

Prologue

Freya stood in line for the reception desk at the Qantas Lounge, nervously flicking the corner of her boarding pass. The young man behind the counter was doing his best to deflect a barrage of insults from an oversized businessman who had missed his flight, and the sensitive artist smiled in sympathy whenever she caught his eye. She presumed it hadn't been the airline's fault that the aggressive traveller had arrived late, and most certainly not within the clerk's sphere of control. It never ceased to disappoint her that such verbal abuse was so often directed at the least deserving.

The eighteen-year-old rehearsed her pitch while she waited. Her bag weighed heavily on her shoulder, stuffed to bursting with samples, testimonials and a number of photographs taken at her recent Brisbane exhibition. She felt confident in her ability to sell herself, although with no idea how stiff the competition might be for next year's endowment scholarship for The Good School.

Mid-sentence however, the irate passenger at the front of the queue fell silent as the sliding doors parted and a tall, slim figure with a mass of sleek, dark curls entered. A wide smile and a pair of enchanting eyes met each turning head before waving to the man behind the counter, who immediately excused himself from his current customer and picked up the telephone.

The lady in the tailored suit and high heels diverted towards a leather couch and deposited her two bags on the floor beside it, preparing to sit down. Instead of checking her voicemail messages, as she had obviously intended, Freya could hardly believe her eyes when the new arrival made a bee-line for her.

'You must be Freya,' the graceful celebrity assumed, extending her right hand towards the star-struck young woman. 'There aren't too many of us with such unruly mops of hair! I'm Kierney Diamond. It's so good to meet you.'

By now, half a dozen people were waiting for attention, all of whom gaped in astonishment at the unremarkable bystander who had been greeted like a long-lost friend by the famous United Nations ambassador. The Queenslander lifted the satchel containing her portfolio off her shoulder and placed it awkwardly between her feet, almost overbalancing in her haste to accept Kierney's handshake.

'Yes. Thank you,' she stammered. 'Yes, I'm Freya Gunarwardene. It's a real honour, Ms Diamond. I wish my hair looked like yours!'

The thirty-six-year-old beauty smiled. 'Thanks, and please call me Kierney. Come out of the line. There's a meeting room booked for us inside, and I expect someone'll show us through in a minute. How was your flight?'

A beaming Qantas staff member appeared from the office behind Reception right on cue, ready to usher their VIP visitor inside the lounge. Her expression altered momentarily, not knowing who the second guest was and struck by the similarity in the two ladies' physical appearance.

'Step this way, please, Ms Diamond. It's lovely to see you again. Is this your guest?'

'Hello, Hannah,' Kierney replied. 'Yes, Freya's my guest. Fleeting visit today. I'm booked on the five-fifty to LAX. Please could you send someone to call me? What time's your flight, Freya?'

The youngster followed the others into an area reserved for First Class passengers, unable to remember when her return flight departed. She fumbled around in her handbag, feeling anxious and inadequate, while the scarlet-lipped employee held the door open for her. Unfolding her itinerary and scanning it quickly, she provided the requested information, and the dark-haired pair were duly left on their own.

'Sorry,' the older woman frowned. 'I didn't mean to put you on the spot. Please sit down. I've been really looking forward to meeting you ever since we spoke. Would you like tea or coffee? It's just outside. I'm dying for a coffee. I left Melbourne before six this morning. Oh, is that a copy of "ALS"?''

True enough, Kierney had spotted the distinctive top right-hand corner of her parents' autobiography as her interviewee opened her bag and began to extract the collateral she had brought with her. The

unmistakeable emblem of two initials formed into its singular number caught both sets of eyes at once, embarrassing both women with its power.

'I always carry it, wherever I go,' the teenager nodded. 'It's like a lucky charm. My friends tease me that it's my comfort blanket, and it's become known as "The Book" in my family.'

Wondering if her words might come across as too sycophantic, Freya's voice trailed off. She had drawn quotation marks in the air, a habit which annoyed her in others, but to her relief Kierney was laughing.

'That's funny! We call it that too.'

'It cheers me up when I'm down,' the young leader admitted, 'because it's full of such hope. And I couldn't think of anything more wonderful than to meet someone like your father.'

The famous ambassador for peace felt tears springing to her eyes at these words, fortunately distracted at that moment by her mobile telephone ringing on her lap. 'Do you mind if I answer this, please?'

Shaking her head, Freya waved a feeble hand, amazed at even having been asked. Why did she feel so revered by such an impressive international figure? There was nothing girlish about this tall, dark-haired celebrity, and yet the difference in their ages appeared negligible, sitting opposite each other in the small space.

Trying not to look as though she was eavesdropping, the artist gazed around the room, realising fairly quickly that Kierney was speaking to someone very important. Being left alone with her thoughts, insecurities frightened her, punishing her for being so forward with her idol.

'That was my boss,' the part-time musician apologised. 'He likes to know where I am at all times.'

Only the Secretary General of the United Nations, Freya gulped.

'It's embarrassing. He calls me "Ms Next-in-Line", which is amazingly flattering,' the human rights advocate continued. 'It's at times like these I wish *Mamá* and *Papá* could hear him.'

Both beset with the same romantic notion, two pairs of moist, shining eyes met again.

'I'm sure they can,' the younger woman hazarded.

