly into the main thoroughfare. He spotted Lynn's golden hair among a

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bunch of about eight uniforms, already heading down the corridor towards the car park. It was now or never, he vowed.

In less than twenty seconds, the long-legged man had caught up with the group and walked alongside for a few steps. Lynn looked over to her right and seemed to acknowledge his presence. Summoning every available molecule of bravado, he launched forth.

'Hi, Lynn. I'm Jeff Diamond. I work in the Computer Science department and I'm also a student here.'

The famous teenager appeared slightly startled but smiled graciously anyway. She must be used to people accosting her out of the blue, Jeff figured. How many young blokes like him were there, chasing their fantasies just the same as he was? Hundreds, he expected. Thousands, perhaps. Her friends looked at him suspiciously, awaiting his next move, and he felt a shield of protectiveness close in around the young star.

Undaunted, the single-minded student continued, as per his many mental rehearsals. 'I've got tickets for Thursday night's performance of "A Streetcar Named Desire" at His Majesty's Theatre. Would you come with me, please?'

Flawlessly executed, even if he said so himself...

Lynn was taken aback. Who was this guy? Should she know him? He was stunning looking though, whoever he was. Well over six feet tall, with hypnotising, dark eyes and a disarming smile. And "A Streetcar Named Desire" would be amazing to see as a play. Its new season had received good reviews as it toured around the Australian capital cities.

Before she knew it, the young woman was accepting the invitation. 'Why not? Thanks, Jeff. That'd be great.'

OK. So the impossible had happened! It was as if all the air had been sucked out of the corridor, leaving everyone in a sort of frozen limbo. The handsome man willed his mind to turn faster, but only his heart rate was heeding the call. Had Lynn Dyson really agreed to go out with him? Their walking pace had slowed to a virtual stop, yet it took him a while to figure this out. He had her attention. So what was he going to do with it?

'Fantastic, thanks,' he said, calming down slightly. 'It starts at seven-thirty. Where shall I pick you up from?'

On Lynn's face was a cautious smile. By the looks of things, she was none too sure what had transpired in the last few seconds either.

'Do you know the Dyson Administration building, just a bit further down St Kilda Road from the river? After the army barracks, on the corner of Coventry Street.'

Jeff nodded. 'Yes.'

He didn't, but would find out easily enough.

'Seven o'clock then?' he suggested.

'OK,' the schoolgirl confirmed. 'See you in the lobby there at seven. We have to go now. Bye, Jeff.'

'Adiós. Thanks again. See you Thursday.'

Elation threatened to lift the astounded student's feet off the ground, and his ultra-cool persona fought hard to counteract its force. Catching the eyes of a couple of the star's friends, Jeff could see he was not the only one to be surprised by the snap decision. As he watched the small group walk off into the distance, he could hear girls' laughter and tried to imagine what their *post mortem* analysis might contain. He turned and walked in the opposite direction, back towards the faculty building and the remainder of his mundane shift.

Did that really happen? Had his script really had the desired outcome? The master plan had been in abeyance for so many weeks but was suddenly obsolete, fully executed and closed. He now needed a new

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plan for Thursday, because he, Jeff Diamond, the no-good reprobate from Nowheresville, New South Wales, was taking the lovely Lynn Dyson to the theatre. How about that!

The worst thing about it though was the fact that he couldn't tell anyone. *Jesus Christ*, the young man cursed. How was he going to make it to Thursday without going completely crazy? He stepped outside for a cigarette. Sitting on the wall, he played and replayed the last few minutes in his head. Yes, it had definitely been Lynn. No, he hadn't asked the wrong girl out. He was positive about that. Well, then... It had to be true, and he would damned well be ready.

The dreamer reluctantly dragged himself back to reality, needing to return to the computer room as if nothing consequential had happened. There were another three long hours to be spent at work, after which he had a few classes to sit through and then had agreed to a squash game with Gerry. His stomach felt sick, and his head was aching. He hadn't slept for a number of nights, and his head was heavy at the best of times. Still, today was a good day. It wasn't every day that one arranged a date with the country's most eligible young lady.

The Melbourne Academy Year Twelve class filed back onto their bus. Lynn Dyson was, as always, surrounded by friends. She was a genuinely popular girl, and not just because of who she was. Several students in her year had famous parents or were heirs to successful businesses in Melbourne. Most of their cohort had been together since primary school and they were a close-knit bunch.

Sitting next to the young celebrity was her closest friend, Michelle England, who was particularly excited after the impromptu encounter in the corridor.

'Who is that guy?' she yelped.

'I don't know,' the smiling blonde answered, before seeing the disbelief on her friend's face and adding, 'Really, I don't!'

Michelle, together with Andrea and Jenny, who were sitting in the seats behind, were unable to fathom how a perfect stranger could have had the gall to approach their famous classmate and ask her out. Just like that! This was one brave man. They witnessed the pretty musician turn boys down on a regular basis, with ready excuses such as training commitments or too much homework. Occasionally too, they had seen young men retire hurt after their especially arrogant assumptions had been quashed simply for their audacity.

'So if you don't know him, why did you say you'd go out with him?' the redhead persisted.

Lynn had to agree that her action was more than a little impulsive.

'I know,' she shrugged. 'It's probably not the smartest thing I've ever done.'

'He was so cute though,' squeaked Andrea. 'So what about the ticket you've already got? Who are you going to give it to?'

That was right, the sixteen-year-old thought. The information to which her brazen suitor was not privy was that his date was already booked to see the same play on the same night with the music crew from school.

'Yes. I don't know. It is a weird coincidence, isn't it?' Lynn agreed, as much to herself as to her friends.

So who was this mystery man who had singled her out and made his move? He was courageous, that was for sure. He might not have gone through with it if Lloyd had been walking with them, the celebrity mused. Lloyd, the boy towards whom Professor Martin's scathing remarks about the French skiing holiday had been directed, was one of the sixteen-year-old's best friends and another well-known child actor, who of late had taken on the role of her unofficial bodyguard. Thank goodness for the crutches, she smiled to

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herself. The trendy lothario had been lagging behind the main group, most likely chatting up girls himself, and hadn't even noticed that he was neglecting his duties.

'What are you going to do about Dean then?' asked Michelle.

Dean Keller was Lynn's so-called boyfriend, from her older brother's group of sports-mad friends, and they had been out on a few dates over the last three or four months. He had been putting pressure on her to have sex with him, but she had refused, and his continued insistence was becoming tiresome. She had told him she was too young, but had also been thinking of calling it off with him altogether. Dean was good company, but there was no connection. Even though the prodigious starlet was only sixteen, she already had a keen idea of the type of relationship she wanted and definitely didn't see that developing with her current beau.

'I don't want to keep seeing Dean anyway,' she told her friends. 'I'll break up with him this afternoon.'

The girls looked at each other in amazement. Such topics were the stuff of grown-ups, with which their young lives had only just begun to come to terms. It was rumoured that a few of their classmates had already had sex, both boys and girls, but none of Lynn's immediate circle had admitted to going that far yet. There was a great deal of curiosity but not much intent among the girls; and among the boys, an even greater deal of both curiosity and intent, but precious little success!

'So are you going to go through with it on Thursday?' Michelle egged her on. 'What if he asks to come up to your room?'

'I'll tell him he can't,' the pretty blonde responded. 'I'm lucky. I've got a security guard to help me.'

The friends agreed it would be quite safe, as long as she was sensible.

'Besides,' the sporty schoolgirl added suggestively, 'I might want him to come up to my room. It's got to happen one day, hasn't it? And he was so good-looking!'

A mixture of horror and excitement rippled through the foursome.

Theatre

“Thursday 17th February 1972, 7:30pm,” the tickets read. That was tonight! Jeff checked the date on the top of the newspaper to make doubly sure. He had never known such an interminably long couple of days, filling far too many waking hours with as much activity as he could physically manage, in order to pass the time and tire himself out.

Disappointingly, and despite his best efforts, the student still felt terrible. He really needed to learn how to get some decent sleep. There were now only three hours left between finishing work and meeting Lynn to get himself into some semblance of good shape. He ate a huge meal of steak and chips, which left him feeling nauseous. He didn’t want to arrive smelling of beer or cigarettes, which ruled that type of stimulation out of the question.

The nineteen-year-old lay on his bed, revelling in the idea of his dream girl finally being close enough to touch, and contemplated how the evening might unfold in her company. He mentally undressed her and then chastised himself for debasing the object of his affections before he had even properly met her. It must be the Catholic in him, he smiled. At least by masturbating now, he wouldn’t have such an uncontrollable sense of urgency when he was with her. Well, maybe not anyway... That was a little too much to expect, even for someone as well-acquainted with self-discipline as he was.

The prospect of sitting next to Lynn Dyson for two hours seemed like a distant fantasy to the young man who had waited so long for this opportunity. The fact that they were actually going out on a proper date still hadn’t sunk in, even though he had only a short time to wait before fantasy hopefully would morph into reality. As he pictured the gorgeous sixteen-year-old with his hands all over her, smiling the enticing, irresistible smile which had beamed down on him from the many posters on his childhood bedroom wall, the excited teenager let his imagination run wild.

The pressure release cleared the fuzziness in his head for the next half-hour, but it soon returned. *Wake up, man*, Jeff kept saying to himself. This could be the most important day of his life so far. He took a shower, ironed his shirt and put on his one and only suit. He had bought it for Gerry’s twenty-first birthday party, the December before last, and it hadn’t been worn since, despite having cost him several weeks’ wages. He combed his hair and splashed on some after-shave. His shoes were polished, and his tie was straight. He looked good on the outside, and his rich boy costume would hide how he was faring on the inside well enough for this evening, before the malicious fairy godmother in his mind saw fit to turn him back into a lost boy from the Stones Road.

One thing the young student had never lacked was self-confidence. For all his many defects, nature had bestowed on him a striking countenance, a strong, lean body and a wit to rival any great satirist. He had also learned some hard lessons along the way to reaching the ripe, old age of nineteen, and they had left him wise beyond his years. Ever since he could remember, he had engineered those events under his control to deliver the best learning experiences he could lay his hands on. He had always nurtured his thirst for knowledge, because for him it brought independence. Knowing more than the next person could only be a good thing, as far as this unfortunate son was concerned. He had formed his alliances carefully and never abused their friendship. Life was all about fairness in Jeff Diamond’s world.

In return, these alleged friends of his had teased him heartlessly about his crush on the young Lynn Dyson, child actor, musician and rising tennis champion. At just ten years old, she had impressed the prodigious intellectual to the core with her sensitivity and interest in the world when she had been given the role of hosting “Strong Current”, a children’s current affairs program on the ABC. There was something about her sincerity which captured Jeff’s attention, beyond the obvious attraction normally harboured by young boys for hot television starlets.

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Subsequently, when she turned thirteen, Lynn and the band with the unwieldy name of Melbourne Academy Chorale, or MAC for short, had made a special programme featuring folksongs from Mediterranean countries. They had travelled to Spain, Italy and Greece to research the origins of some of the songs, and the Sydney lad remembered vividly the singer's interpretation of the political struggle of peasant farmers at the turn of the twentieth century. He had no idea how much of her commentary had been constructed from her own ideas and how much was scripted by the producers, but the wayward adolescent was happy in his delusion. Even to him, Greek folksongs seemed weird fuel for an adolescent infatuation, yet he had not been able to get Lynn Dyson out of his head ever since. Or other parts of his anatomy, for that matter.

If only to satisfy his obsessive curiosity, tonight's date was the first step towards a well-planned destiny. With his head thumping and tension gathering painfully in his shoulders, Jeff approached the revolving doors of the Dyson Administration building, opposite the illuminated Shrine of Remembrance, full of apprehension and anticipation. It was not a particularly impressive building, probably about a decade old, with eight concrete steps rising from the street to the main entrance. Breathing deeply, he passed through the doors and walked up to the desk.

'Can I help you, sir?' asked the security guard, eyeing the young man up and down.

The student wasn't used to being addressed as "sir" and was at once very glad he had opted for the suit and tie.

'Yes, please. My name's Jeff Diamond. I'm here to meet Lynn Dyson.'

The guard fixed the stranger with a patronising stare, as if to say, "Are you sure?" Nevertheless, he dialled a telephone number, and the visitor heard a female voice at the other end of the line.

'Miss Dyson, I have a Mister Diamond here in reception to see you.'

The faint voice replied, but the man in the lobby was unable to make out her response. With any luck, she hadn't forgotten or changed her mind. The uniformed official replaced the receiver with a haughty sigh of disapproval. Par for the course, the young man smiled.

'Miss Dyson will be right down, sir.'