Their meeting officially underway once coffee had been served and sampled, Freya began to relax. The person in whose hands her fate lay listened carefully, interjecting every now and then with an insightful question. Her demeanour was exactly how the youngster had expected: passionate yet commanding; authoritative yet amiable. An adolescence spent immersed in the pages of "A Life Singular" now stood the applicant in good stead, feeling totally at home in this stranger's presence. There was an odd air of mutual respect laced through their conversation, rendering the meeting less like an interview and more like two firm friends chatting in a laneway café over a glass of wine.

'The committee will be making its final decision about the award next week,' the renowned lawyer explained, returning the candidate's written submission and moving to examine one of her drawings in great detail. 'We're down to a shortlist of three, after my brother discounted one applicant yesterday. It's always a difficult choice.'

'I can imagine,' Freya nodded. 'I can't believe I've got this far, to be honest. And I was really thrilled to hear you wanted to meet me. Thanks for paying for my ticket to Sydney. I'm not a very experienced traveller, as you saw earlier. I felt like your dad when he was going to New Zealand for the first time.'

Kierney chuckled. 'Not quite so hyperactive, I hope.'

'Oh, I'm not so sure,' the artist's eyes dropped for a second, before correcting their manners in such exalted company. 'I was on my own. I'm sure I would've been very excited if I had someone to share the experience with. I even went to the Stones Road at lunchtime. On a kind of pilgrimage, I suppose.'

'Did you?' her distinguished lookalike appeared pleased to hear this. 'Wow! What did you think?'

'Some sort of pride, I think,' the eighteen-year-old answered, unsure of herself again. 'I'm not sure why. It didn't really hit me until I was back on the train, but I felt proud that I pay so much attention to your parents' advice, and that I'm serious about doing my best to change the world.'

'For your own father?' Kierney asked, seeing a faraway look in the candidate's eyes. 'To honour his memory?'

'No, not really. More to honour your parents' memory. I feel so connected to them,' she paused, catching her breath. 'Oh, sorry! That's inappropriate to say in front of you. I'm sorry if I'm getting too close. I worried about how much of a fan I could be during this interview process.'

The older woman smiled. 'Don't apologise, please. It's always nice to hear how much people loved them. Ryan and I've become quite adept at partitioning that aspect of people's applications. We always debate whether being a fan of Mum and Dad should be a selection criterion, which I won't go into now for obvious reasons, but at some point it'd be nice to share some more memories with you.'

The bemused young painter nodded, stoked that there would at least be more contact with this surprisingly gentle and encouraging role-model. 'OK. Thank you. I'd love to hear more. How's your son, by the way. It must be hard to be away from your family so often. Behnam, isn't it?'

Kierney nodded. 'It is, but I'm never away for more than a few days at a time. Ben, we call him. We were all in Melbourne this time, but Arka flew back with him this morning. Here... I've got an up-to-date photo.'

Their two heads of long, black hair came close together, scrolling through pictures on the diplomat's mobile telephone until they reached a cute portrait of a small boy offering a spoonful of his breakfast to whomever had been snapping away. The teenager gasped, overcome with an atypical rush of love for the little tyke.

'Oh, he's adorable,' she whispered, unable to stop her fingers from stroking the surface of the screen.

Ready to put the handset back into her bag, the busy mother again made eye contact with her young interviewee. A curious reaction indeed. And the strongest signal yet...

'I think you know my other reason for wanting to meet you in person,' Kierney said, her voice slightly hushed.

'Yes,' the humble painter responded. 'I hoped we could talk about that.'

It was clear that both women had been doused in the same foreboding ambiance. Leaning back and smiling, Freya was frozen in her seat, desperate to resist a completely unexpected urge to hug her interviewer, who twisted a heavy ring which she wore on the middle finger of her right hand. The avid reader had recognised this striking piece of jewellery when they had first introduced themselves, now shivering at the sight of its four inset stones.

The famous daughter broke the silence, slapping a palm on each knee decisively. 'Your date of birth caught my attention, and I was interested in your comments when we spoke last time. Ryan thinks I'm nuts, and we're inundated with cranks claiming to be our parents. I have no real confidence in the whole concept, and he has even less. Almost none, in fact. But your reaction to Ben's picture just now was acute, and I feel creepily like I already know you. I hope you don't mind me telling you this.'

'No,' the younger woman said, her spine tingling. 'I've always had a weird feeling about it, as I mentioned when we talked before. And there's so much in your dad's book that I think I understand. If that makes sense?'

Jeff Diamond's gipsy girl had tears in her eyes, daring to believe she were a step closer to solving the mystery of her parents' long and hopefully continuing journey. This sweet-natured and persuasive artist, half Australian and half Sri Lankan who had accomplished so much in her eighteen tender years, evidently had a head-start when it came to appreciating the messages in the revealing best-seller.

Ryan and Kierney had certainly been taken by the biographical details documented in this young woman's application for The Good School's scholarship, telling how her deceased father had been a sufferer of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and of how their family had been torn apart by its effects. However, as the compassionate lawyer secretly vowed to confess to her older brother, it was truly a mammoth leap between empathy and reincarnation.

Freya struggled to maintain her smile too, knowing there was one more vital statistic as yet unimparted which was likely to bring this surreal encounter to an unsatisfactory conclusion for both women. Even if she were who Kierney hoped she was, there was one aspect of her personality that would surely be a showstopper.

Flying Away

Kierney Diamond watched her brother put down the weighty hardback and issue a long sigh. The student siblings had paid a fleeting visit to Melbourne for their grandparents' combined sixty-fifth birthday celebrations and were now back at the airport again, one returning to Sydney and the other bound for Heathrow.

'Where are you up to?' the eighteen-year-old asked, her dark eyes alighting on the familiar tome.

'Leaving for London,' Ryan replied.

'Are you enjoying it?'

'Yes and no,' the young man scoffed, the well-worn expression igniting both hearts. 'I can't believe how many revelations it contains. Even for me.'

'Us,' his sister assured.

'Cool. But there are so many things I didn't know. Page after page of the stuff. Was it like that for you?'

Kierney nodded. 'For a family who talked all the time, a good deal still obviously went unsaid. To protect us, I suppose. It's nice. Comforting in a way.'

'Or maybe they just forgot,' Ryan countered. 'Things too painful to remember; that you'd rather put out of your mind, so after a while you just do. I guess it must've all come flooding back when Dad was forced to sort everything into sequence.'

The law student sighed. 'I think you're right. Gerry told me the other day about a very emotional conversation he had with *Papá* while he was writing. He said he hadn't understood the reason why *Papá* was so obsessed with certain memories, and that it was only after he'd read about *Papá*'s decision to have kids that everything made sense to him.'

The tall, blond sportsman shrugged and chuckled, heaving himself to his feet. 'Ha! That'd be right,' he teased. 'The master of the blindingly obvious strikes again! Gerry never has been one to pick up on the subtleties of life.'

Kierney smiled. 'He's getting better, I think. We need to remember that the vision was only clear to *Mamá* and *Papá* at that point. Still forming, which means they probably hadn't discussed it with anyone else. Not where it was all leading, you know... Oh, I'm getting a lump in my throat just thinking about it. It's just so magical, seeing their dream come together. You'll enjoy the next few chapters. Practice makes perfect...'

'Practice makes perfect?' Ryan echoed. 'I assume that's a reference to sex. Thanks, sis'. That actually freaks me out a bit. I'm not sure I want to be reading about our conception on a 'plane full of ogling eyes. Perhaps I'll leave it 'til I get home. I'll be too self-conscious to read it in public.'

The Sydney University undergraduate shook her head. 'Why? How will anyone know what you're reading about, you idiot? Hide the book in a magazine or something. I love the part where he tells the newborn you that you're the perfection they were practising for. "*Ergo*," *Papá* says. Like a foregone conclusion.'

'Yeah. He said that loads of times. "You are practice made perfect, guys." Right before they gave us some other shit about working harder or something.'

His sister couldn't help but laugh. The impersonation of their father's dark-brown voice was accurate enough, but the sarcasm was overblown. She sensed the cricketer's discomfort as he struggled with his own emotions. Their parents had never missed an opportunity to tell their children how important and wanted they were; a lesson learned the hard way by one and never to be repeated by either.

“Exquisite sex beget two perfect beings,” the romantic teenager quoted. ‘The hierarchy of drugs thing is interesting. You’ll get to that bit soon, if you’re where I think you are. And then there’s the hint about Nick.’

Ryan blanched. ‘Shit! Yeah. Bloody Nick! D’you believe there’s any truth behind his claim? Really?’

‘Who knows?’ Kierney shrugged. ‘Another indication that blood’s not thicker than water if there’s no love in your family. *Papá* didn’t care much when Granddad dropped the bombshell, and much, much less last year. Unsurprisingly... I just wonder if they’d have pursued it more if *Mamá* had still been alive to meet him too.’

‘Jeez. Rollercoaster or what!’ the young man exclaimed, now with more interest in reading further.

‘I know! You’d better get ready,’ his sister said, checking the clock on the wall. ‘They’ll be coming to get you in a minute.’

Nodding, Ryan disappeared to the restroom before his flight was called for boarding. While he was gone, the younger Diamond prodigy lifted their father’s substantial autobiography from the table and opened it up to the page where a tatty Cambridge University Press bookmark had last been inserted. She had read the intricate web of stories from start to finish twice already, yet still found it disconcerting to uncover facts and observations about her own life through the farsighted but worn-out eyes of her beloved *Papá*.

Leaving for London, Kierney reminded herself with a sigh. How thrilling it must have been for the young stars to be free to live life in their own way. The independent teenager attempted to put herself in her mother’s shoes, back in the mid-nineteen-seventies, thinking how exciting it would be to embark on the journey her mysterious boyfriend had envisaged with such clarity. It surely was a veritable leap of faith for the privileged high-society child. Her daughter remembered fondly the stories both parents used to tell of their ambitious plans and how Jeff’s wild ideas were painstakingly shaped into a set of achievable milestones by Lynn’s pragmatic and level-headed management. They had truly been a partnership made in heaven, the sentimental student had long realised.

Leafing back a few pages from her brother’s marker, Kierney felt tears welling up as she ran her fingers over the embossed rendering of the simple but stylish tattoo her parents shared, which over the years had become almost as famous as their names and faces. These tiny inked icons heralded the relationship’s true magic, Jeff had reminded his children on many an occasion. She and her brother had not quite understood the significance of his wondrous statements at first, but once the young woman had lost herself in early chapters of the book, their full impact had gradually begun to unwind.

Ryan would be turning twenty in the next few months, having left the boisterous Jet behind in a triumphant wake of sporting success, and the willowy gypsy girl herself was these days officially an adult too. Nevertheless, it was difficult to imagine either of them setting off on quite such a life-changing adventure as their parents had begun at similar ages. When the eternal couple had boarded that flight *en route* to London early in the New Year of nineteen-seventy-five, would they have had any real idea who they were to become and how much they would change the way people behaved towards their fellow man, woman and child in years to come?

Yes, Kierney insisted to herself. She believed they did.