OK, Jeff thought. *Less of the condescending tone now, if you don't mind.* The quaintness of this situation reminded him of one of those period dramas imported from Britain, where upstairs rarely came into direct contact with downstairs. He waited in the entrance of the building, trying but failing not to pace around like a prize-fighter preparing to confront his opponent. He stared absentmindedly at the selection of uninspiring paintings on the walls, and trained his ears beyond the security barrier, where he had noticed three lifts.

While he waited, the tired teenager took a few more deep breaths and rolled his shoulders. He wished he could relax and simply enjoy the occasion, but his extreme physical reaction to this event was entirely predictable. He smiled to himself again at the irony, as he acknowledged the ease with which he attracted any other female company, and yet for the one who mattered, he was a total wreck. Perhaps that was the way it should be, he attempted to justify his own behaviour.

A bell sounded behind him, and the right-hand lift opened. Miss Dyson stepped out, and Mister Diamond's stomach flipped over. Inhaling and exhaling quickly to regain his composure, he stepped towards the turnstile to meet her. She was dressed conservatively, as was he. Her shining, golden hair was loose over her shoulders, her blue eyes commanded attention, and her face wore a friendly smile.

'Hi, Jeff,' Lynn greeted him and extended her hand politely, her voice cheerful and unassuming.

'Hello,' he replied, relishing the sensation of her hand in his. 'How're you going? Thanks for coming out.'

'You're welcome. I'm looking forward to it.'

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The young man held out a chivalrous arm, indicating for her to pass through the barrier and onwards in front of him. He observed that whether the young star meant them or not, she certainly knew the right things to say.

'Actually, we should go out this way,' Lynn changed her mind, turning abruptly and pointing to the back of the building. 'We can get to the tram stop faster through the side entrance. Howard, please could you let us through again?'

The uniformed man obliged, giving Jeff a knowing nod. The impatient student responded with a voiceless "Up yours" and followed his stunning date to a door at the rear of the building. His long arm reached over her head and swung the door open for her, and she smiled as they passed through.

'Thanks. Have you had a good day?'

'Pretty good, thanks. About to get a whole lot better. You?'

They found themselves outdoors, in an open area which the general public was unable to see from the street. With meticulously tended lawn surrounded by flowerbeds, the area resembled an ornate English tea garden, complete with a stone fountain and quaint, covered picnic tables. A path led to a gate in the far corner, towards which the pair was walking. Jeff kicked off the conversation proper, itching to get past the pleasantries and on to something more constructive.

'So...' he began, anticipating the questions his new acquaintance must have. 'Who am I?'

Lynn laughed at the quirky opener from the handsome man at her side, dangerously close to her shoulder. Despite his very gentlemanly behaviour, he had an insistent air about him which was strangely exciting for the sixteen-year-old.

'Yes, well... It is a bit like that! I have to tell you that after you asked me out, we were talking on the bus going back to school. My friends asked, "Who is that guy?" and I had to say, "I have no clue!"'

'Not surprised!' Jeff responded with a flash of his dark brown eyes. 'I was going to ask you for a coffee there and then, but guessed you wouldn't be able to stick around. I just had to go for it. Anyway, I'm a second year student.'

'Doing Computer Science, obviously,' she interrupted.

'Yes, and I work some shifts in the computer room. Just keeping stuff ticking over, et cetera. I moved down from Sydney over the summer with some mates.'

The evening sun was particularly warm, and the young man felt the first few strands of tension slipping out of his neck and shoulder muscles. He took off his jacket and tossed it over his shoulder, where it hung, casually hooked on the index finger of his right hand. They had reached the tram stop just as one was pulling up, so they ran to jump in through the back door. There was only one seat vacant nearby, and Jeff motioned to his famous date to take it. He stood in front of her, wondering how competent he was at blocking the view of prying eyes, and watched as a light breeze from the open window blew Lynn's hair back away from her face. She was so beautiful, and making things extremely easy for him, he thought.

'Wow! That's a big move. Why did you come to Melbourne?'

Jeff inhaled deeply and smiled, leaning against the wall of the trundling vehicle. There was no way on Earth he was going to tell her yet that the main reason he had moved south was for this very moment.

'For a number of reasons really,' he explained. 'I wanted a change of scene, my best mate was taking over the Melbourne branch of his dad's company, and his girlfriend's come down to take over a boarding kennels business she inherited when a family member died. The stars were aligned, so we just decided to relocate. It was a spur of the moment decision that got legs very quickly. And here we are!'

'That's a good story,' Lynn told him, grinning at the drama in his outstretched arms.

The pair talked idly about their various experiences of Melbourne and Sydney, laughing at the different perspectives they held as resident and visitor of each city. Jeff's first-hand knowledge of other Australian state capitals was non-existent, of which he felt initially ashamed, but he soon realised that this rich vein of

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ignorance did not seem to count against him in the pretty sixteen-year-old's mind. In fact, she appeared particularly impressed by his academic achievements, despite his having omitted a number so as not to seem too boastful.

After only five minutes, the tram arrived at the intersection of Swanston and Bourke Streets, and the couple alighted to continue their journey on foot, heading eastwards to Exhibition Street and the theatre district. The student proceeded to answer the inquisitive young woman's detailed questions on university life and how different it was from school, most of which constituted safe ground for the man who sought to stay reticent about his own story.

'And have you had to start your degree again?' her bright voice asked.

'No,' Jeff began to answer, only to have the conversation cut short by another sudden change of direction.

The pair had reached the doors of the theatre, and the blonde star was being greeted and pointed at from all sides. Checking to see her companion was following her, the celebrity marched through the vestibule and over to a wide staircase of plush red carpet.

'To be continued!' the amused man shouted, revelling in the attention his famous date was attracting.

So this was what it was like to go out with someone famous... Having always been fascinated by the paradox of fame, her companion scanned the rows of entranced faces which swayed like corn in a stiff breeze, following the celebrity's every move. Lynn's success had no direct positive effect on the lives of these excited individuals, and yet she was quite clearly adored. Why? Perhaps due to the hope a sighting engendered that a portion of her success might transfer to those whom she touched or said hello to, he guessed. Or maybe her presence among them simply made people feel good about the world for a few minutes, the therapeutic value of which the afflicted student could most certainly appreciate.

Was this sufficient though to deserve such adulation? Or ought there really to be an obligation on these special somebodies to take their power a step further? He dared to wonder what it would be like to discuss his impudent theory with the young lady herself, dazzled by her smile and feeling his heart leap into his mouth again. Focussing back on more earthly matters, the new kid in town wasn't entirely sure what he was supposed to do now. The world had slipped into slow motion. This very scenario, which had only existed inside his head for so long, had precipitously become real.

Concentrate, he scolded himself. Lynn Dyson was his responsibility tonight. Should he help to push his precious charge through the crowd or allow her to be mobbed?

But he needn't have worried. The slender, dignified teenager was a professional crowd-pleaser. Born into the job, she handled the attention with grace and patience, while managing to keep moving at a steady pace. Jeff studied the tickets and found the number for the door they needed. A split-second later, his date caught his eye with the question for which he already had the answer, and he pointed over towards the left-hand side of the huge foyer. That was close, he blanched.

The inspired man handed both tickets to the usher on the door, who was also excited to see the child star. As he began to relax more, the ambitious songwriter was keen to observe how people reacted to her at close quarters, eager to absorb more of this world of celebrity. The usher gave them a programme and refused to accept any money, simply returning the ticket stubs to Lynn, who duly separated them and gave one back to her chaperone. He accepted it with thanks, searching this time for the seat number.

He needn't have bothered to do this either, however. They were receiving extra special service, shown right to their seats. The sixteen-year-old sat down and gazed around at the full auditorium, now appearing oblivious to the excitement she was generating. The cavernous space, with its modernistic *décor* and red velvet upholstery, was familiar territory for her, both peering out from and looking down at the stage. She watched closely as Jeff sank into the seat on her left, so tall that his shins pressed against the back of the chair in front. He was most unlike a regular university student; this guy wore after-shave and cleaned his shoes. He had put his jacket back on and looked very smart and handsome, with long, wavy black hair, mysterious dark eyes and a fantastic smile.

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'I didn't even get a chance to buy you a drink,' the subject under observation apologised, handing his dream girl the programme. 'Are you OK?'

'I'm fine,' Lynn smiled. 'Thanks, but it's easier for me to avoid the public spaces. Sorry about that. My friends are used to it.'

The cool, young man shrugged. 'No apology necessary. It was quite exhilarating to be washed along in your wake.'

His evocative words were met with a look of amusement, emanating from dancing, aquamarine eyes. Jeff took this to be a token of appreciation, and it melted his heart. Any sign of approval at this early stage was worth its weight in gold.

'So carry on about your degree,' the beauty invited. 'You didn't have to restart when you moved?'

The handsome migrant was quietly impressed too. This girl, who must be so used to being the centre of attention, was prepared to take the time to find out about him. This was the Lynn Dyson he had hoped was real, and still hoped was real. She was evidently so practised at talking to strangers that he decided to reserve the right to some cynicism. It was among his well-honed self-preservation skills, yet he would remain optimistic for now.

'No. We struck a deal,' Jeff replied. 'I was at UNSW, and there are enough similarities between the two degrees that they gave me full credits for my first year. The job's not too exciting though. Prof' Martin and the other lecturers in the department haven't opened their doors to me yet, but I'm working on it. They're an interesting bunch. For a subject that's all about the future, they don't seem to be great visionaries.'

He received a sympathetic smile. 'That's disappointing for you. It must be strange being a student and a member of staff at the same time.'

'Yeah, it is,' the young man agreed, 'but there are a few of us around the place. Usually post-grads though. Not many like me.'

The lights dimmed, and the audience slowly fell silent. Jeff watched Lynn settle back into her seat and did the same, wondering how he would be able to concentrate on the play when his body was already intent on a whole different plot for the evening. As the curtain began to rise, he shot one last, loaded half-smile in her direction.

'Enjoy!'

The play unfolded before them, scene after scene. Fortunately, Jeff had read the gritty play not too long ago, courtesy of a sleepless night trapped in a random girl's house after a night out, and the characters he remembered were soon brought to life on the stage. He speculated hesitantly on what the privileged schoolgirl might make of the subject matter.

She seemed totally absorbed, and her companion was torn between maintaining his focus on the stage, as the most effective sedative for his rampant urges, and studying the young woman's facial expressions and body language for any signs that might inform him as to her level of tolerance for imperfect people. After a few exquisitely torturous minutes, he pinched the programme from Lynn's knee and scanned the cast list.

He pointed to a character on the stage. 'Who's that?'

To the nineteen-year-old's delight, his date playfully snatched the programme back and pointed to an actor in the gallery of photographs. His eyes flashed at her in gratitude, both for the answer and for the easy way she was interacting with him; not quite flirting, but with the same, tantalising result. The interval arrived more quickly than either youngster expected, and soon the curtain was descending again and the house lights were coming on. People immediately began to make their way to the bars and toilets, and the background noise deafened the pair until they became accustomed to it.

Lynn gave a sigh and turned to her mystery man.

'Good, isn't it?' she stated, her blue eyes so engaging that they almost distracted him completely.

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'Yeah. Would you like that drink now? We've got fifteen minutes.'

Jeff could have really done with a cigarette too, but some things would simply have to wait. Most things, to be more accurate.

The young woman shook her head. 'Do you mind if we stay here? It's too much hassle to walk around out there.'

'Sure,' the compassionate man smiled. 'That's perfectly fine.'

This was the first sign of vulnerability he had detected, and his heart went out to the young beauty. Here was a chink in the armour of the public Lynn Dyson, and her new admirer could almost see through. He twisted round in his seat to face her, and she moved over instinctively to allow his long legs to extend a little.

'Let's stand up for a while. You need to unravel.'

Great idea, he thought, smiling at her metaphoric choice of verb. They stood together in the otherwise empty row and continued to get to know each other, finding conversation flowing readily between them. Jeff unravelled on command, stretching out his shoulders and twisting his back until it clicked. It was a relief to feel the tension leave his body, albeit gradually.

At a lull in their carefree exchange, he served again. 'So, tell me... What do you like to do?'

To his surprise, the sixteen-year-old seemed genuinely stumped by this question, staring into her companion's searching eyes for a few seconds before responding. In truth, she was also struck by how pleasant it was to find someone who was interested in her real self, rather than seeking trivia or gossip about her public life. She was caught off guard and didn't quite know what to say.

'That's an excellent question,' Lynn began to piece together her answer. 'What do I like to do? I don't get much time to think about what I like to do, because I'm always so busy doing what's on my schedule. I love what I do though, don't get me wrong. I love the music. I like spending time with friends. I'd love to read more but hardly ever get a chance to, except for school work. I like learning about anything, especially about people and different cultures. What about you?'