It was now fifteen months since their father had gone in search of his dream girl all over again, and both Diamond children had been pleasantly surprised at how their lives had carried on without upheaval or excessive grief, just as the wise man had projected during those last, frantic weeks together. The dreamy songwriter replaced the marker and closed the book, tilting it to see from the top how far through the large volume it was located. Approximately halfway, she contemplated in wonder. The life she had known with her parents hadn’t even begun, and yet her *Papá* had spent almost as long articulating the incredible campaign up to this point as he had in documenting the rest of their life singular.

Ryan returned to gather up his belongings in preparation for departure, attracting the attention of a group of girls travelling together. Kierney rolled her eyes at his casual but confident wave, being drawn into the throng along with him. After they had signed each person's boarding pass and posed for a few photographs, the *débonair* cricketer held his hand out for the book.

'Hang on a sec'. Look at this...' Kierney invited, turning the upper edge into her brother's line of sight and flicking the top of the bookmark. 'Almost fifty percent of the way through, and they're not even married yet. That's amazing really.'

'Is it?' the final year student replied. 'Why? Isn't that just following the normal exposition, climax and *dénouement* thing?'

'Well, yes. I guess so, but he obviously considered the process of becoming one as much of an accomplishment as all the huge things they did together, as one, in the next twenty years.'

Ryan shrugged. 'Yeah. Maybe. I never thought about it like that. It's going to be surreal reading about our births. I'm almost tempted to skip that part.'

His sister laughed. 'Ew, yes. Especially the blowjob in the shower!'

'Oh, shut up, for God's sake!' the young man grimaced, shoving the book into his hand luggage, folding the flap over and fastening the clip. 'That's enough from you. Dad told me he wanted to steer clear of what was already in the public domain, 'cause people already know all that stuff. Maybe that's why the second half covers so much ground.'

'*Muy buen*'. That's a good explanation, brain-box,' the dark-haired teenager smiled. 'Plus, maybe that's our story to tell. Later. You know... Do you think we'll ever know their next incarnations?'

The young man scoffed. 'What? Don't even go there. Needles and haystacks, *pequeñita*, don't ya think?' his father's sarcastic intonation replicated again. 'I'm more worried about all the loonies who'll make that assumption about themselves or their kids and plague us in a few years' time. "Hey, Ryan, my daughter used to be your mum. Don't you remember her?'"

'Hmm... That has crossed my mind a few times too. And how the hell would we know if one of them really was the genuine article? They might be born anywhere in the world, which I suppose is why we sometimes never meet "The One" in our whole lifetime. That's kind of sad, isn't it? I don't want to wait until a future incarnation to find the happiness they had.'

'Whatever...' her brother replied, dismissing his own secret and shared disappointment. 'I've got to go. Are you going to be alright here?'

Brother and sister embraced warmly. It would be six months until they next saw each other, but neither was afraid of the separation. Both young lives were busy with study, playing sports, making music and spending time with friends, and the technology their parents' timely investments had made possible always kept them well in touch.

'Yes, I'm fine,' Kierney replied, kissing his cheek. 'I'm glad we came home for "G" and "G"'s party, but I'm looking forward to getting back to uni' too. I feel like I'm leaving Melbourne behind, just like *Papá* predicted.'

'Me too,' Ryan agreed. 'He was a wise, old man, after all. I honestly didn't believe him, did you?'

'Not really. Not so soon anyway. Should have, evidently. Safe flying, Jetto.'

'*Adiós, chica*. Onwards and upwards.'

'What's this?' Jeff asked, watching the smiling blonde pull out paper and pens from her flight bag and place them on their tray-tables.

'Homework,' Lynn answered. 'But we have to do it on our own.'

'What? No cheating or collusion?' chided her handsome travelling companion, instantly intrigued. 'Can't I even sneak a look when you're asleep?'

The young woman gave him a stern glare. 'Definitely not.'

The flight was not yet twenty minutes in the air, and already a sense of impending boredom was encroaching. How well Lynn could read his mind these days, and how grateful the healing rock star felt that she took the time to do so. The twenty-four hours leading up to their departure had seen the line on his happiness chart break all previous records as it whizzed up into the distortion zone.

His dream girl had come prepared for mania however, having finished reading Doctor Diamond's Law of Compensatory Addictions and plotting a course to smooth the extreme peaks and troughs just enough to strike the perfect balance between stability and impulsiveness. After strictly controlled intervals of forced solitude and combined excitement, the pair had coasted past her parents' awkward farewell, through Passport Control and all the way to their current location, high above the clouds and heading in a north-westerly direction at a rate of knots.

Jeff turned the blank pieces of paper over and over again. 'Are you going to give me any clues?'

Lynn laughed. 'No!' she kidded. 'It's an exercise in telepathy. Of course I am. A normal life. We both independently need to write down what a normal life means to us.'

Her boyfriend's eyes widened. 'Ah, OK! I can tell you right now that I'm gonna need way more paper than this. Is it a thesis you're looking for or a song? And who's going to mark it? Philosophical arguments for and against or a checklist of practical instructions? There are just so many ways to tackle it.'

The nineteen-year-old smiled and lifted herself up off her seat to kiss his cheek, tucking her legs underneath her to make herself comfortable. '*jExcelente!* It'll stop you from getting bored then. We're going to mark each others'. And write whatever you want in whatever format you want.'

'Can't I just watch the movie and tell you later?' Jeff requested, leafing through the in-flight magazine to find the Entertainment section.