At her date's request, the celebrity sat down, and he followed, utterly captivated. She leaned forward in her seat and elongated her back too. Seizing the moment to focus his avid attention on her body, he rested his right arm across the back of her chair and made himself as comfortable as he could. This evening was turning out every bit as well as he had hoped, and certainly much better than he had dared to expect. He prepared to reply to her question, also struggling to find anything original to say.

'Well... Much the same, I suppose. Not the busy schedule part, but many of the same interests. I like to read, play the guitar and piano. I write songs, run, play football, tennis, squash, basketball. Any sport, really. And to get heavy for a minute, I'm into social justice and human rights, but not in any organised way yet. One day...'

The star's blue eyes told him again that she approved. 'Oh, me too. Well, I'd like to be, at any rate. Plenty of opinions and no power, that's me! I hate being so young.'

There was something very interesting about this man, Lynn decided. He was funny and outgoing, and yet introspective as well. She had the oddest sensation that this Computer Science student from Sydney whom she barely knew seemed already able to see inside her head, and she wondered whether she should trust him with her confidences so soon.

Her charming suitor chuckled kindly at her comment. 'You're not the only one who feels that way. Heaps of opinions and no power. That's a big percentage of the world's population you're describing.'

Out in the foyer, the tones of the five-minute bell had started. The good-looking pair watched silently as members of the audience filed back in to take their seats, each lost in thoughts of the other. Lynn reclined into her chair, bumping into Jeff's long arm. She didn't move away, and he left it in place for a few delicious, extra seconds. There was a definite connection. A spark which both felt but neither

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acknowledged in words. The young man pulled his hand away, his fingers gently but deliberately gliding across her back, and she chanced a tentative smile.

‘Can I let you into a secret?’

There was a glint in her girlish eye, almost mischievous.

The inquisitive man urged her to continue. ‘Absolutely.’

Lynn gestured over to the seats on the left of the auditorium, at a box further forward from where they were sitting. ‘Can you see a group of kids over there, about rows three and four from the front?’

Jeff nodded, although he couldn’t really tell at whom she was pointing.

‘I had a ticket to sit down there tonight, with the music group from school.’

‘Really?’ the nineteen-year-old exclaimed, loud enough to make the snooty lady in the row in front cast a hard stare over her shoulder.

He raised his hand and mouthed an apology. Well, that was an unexpected twist!

‘So you were going to be here anyway tonight?’

‘Yes!’ Lynn answered, laughing at the odd situation in which they found themselves. ‘I was really looking forward to it. I’m surprised no-one blurted it out when you asked me to go with you, because some of those same girls are down there now.’

‘That’s amazing,’ Jeff replied, flattered beyond belief to think that Lynn Dyson would choose his company over her friends’. ‘Well, I have to say thanks again. That makes me feel damned good.’

The pretty teenager shrugged modestly, suddenly a little nervous. ‘I was intrigued by you. I saw you through the window, looking at me. At least, I think it was you. Was it?’

Her date nodded. ‘Yep. I was staring at you, and then you stared at me. You backed down first.’

‘I know,’ she affirmed, before playfully coming to her own defence. ‘Because I had to pay attention to Professor Martin.’

‘Yeah, right,’ her happy companion teased.

Lynn slapped his arm gently, and he caught her hand on its follow-through, bringing it to his lips just as the lights went down for the second act. He released her fingers as she instinctively pulled them away, sensing her uncertainty. Such a cautious reaction was very appealing to the red-blooded male.

The couple lost themselves in the ensuing scenes. The performances were first-rate, and the abrasive Tennessee Williams story was appreciated by the cultured Melbourne audience. The plot unfolded slowly, and eventually the curtain fell for the final time to a thunderous ovation. Jeff exchanged a smile with his pretty neighbour, both applauding with enthusiasm, but then abruptly, with the clapping and many shouts for more still going strong, the famous patron placed her hands on her knees as if she were about to stand up, and turned purposefully.

‘Let’s get out of here.’

Before Jeff could agree or disagree, the young celebrity was already on her feet. He cottoned on quickly that she wanted to avoid a slow exit through the foyer, so he stood up straightaway and helped guide her past the other people in their row, who each gaped in turn. Out in the entrance hall, the march accelerated into a sprint, while admiring glances and shouts of recognition were launched from all sides. Her protector had to up the pace to stay close behind and was almost breathless by the time they reached the corner of Bourke Street.

‘Whoa!’ the student exclaimed. ‘You’re fast! Or I’m out of form.’

‘Sorry! It would’ve taken us ages to get out of there, and I didn’t want to give anyone the chance to stop us.’

Stop us? Nice touch, the boy from Sydney’s west smiled. Sensing a little anxiety from the beautiful girl whose company was so intoxicating, he concluded that they shouldn’t linger out in the street for long. He

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flagged down a yellow taxi and received a grateful smile for his unprompted action. Holding the door open while she climbed in, Jeff felt his head swim a little as a mixture of pride and relief curdled in his stomach. The serial womaniser was just about to drop into the back seat beside her when his conscience dealt him a sharp slap.

No way! his brain warned him. *This is Lynn Dyson, remember? Close the door and ride in the front, mate.*

Whether the schoolgirl was any the wiser to the battle raging between mind and body, the nineteen-year-old silently rejoiced that a social *faux pas* had been avoided. After giving the driver his instructions, he turned round to check that she was comfortable, and his eyes were met with yet another relaxed, smiling expression. Moreover, the suspense which now engulfed them was foreign even to the man who was no stranger whatsoever to encounters with good-looking females.

'It must be pretty frustrating not to be able to move at your own speed,' he offered, seeing her enquiring eyes. 'And you can't afford to piss anyone off, I guess.'

The young woman giggled, putting on an exasperated air. 'I'm not even allowed to talk about pissing people off.'

Foul language sounded clumsy emerging from such a refined mouth, and it made the Sydneysider laugh too. What was he doing? Bad boys like him didn't date nice girls like Lynn Dyson. But what the hell? He was here with her now, determined to make the most of it while it lasted.

'Who are you?' Lynn asked, disarmed by his insight again. 'Are you a reporter?'

'No. I'm a friend.'

Her enquiry was so cute however, that Jeff couldn't help but take the liberty of toying with the situation a little. His left hand grabbed the lapel of his suit jacket while he dipped his other hand into its inside pocket, as if to retrieve a hidden voice recorder. The star's face was a picture, intently following this short series of actions.

'It's OK,' he told her with a wry smile. 'We can turn this thing off now. I've got what I need.'