'If you like,' Lynn shrugged. 'But you won't, will you?'

The swarthy intellectual cocked his head and dealt his fellow passenger a heart-stopping wink. The family goodbyes at the airport had been cheerful, and only a few tears had been shed. Marianna and Bart had seemed relaxed and in love themselves, waving to their elder daughter and her ambitious and *avant garde* suitor as the automatic doors into International Departures opened for the famous musicians. Jeff had put his arm around Lynn's shoulder while they both looked back, their free hands high in the air until the doors slid shut. Once through the baggage security checks, they had found a couple of seats in a dark corner of the air-side bar and settled down for their final two hours on Australian soil.

'Well, gorgeous,' the chart-topping performer had declared, wondering if the broad smile on his girlfriend's face was as genuine as it looked after saying goodbye to her family for another year. 'This is it. We're finally alone. It's all up to us now. Are you ready?'

'Yes, very,' came the tennis champion's immediate confirmation. 'You?'

The twenty-two-year-old musician had raised his beer glass to his beautiful best friend. 'You bet. To us!'

'To us!'

And now, flying First Class on Qantas to London, here they were on the opening night of their new life singular. As usual, the flight attendants had fussed around the stars when they first boarded, so much so that they had to request the noise be kept to a minimum to spare the other passengers from the disturbance.

To uphold her elevated position in Australia's pseudo-aristocracy, Lynn had been brought up with strict flight manners, which the pretender from Sydney's western suburbs had also magnanimously assumed. The golden rules instilled in the Dyson children from a tender age were one, to always dress smartly, as befitting their privileged status; two, to not behave in a drunken and disorderly way in front of staff or fellow travellers; three, to not leave the cabin in a total mess like a lot of spoiled passengers seemed to; and four, to keep themselves to themselves.

Rule number four was the one the young lovers were looking forward to the most. The initial eight-hour flight took off in a southward direction at ten-thirty at night, circling Melbourne's city centre and Port Phillip Bay before veering towards the Northern Territory, bound for Singapore. The former child-star had waved her birthplace goodbye from the window seat without a trace of regret.

The seasoned travellers had struck a deal that Jeff would swap to the window on the second leg of their journey, since he hadn't been motivated to see London's extensive metropolis from the sky on any previous flight. The opportunity cost of this deal however, as he watched enviously while his girlfriend arranged her pillow against the wall, was that no sooner had he taken his last mouthful of complimentary *Shiraz*, than a lipsticked, tight-skirted stewardess appeared at his side to refill his glass.

'No, thanks. I'll wait for dinner,' he declined most uncharacteristically, putting his hand over the tumbler and smiling at her overenthusiasm.

Of course, the attentive woman had not planned on leaving the vicinity of her favourite singers in a hurry and proceeded to bend over the good-looking star, reaching into the seat pocket to retrieve a menu card. Lynn briefly opened her eyes to check out the amusing scene, understanding exactly how beguiling the entire female population found her red-blooded boyfriend.

'Have you checked the options for dinner, Miss Dyson, Mister Diamond?'

Accepting the card from the brunette's hand, Jeff pretended to scan down the culinary choices, using a gratuitous few moments to study her uniformed figure far more closely. There were worse ways to while away the hours on a long-haul flight than to take in the view from the aisle seat, but it was becoming clear that this particular painted lady had definite designs on him that could escalate to irksome now that he was flying as half of showbusiness' newest item.

'Can we swap seats?' he joked, after the brazen stewardess had given up. 'These flirt attendants are going to drive me insane.'

'Mister Popular,' Lynn teased, giggling at yet another new descriptor he had defined. 'Flirt attendants? Take your medicine. You love the attention really, don't you, Mister Diamond?'

The playful man rolled his eyes, knowing full well how little he could hide from the astute Miss Dyson. Putting on a surly tone, he read out the meal selection, more out of spite than curiosity, before retrieving the blank sheets of paper that Lynn had given him and commencing his dissertation. His pen drew lines to divide one page into four quadrants and gave each a title: "J thinks L wants", "L thinks J wants", "L wants" and "J wants".

Out of the corner of his eye, the diligent passenger could see a certain inquisitiveness brewing beside him. Being left-handed though, it was easy for him to mask his writing. With a haughty flick of her hair, the spurned onlooker poked fun at his secretive behaviour and returned to her book. Observing him with a better informed eye, her heart suddenly overflowed with love for this emotional powder-keg of a man on whose wild ride she had decided to tag along.

The first theme Jeff's mind offered was "Freedom". Lynn would want time to herself. And he hoped he would too, once things began to settle down. Did she think he knew that? And did she know he thought that? The happy man closed his eyes and imagined themselves in the new apartment they had seen only in photographs.

Freedom to come and go, freedom of thought, freedom to experiment and learn and freedom from nightmares and phobia. They would both be busy, separately studying in different parts of the sprawling city, meeting their own new sets of friends and becoming involved in their respective university activities. It would be healthy for the devoted *duo* to keep as many distinct interests as possible, as long as they reserved sufficient time from their professional schedules to spend in each others' company.

The second theme descended on the prolific thinker before he had finished dealing with the first: "Routine". He knew Lynn craved routine. In fact, in his opinion, she craved it too much, and their relationship would benefit from more spontaneity than she would introduce alone.

This was shaping up to be a fascinating exercise, Jeff thought, and he couldn't wait to share their results. He looked across at his beautiful best friend and smiled.

'This is a great idea.'

'Good. Thanks,' she replied. 'I'll do mine after dinner. Do you mind? I just want to read for a bit.'

'Sure,' her boyfriend leaned over and kissed her. 'Anything you like. It was your idea. Enjoy the peace and quiet.'

The philosopher meandered lazily from topic to topic, blocking out the sound of meal trolleys being prepared. Hopefully, his next glass of wine was not far away. He stood up to stretch his back and legs, glancing towards the curtain which separated their rarefied atmosphere with that of the rear of the aeroplane, willing some second-hand smoke into his nicotine-starved lungs. As it turned out, these quadrants weren't proving at all useful to categorise the attributes of his normal life, so the creative addict sat down again to transfer his semi-random thoughts onto a new piece of paper under each theme instead.

Forget the cravings, he urged his overactive mind. Lynn had designed this endeavour with the specific purpose of overcoming them, and he would damned well make sure the structure of his argument impressed her.

However, midway through the transcription process, the musician was suddenly overtaken by a rush of lyrics. He had been toying with a few profound phrases for the past couple of days, but nothing substantial had materialised until now. He felt tears stinging behind his eyes as the poetry surged out of his heart in a veritable torrent.

The stunning woman to his left had fallen asleep, still with her book open on her lap. Her boyfriend picked out a fresh piece of paper and captured the subliminal messages this burst of energy had set free. Where had this guardian angel come from? She, who had proven her worth in her own right a thousand times, now gave him her love so unconditionally and in return only took his breath away.

The song which proceeded to write itself on the tray-table beside a fresh glass of red wine would promise that its composer would be everything his *Regala* could ever desire. And much more, if she were to allow it. No matter the price, he intended to repay her dedication a million times over. This she must know, and he would tell her every day.

After dinner, Lynn placed a blank sheet of paper on her tray-table and wrote "A Normal Life" as a heading across the top, underlining it with a flourish. The intensity of the songwriting process had rendered her man tired and sentimental, necessitating a welcome romantic and carefree exchange to lighten his mood.

'Don't show me yet,' Jeff warned, drinking in the meditative air which had gathered above their seats.

His neighbour gave him her endearingly familiar questioning look. 'Not much to show! I've set myself a challenge now. My brain won't think.'

'Doesn't matter. Leave it then,' the empathetic intellectual shrugged, sensing a more serious, even melancholy mood engulf her. 'Is something wrong?'

The nineteen-year-old sighed. 'No. Not really. Just a stupid, nagging idea that's playing on my mind.'

With a half-smile, her boyfriend leaned over, prised the pen from her fingers and lifted her right hand to his lips, kissing the soft skin of her wrist. 'Oh, yeah? That's my trick. *Digame*.'

'I suppose you're already in the Mile High Club?' the veteran jetsetter asked, heavy-hearted and slightly embarrassed.

Taken by surprise, the rocker with the party reputation paused before indicating in the affirmative. He felt full of remorse, even though he had nothing to be ashamed of. He understood that his past unshared did not sit well with Lynn, but there was little either lover could do about it.

'Yes. You suppose correctly.'

The young woman stared straight ahead. 'I thought so.'

Jeff figured he had two ways to go with this: he could make light of the topic or he could make excuses, neither of which seemed appropriate at the start of their union's brand new episode. He saw no value whatsoever in admitting that scarcely a flight had gone by without coercing a stewardess or a nearby passenger into the confines of the lavatory for a thirty-thousand-foot copulation or two.

The notorious sex-god began with the first option, concluding that it would only serve to buy him time to come up with something better. 'I'm sorry. Do you want to join too? I'd be delighted to perform your induction.'

Lynn smiled, which required more effort than she expected. 'Thanks. I don't know. Not today, I think.'

'Sure. Maybe another time. Just say the word,' her boyfriend replied, feeling like a rat. 'You know, it was really, really bad, to be honest. Tacky, extremely clumsy, a bit painful and not worth it, except to be able to say I'd done it. Just a tick in the box, if you know what I mean.'

The compassionate man looked away, letting the subdued beauty beside him digest his comments and gripping her hand less tightly. He didn't feel any better having voiced them, so had no reason to believe she would either, having heard them.

After a minute or so of silence, he dutifully checked in again. 'Are you OK?'

'Yes. Thanks,' the dignified teenager responded. 'Sorry. I know I can't expect to share every new experience with you. It just takes me a while to come to terms with things, that's all.'

'Why did you mention it?' Jeff asked. 'If you'd already guessed the answer?'

'Because I'd rather know for sure. Why *didn't* you mention it?'

The patient man's expression changed to one of dismay before he had the chance to check his reaction, annoyed that his partner had turned the problem around to be his fault when he was trying so hard to repair the damage.

'No reason,' he responded curtly. 'It never even entered my head. I'd forgotten all about it. Certainly not to hide it from you. It just wasn't that memorable, and that's the truth. And I'm not saying that just to make you feel better, although I do want you to feel better.'

'Would you have suggested it, if I hadn't brought it up?' Lynn persisted, feeling confused.

Jeff sensed her insecurity and recognised it well. His refined girlfriend needed to be asked, and clearly it was his job to do the asking. That was fine. He could handle this mission...

'Ah, yeah! Damned sure I would've done at some point. I'm just not *that* much of an exhibitionist,' he smiled kindly, gesturing around the aircraft at the fact that they were surrounded by fellow travellers. 'But all it'd take is one look at your exquisite body sitting so close during a quiet, unlit moment to start my sexual time-bomb ticking. Just you wait, lady...'