Lynn's eyes widened still further, not knowing whether to believe his soothing tone or his impish antics. The comic flamboyantly pulled out a battered, black leather wallet from his pocket, creasing his jacket in his hands to show her that the space was now empty.

'Oh, very funny,' she huffed, sounding a little perturbed and turning away to look out of the window at the tall buildings along the right-hand side of Flinders Street.

The taxi let its passengers out on the opposite side of St Kilda Road from their destination, leaving them to cross the wide, tree-lined boulevard along which flowed multiple lanes of car and tram traffic. In the fresh air, the young sportswoman waited under the cover of a nearby tram stop while her date paid their fare, and the cool breeze again blew her hair back from her face. Marvelling at how gorgeous she looked, Jeff slipped sideways, at her back, to shelter her from the wind, and his hands grasped the rail on either side of hers.

The aroused man was in no hurry to cross the road and deliver her home. No objections were raised by the sixteen-year-old either, and he moved in a little closer. His mind began to race ahead, though with no hope of keeping up with his body. He needed to take it easy, and yet that task was becoming more impossible with each passing moment.

'So do you live up there?' the nineteen-year-old asked, his eyes directed over her head at the Dyson Administration building on the far side of the street.

'During the week I do,' Lynn answered. 'Most weekends I go out to the farm at Benloch if I'm not travelling. It's near Lancefield, north of the airport. Do you know? Where do you live?'

Jeff leaned further forward, pushing into her back slightly, and raised his right hand as if to point towards the light towers of the MCG.

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'In Richmond, about a "K" from the "G".'

The handsome stranger's mouth was now very close to the young woman's right ear, and she could feel his breath on her cheek. He smelled good too, like a grown-up. The joke at her expense now behind her, she realised she felt comfortable enough with the physical contact. In fact, she liked it a lot. This Jeff Diamond was a very expressive man, both verbally and physically, and she became aware of a strong desire to lean back into him, which conflicted with a sudden uneasy feeling inside. Her date showed no sign of moving away either, causing her to become slightly more apprehensive at their proximity.

Naïve to the world of dating, Lynn continued to make light of the situation, even though her heartbeat was quickening. 'Are you in a share house?'

'No. Just me. I value my freedom very highly.'

Caught out by his own honesty, Jeff kissed the back of the blonde's head, and her hair felt unbelievably soft against his lips. He briefly gave himself permission to consider how much he wanted her, but then banished the dangerous notion immediately, knowing that tonight was not going to be the night. The eager young man promised himself this would not be the last time he was so close to his dream girl.

Both immersed in the sublime moment, the student watched as Lynn's hand settled on top of his right wrist and squeezed it gingerly, mostly coming into contact with his watch under the cuff of his shirt.

'You're left-handed,' the famous schoolgirl said awkwardly.

The ladies' man nodded, smiling at the cute combination of *naïveté* and nerves, while his date worked to cover her embarrassment. She was quite obviously in uncharted waters, and he took pity on her. Still facing towards the river, the young star failed to notice him nod or smile and continued ruefully.

'I'm really looking forward to finding out what freedom feels like.'

Exhaling and positively imbibing their closeness, Jeff closed his eyes and bowed his head to touch hers. The power of his reaction to her comment rocked him to the core. It was as if it finally validated the feelings he had inexplicably held for this woman over the last few years. For two people with nothing in common on the surface, they had certainly identified a connection on a very fundamental level. And what was more, it had happened after only a couple of hours in each others' presence.

An outlandish thought suddenly entered the young man's head. Was this how ordinary people turned into kidnappers? From where he was standing, with the girl of his dreams so defenceless, trapped by his large frame against the railings, it was but a short step to taking her hostage, such was his desire to wrap her up in his arms and transport her back to his flat, if only to explore this unfathomable attraction in more detail over the next few hours. And naked, of course...

'Shall we go?' he suggested, necessarily breaking the spell for both of them.

Lynn was grateful. 'Yes. It's late. We'd better.'

The confident student stepped to one side and allowed his quarry to escape onto the footpath. She turned and looked up into his eyes, still wearing the same uncertain smile. Time to put their connection to the test, he resolved. Was it one-way or two-? He undid the top button of his shirt and loosened his tie most deliberately, watching the delectable creature standing next to him scan him up and down.

Was Lynn Dyson really giving him the eye? What a deliciously sweet image for him to take home in his heightened state of arousal. The handsome stranger gave her a sly wink, and she looked away quickly.

It appeared she was, he dared to dream. The self-assured man knew the signs only too well, and he allowed himself a brief moment of arrogant pride before coming to his senses.

Bring it on, his body urged ever more forcefully. It was definitely time to call it quits for the night. There were by now far fewer people around, and Jeff had successfully hidden his secret snare from view while a bunch of rowdy tourists disembarked from the next tram. Sensing his new friend relax a little, he fixed her enquiring eyes with his and invited her to walk towards the nearest traffic lights, to cross over to the headquarters of the Dyson empire.

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Still lost in his wild and lustful imagination, the boy from Canley Vale held out his hand without so much as a conscious thought. Lynn's eyes darted downwards, momentarily stunned and unsure whether to take it or not, and her reserve brought him back to reality also. Jeff Diamond didn't hold hands. What was he doing?

But before he had a chance to disguise the spontaneous gesture, slender fingers brushed across his palm. Electricity sparked between them, causing both to recoil a little, inhaling sharply and focussing on their conjoined hands in dismay.

'Sorry,' the sixteen-year-old gasped. 'I'm not quite sure what I'm supposed to do.'

Jeff exhaled too and flashed a reassuring smile. 'Me neither, but it feels great.'

As casually as he could, given the fact that his nerves were now tingling all the way past his shoulder and into his chest, the young man resisted his flight instincts and squeezed the smaller hand a little tighter. It did feel great, skin-on-skin, and his sex-drive growled in complicit agreement. His date glanced up as they strolled along and dared to swing her arm just a tiny bit, relishing the unfamiliar physical attraction of such a strong grip.

The pair was thus committed to walking the hundred metres or so back to the Dyson Administration building hand-in-hand. Unable to come to terms with either his behaviour or its inexplicable rightness, Jeff found his mouth launching into an equally natural conversation about his timetable for the next few days and other such harmless pieces of generality.

'Can we do this again?' he asked, realising they were almost at the gate.

'The play?'

'No,' Jeff chuckled. 'When's the next gap in your busy schedule?'

It was the celebrity's turn to sigh. How could she possibly have a proper boyfriend? There was no time.