The thankful young woman dearly wanted to believe what her worldly companion was telling her, leaning over to kiss him. How the tables had turned in their two years apart! Jeff Diamond's previously sparse catalogue of life experiences had leapfrogged that of Lynn Dyson in the time it had taken for her to complete her Californian degree.

'Shhh! Thanks. I'll get over it in a minute. Will you nominate me, please?'

'Absolutely,' the handsome playboy replied with a lecherous grin, relieved that the issue appeared to be resolving itself. 'It'll be my pleasure. I'll spring it on you one day, so you can't say no.'

'Hmm...' his girlfriend murmured, picking up her homework again. 'I don't know about that either.'

Focussing back on the growing list of ideas for a normal life, Jeff gave the girl next-door a suitably suggestive wink and reverted to the theme of routine *versus* spontaneity. *More work required*, he smiled to himself. A hook for another song was drifting in and out of his head, and he shut his eyes tightly to prevent it from escaping.

"Simplicity". The simple life was what he was seeking, despite the wealth of opportunities ahead of them. As an antidote to the hype which would continue to follow them wherever they went, he guessed. It was a conundrum to the millionaire that, as he had become more affluent and influential, his desire to live the high life was diminishing. After the initial surge of excitement to buy the car of his dreams and to participate in the whole gamut of rich men's pursuits, the fulfilment he sought was not to be found in material possessions and expensive indulgences.

So what exactly did he want from a normal life? What was simplicity? To be who they wanted to be. That was a type of freedom too. And how about simplicity as opposed to opulence or luxury?

The boy from Canley Vale cast his mind back to his gorgeous schoolgirl's apartment at Dyson Administration, where she had spent the majority of nights since she had started senior school. It was no bigger than his lowly, rented flat in Richmond, although better appointed and infinitely less dilapidated. Before that, the pre-teen had been a weekly boarder at the junior school for Melbourne Academy and had regaled many a story about living in a dormitory environment. It had lacked privacy and was fairly basic, but plenty of communal fun was had nonetheless.

No, Jeff affirmed. Neither he nor his ravishing concubine needed opulence. A comfortable space with a few labour-saving amenities was all they required. Moreover, luxury and simplicity could definitely coexist, because luxury could be synonymous with enjoyment without necessarily being expensive. The multi-millionaire pondered what his dream girl's idea of luxury living might be. True, she had spent her weekends and holidays in the enormous expanses of Benloch, both the house and the farm, and was familiar with the world's most highly-starred hotels. London may turn out to be claustrophobic for her if they didn't spend a fair amount of time in the open air, and it would hardly be extravagant to while away an afternoon on Hampstead Heath every now and again, British weather permitting.

Momentarily distracted from his task by another new message commanding to be expressed, the poet pulled out a fourth piece of paper and began to scribe yet more new verses. Jesus! Why was his brain producing folk songs lately? This mental renaissance he was undergoing was unleashing some real surprises.

Jeff's next theme was "Diversity". By now, it was close to one o'clock in the morning in the part of the world they had recently left. He considered taking a cigarette break or settling down to watch the movie, but this exercise he had been set was firing up his imagination nicely. London, for him, was the perfect place in which to surround themselves with every conceivable type of acquaintance: old and young, cosmopolitan and stereotypical; various nationalities; homo- and heterosexuals; religious zealots and refuseniks of all persuasions; political animals and party animals.

The twenty-two-year-old, still ever hungry for knowledge, yearned for long, stimulating and challenging conversations with people whose points of view were poles apart. Not wanting to be outdone by his sleeping partner on key performance indicators, the ambitious world-changer had set himself the lofty goal

of bringing opposing parties together in at least two world conflicts over the next five years. He had a number of case studies in mind for his doctoral thesis and was impatient to enlist his intellectual role-model and new overseeing professor, John Francis. To achieve this objective, it would be necessary to develop a circle of open-minded, tolerant humanitarians, pragmatists not dogmatists, who could help him formulate an action plan for making the world a better place.

Pausing, the young man pressed his head back into the leather seat and took a few deep breaths to stave off advancing sleep. Maybe his last train of thought wasn't quite what Lynn had in mind when she had asked him to describe a normal life. Smiling, Jeff put brackets around these most recent notes. They represented the very abnormal life he was hoping to cultivate alongside his beautiful best friend in their new home as the months went by. He would love her to come along for what promised to be an exhilarating ride, but this was altogether her choice. Her priorities had been directed elsewhere before, he realised, but hopefully less so these days.

Hey! This was something worth writing down: a solid foundation on which to build individual ambitions. Yeah, that was good. With a pang of longing, the lost boy knew he would still need his dream girl to come home to, or at least on the other end of the telephone after a hard day on the road. This was the dependence he doubted he could relinquish, and didn't much want to anyway. The knowledge that Lynn was ever there waiting for his return, both physically and spiritually, was fundamental to who he wanted to be. He had told her a long time ago that she was his lighthouse; a role which would never change for as long as he lived.

This brief brush with insecurity led the old soul to yet another theme. What about health? They had to do whatever they could to stay healthy, both corporally and cranially, if they were to accomplish their long list of achievements. He looked across at the Olympic athlete beside him, who had fallen asleep with her reading lamp illuminating her youthful face. Her tanned skin was clear and radiant, her hair shone, and she was as strong and fit as she had ever been.