'Well, I'm going to Sydney this weekend. Then most nights next week are booked up with rehearsals for Friday's TV special. The show's live, so it's got to be good.'

Undaunted, the young man pounced on an opportunity. 'There's a party at RMIT next Friday night, for the start of the new academic year. How about we go after your show?'

'Hmm... I wouldn't be able to get there until about ten-thirty or even eleven, depending on what sort of reception they throw for us afterwards,' she answered, not committing but not turning him down either.

'That's OK,' Jeff shrugged. 'It's at the Uni' Club on Swanston Street. You can't miss the place. Or I could pick you up from wherever you are.'

They had reached the unmarked side entrance to the Dysons' office building. Lynn removed a set of keys from her handbag and unlocked the gate. Her new chaperone hung back, not knowing whether they had reached the part where he was meant to say goodbye. Having spent such a mind-blowing evening together, he wasn't about to make this decision for her. Not if he could help it.

'OK. That sounds good,' she agreed, waving him through. 'I know the place you mean. My brother pointed it out to me. He's got friends at RMIT. I can ask someone to drop me off. Are you coming in?'

Jeff grinned, scarcely believing what he was hearing. 'Thanks, Lynn. That's fantastic.'

The couple walked through the manicured gardens, past a few sets of tables and chairs, their path lit by a line of waist-high lamps. To the dumbfounded young man, the scene was bizarrely similar to how he envisioned C S Lewis' Narnia, and he distracted himself by imagining them re-entering the building through a set of old, wooden wardrobe doors.

On a more serious note though, still fighting his libido, the boy from Sydney's west also realised that the child star was being rather too trusting of him. At sixteen, she of all people ought not to be out walking in the dark with a man she hardly knew, and she definitely shouldn't have invited him in through the gate. He was surprised at her apparent confidence and wondered if there were cameras located around the paths and perimeter, through which the security guard could keep an eye on her.

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It also occurred to Jeff at the same moment that he already felt protective of this beautiful fledgling and vowed to convince her next time to take more precautions. No. On second thoughts, he concluded, this discussion must take place regardless of whether he was lucky enough to see her again. The prospect of Lynn Dyson being attacked in the dark filled him with horror. He would never forgive himself if something were to happen without having voiced his concerns and giving her a chance to reduce the risk.

'Can security monitor these gardens?'

'Yes. There are a few cameras strategically placed,' the naïve and light-headed schoolgirl replied. 'No guard dogs though!'

The tall, dark, handsome stranger smiled. The safeguards he employed for his own security had been learned on the downtrodden streets of Sydney's south-west but were equally applicable for susceptible female sporting heroes. Nonetheless, the last thing he wanted was to be accused of interfering.

'Good. I guess there's a fine line between sanctuary and prison,' he ventured, in an attempt to reinforce the point and hoping he wouldn't be overstepping the mark.

Lynn turned towards him as his words sunk in. Who was this man who looked so casual and relaxed, walking along with his hand in his trouser pocket and his jacket sexily thrown over his shoulder, as if he didn't have a care in the world? One minute he was smiling broadly and cracking jokes, and the next he was making keen and somewhat unnerving observations about her personal safety, as if she were the most important thing in the world to him.

'Thanks for looking after me,' the star replied. 'I should be more careful, shouldn't I?'

Jeff nodded and shrugged. 'I think so.'

The air thick with more unspoken thoughts, the pair continued walking towards the back of the building. Putting his arm around her, the nineteen-year-old lightened up by asking about her plans for the weekend. Lynn told him how nice it usually was to have the chance to escape the city on Saturdays and relax on the family's farm until Monday morning, but that this upcoming weekend held a non-stop itinerary of recording and filming.

This was exactly the type of light conversation on which they needed to end, and Jeff stopped his alluring companion before she reached the door, placing his hands on her shoulders and turning her round to face him.

'I've had a great time tonight,' he said, bending to kiss her full on the lips.

To his delight, Lynn didn't pull back this time, and he prolonged the embrace for as long as he could, lifting his left hand to brush her cheek. His mouth could feel the muscles in her face mould into a smile, and his rebellious sex-drive hastened. Once the kiss was over, he hugged the bashful woman in close and stroked her forehead for good measure. He didn't quite know why, but some altogether unexpected instincts had been awakened tonight, quite apart from the fierce and familiar passion kept hidden from the celebrity's view.

'So have I,' the breathless sixteen-year-old responded. 'Thanks very much for inviting me. You're great company.'

The very special young lady unlocked the glass door into the building. Pushing it open, she signalled for Jeff to step inside again. With his blood pressure so high that it rang in his ears, he had to call upon all his powers of deception to remain cool, calm and collected while he walked through the private area of the Dysons' city headquarters. The hot-headed teenager fought not to submit to the irrepressible urge inside, although he was unable to remember a time when he had felt more turned on.

Lynn was indicating up ahead, beyond the lifts and towards the security barrier. 'You'll have to go out the front door, I'm afraid.'

'You've got that the wrong way round, you know,' he quipped, following her through the large, tiled foyer. 'Usually secret visitors get ushered out the back door.'

The schoolgirl giggled again. 'That's true. We do everything backwards here.'

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They crossed into the main lift lobby, and she pressed the button, stifling a yawn. This was presumably the clearest signal he would receive from this well-bred and unaffected teenager, who had yet to learn the correct protocol for dismissing a red-blooded paramour at the end of an evening. Jeff took his cue to leave, although this truly *was* the last thing he wanted to do.

'I'd better go. Sleep well, Lynn. Thanks again for a great evening. See you next Friday, or in class on Tuesday, if we get the chance. Hope the show goes well.'

The good-looking man kissed his dream girl again, deliberately in the security guard's line of sight, recalling his earlier patronising attitude.

'Goodnight, Jeff,' the young woman replied, stepping into the lift and leaning against doors which were anxious to gobble up their valuable cargo. 'See you next week.'

As he drank in the shifting mirage, the slender beauty took a pace backwards, and the lift doors were allowed to close. The nobody from New South Wales pushed the bar on the turnstile and nodded to the guard, whose expression didn't alter, and the revolving doors shunted him back out into the fresh air.

Jeff could have run home, such was the energy coursing through his system! Lynn Dyson's last words to him were, "See you next week." From every angle, that was a win. His headache had subsided, and adrenalin was pumping through his body, not to mention the testosterone. He walked past the Victorian Barracks, crossed the road and jogged into Alexandra Gardens, continuing all the way down to the river's edge. He sat down on the first bench he came to, resting his forearms on his knees and staring down at the grass between his feet. He smoked a long-awaited cigarette in the cool night air.

An hour must have passed on that bench, while the tired student replayed the evening several times in his mind, still not quite ready to believe it had actually happened. Another milestone achieved in this strange life of his. The most major milestone so far, in fact. Moving to Melbourne was proving to be an extremely good idea. Lighting another cigarette, he set off towards the Swan Street Bridge. His watch informed him it was eleven-thirty, and he needed to cross over to the north bank and make his way home.

The nineteen-year-old arrived at his second-floor flat, which was situated in a quiet Richmond street, not far from Bridge Road. Climbing the stairs, he steeled himself for the usual battle with his front door. Scarred by the traumas of his childhood, no-one but Jeff Diamond knew the extent of his ongoing personal struggle to overcome the demons he carried with him. Once inside, he jumped into the shower and stood under the cool water for a few minutes, waiting for his pulse rate to return to normal and exercising the many fantasies that were banked up inside his throbbing body.

The dreamer didn't go straight to bed. He stood in front of his bedroom window, looking out towards the city, his fingers playing idly with the souvenir ticket stub. He wondered what Lynn was doing now. Fast asleep, he assumed. He allowed his mind to wander once more over her face, her hair, her breasts, her long legs. He had been feeding forever off the images his memory had stockpiled from the television screen, album covers and magazine articles, and today he had added some new material to his mental inventory: her physical presence, her grace, her gentle humour and her touch.

Jeff Diamond had kissed Lynn Dyson. What about that! How many of her millions of fans could say that? And what was more, he had kissed her as an adult and with the promise of more to come.

Yet there was much more to it even than that, the dreamer realised, as he peeled back the sheet and climbed into bed. The strongest impression with which his dream girl had left him that evening was the apparent similarity in the way their minds worked. There was a woman of substance behind the international artist's polished and successful exterior. Hadn't he always known this though? He had sensed a connection on a level that was notably deeper than anything he had experienced before. Perhaps he was overstating it? And perhaps it had only been he who had felt it? He had no way of knowing, and the troubled teenager sparred with his natural pessimism for the benefit of the doubt.

What the elated man did know however, without a shadow of a doubt, was that his first date with Lynn Dyson had far exceeded all expectations. Plus, there would be a second date. Unless she pulled the pin during the week, that was. How the hell was he going to lead a normal life for eight long days and nights?

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The previous two had seemed like an eternity. Jeff lay down on top of the bed for a while before he fell asleep, enchanted by a strange, lingering sense of anticipation.

Two-and-a-half hours later, rapidly spiralling downwards, the exhausted man awoke, yelling and in a pool of sweat. Snatching a beer from the fridge, he sat on the couch until his heartbeat slowed, listening to Lynn's record for the millionth time, in an effort to distract himself and to assuage his desire-fuelled physical needs. One more night when his sleep account would slip further into overdraft, despite it having been a very good day otherwise. The music washed over him, and this time he heard a different voice; that of someone he liked very much.

Lynn arrived at school on Friday morning to a gaggle of giggling girlfriends, all excited to hear how the date with her mystery boy had gone. Much to their annoyance, she was not prepared to give anything away. Michelle England, her best friend, was the first to put the pressure on.

'Oh, come on, please! You've got to tell us. There must be more to it than "We had a great time."'

The famous schoolgirl sought refuge in some last-minute homework, unable to wipe the grin off her face. She had woken that morning full of joy at having met someone so interesting and secretly couldn't wait to talk about it. She knew it wasn't appropriate for her, the youngest and best protected girl in the class, to be playing in such a grown-up world, especially since this was an Olympic year and therefore the first big chance she would have to show the world what she was made of.

'No. Nothing happened,' she insisted. 'He was the perfect gentleman. He's got lovely manners and a wicked smile, and you know how good the play was, because you were there. We talked, we had fun. That's it! He's a nice guy.'

'So,' Andrea took over, 'what's next? Are you going to see him again, this nice guy?'

'Maybe,' the starlet teased. 'I'm very busy. I don't have time for a boyfriend.'

The girls weren't buying it. They had never seen their friend enthusiastic about a boy before. Happiness was written all over her face, and they were determined to wheedle the truth out of her somehow.

'But he was so handsome! If you're not interested, can you give him my number?' Michelle asked.

Saved by the bell, the young ladies filed into class. As the day went on, Lynn found herself unusually distracted, often having to force her attention back to the lessons. Her mind was full of enticing images of this enigmatic stranger: those strong hands gripping her shoulders; his chiselled, southern European facial features; his deep, resonant voice and the body language full of temptation were all unexpectedly irresistible to the impressionable teenager. Nevertheless, she could ill afford the luxury of day-dreaming. Her life was planned out to the minute, and her goals were set by others for her to achieve, without regard for these new-found preoccupations. There was no way she would be able to have a proper adult relationship with this gorgeous find. How could she possibly get away with it?

Lynn reflected on the doleful comment she had made to Jeff about freedom. Had he understood? Is that why he had kissed her, or had he been intending to do that anyway? Why was she so affected by this boy? She had many good friends and was never lonely, but perhaps it was now time to find someone more consequential with whom to share life and develop her blossoming ideals.

The more she ruminated, the more Jeff Diamond presented as a conundrum for the celebrity. He was obviously intelligent, independent and impressive, but also inscrutable and intense. Dare she add integrity into the mix? Could he be relied upon to act in her best interest? Her parents had sent her and her elder brother to a series of self-defence training classes, to instil in them a sense of responsibility for their own safety, and she knew she owed it to them and to herself to be wary of this new arrival, about whom she knew absolutely nothing.

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But above all, Lynn was sure she had made a real friend last night. Even with her limited experience, she considered they had got along much better with each other than two people usually do on first meeting, regardless of any physical attraction. She didn't really understand why, but somehow this new bond felt symbolic and important.

The dreamy sixteen-year-old focussed back on the teacher, shaking her head a little. Yesterday evening was the first time she had been on a date with someone she didn't already know reasonably well, since her handful of boyfriends to-date had all come from within their usual circle. These were easy friendships to make and break, uncomplicated and childish. The next few days would give her the chance to find out if this was all she needed, or whether she was ready for something more grown-up.

Between now and the following Friday night, Lynn Dyson trusted that she would come to know whether the heady euphoria brought on by her brief encounter with a handsome stranger would settle down, or if her novel desire to be half of a fascinating whole was here to stay. She hoped fervently for the latter.

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