Jeff turned off the light above his partner-in-crime and set about observing every fine, feminine detail in the dimmed cabin. Christ, she was so beautiful. The British winter weather would be cold and wet for their first couple of months, with more than a fifty-fifty chance of regular snow. He added fitness *régime* to his list, unable to recall noticing any facilities for keeping fit and healthy when he had visited London before. Then again, his lifestyle at the time had hardly called for it! Plus, he felt sure this pre-requisite would already have been well researched by the Dysons, so it was time to move on from physical health.

Furthermore, bodily fitness wasn't what he meant by healthy. His tired mind referred to something quite different. After writing down "Drugs and alcohol", Jeff closed his eyes and inhaled deeply to stem a wave of nausea as he remembered the periods of debauchery he had enjoyed the last few times he had been to London. There was no way he would allow himself back into that sordid way of life, no matter what temptation came their way. Europe was a paradise for the experimental, but he had played those games before. Such excesses were well and truly out of his system, and he did not plan on exposing his squeaky-clean, unsullied girlfriend to the seedy underworld which lurked down many a dark London alley.

Therefore, their normal life would include far fewer cigarettes, less alcohol and only the occasional spliff. This time around, he wanted his *sojourn* in the northern hemisphere to consist of taking pleasure from illicit substances to enhance a good time, rather than relying on them to manufacture one. A respecting relationship with his old vices, rather than using them. That old theory still held, the rock star figured with a sly nod.

"Entertainment" was the next entry on the songwriter's list. Four words found their way onto the page: "Movies – get over it." He and Lynn had rarely spoken about this, but he knew she liked the occasional visit to the cinema because it was a leisure activity that she could enjoy anonymously and uninterrupted. Not that she had put pressure on him to go, knowing the unpleasant memories the prospect conjured up, and indeed they had had precious few free evenings lately.

Nevertheless, watching the latest box office hit on the big screen was very much a part of most people's normal life, and they would be living on the doorstep of the West End, within walking distance of one of the richest arrays of theatres, cinemas and art galleries in the world. They simply had to make time to immerse themselves in *cosas artísticas*, he decided, before adding *y deportivas* for good measure.

"Learning". Their formal studies of course, but also wider. Technological advancement was key to the farsighted man's ambitions for better universal communication, and Paragon Holdings was already incubating some exciting breakthrough products. As its reluctant Chief Executive, he needed to find some way of keeping on top of the latest developments while he was in the UK, but how should he do this? More a topic for discussion with Gerry and the luminaries at MIT, the passenger concluded this heading was too complex to mull over so high above sea level and with his eyelids beginning to weigh very heavy.

Rubbing his forehead and straightening his spine, Jeff added "Travel" to the list, simply followed by the word "heaps". He was dangerously drowsy and scanned the First Class cabin, which was almost full. The last time he had been on a long-haul flight, albeit in an uncomfortable Economy seat, the famous musician had struggled valiantly to stay awake for fear of spooking everyone with his nightmares. He wasn't confident enough yet in his newfound sleeping skills to allow himself to doze off without his trusty slumber monitor being aware.

The young man caught sight of another male passenger on the other side of the cabin, chatting up one of the tight-skirted flight attendants. He wondered how long it would be before the pair found themselves in the cramped confines of the toilet together, as he had tried a year or so ago. At least the First Class facilities were likely to afford horny passengers a little more comfort! He cringed at the unpleasant conversation earlier about the Mile High Club. Yes, those impromptu encounters for physical gratification had given him a much-needed thrill at the time, but he had absolutely no desire to revisit them anymore.

Best of luck, buddy, the sober and satisfied new man sniffed in derision, while the sleaze-bag across the aisle groped the buxom, heavily made-up woman eagerly and with no inhibitions, presumably after more than his fair share of free alcohol. He wondered what the Qantas employees' expectations were from customers who could afford a seat in the Jumbo's nose... Was a quickie with a First Class passenger a better experience than the Economy equivalent? Was it like calling oneself an escort as opposed to a prostitute? It all came down to the same act in the end.

Rising to his feet slowly while trying not to disturb his peaceful girlfriend, Jeff stretched his six-foot-four-inch frame and made his way up the aisle to the galley and some superficial but attractive female company to pass the time. The remaining high-flying waiter and waitresses were chattering merrily when the superstar appeared in the doorway to the cramped, sterile kitchen, cutting their conversation short at coming face-to-face with their famous passenger.

'Hi,' his deep voice opened, watching all three swoon. 'Please could I have a beer?'

'Certainly, sir,' replied the tall brunette whose name badge read "Jacqui".

She flicked open a can and poured some amber liquid into a glass, excited to be in such close proximity to her favourite pop icon. Her hands shook as she held the drink up to his waiting hands, and he took hold of both can and glass quickly.

'It's Jeff, not sir, by the way. Thanks, Jacqui.'

In the galley, there was another ginger-haired female of ample proportions and a slim, young man, who switched into flirtation mode as soon as they realised who was in their presence. The handsome rock star leaned casually against the wall and let them carry on, continually amused at the effect he had on people.

'Are you going on to London?' asked the well-coiffured man labelled "Philip". 'Work or play?'

'Bit of both, I expect,' the musician answered. 'We're going for a year, to study mainly. One-way ticket.'

'Study?' Jacqui shrieked. 'Why do you need to study? And Lynn Dyson? You guys are megastars. Are you really boyfriend and girlfriend?'

Jeff chuckled. 'Yes, we are. And we don't *need* to study. We want to. It'll be awesome. Good to feed the brain now and again.'

'So aren't you going to make any more records?' whined a glum Melanie, the redhead who had outgrown her uniform.

Their delectable diversion refilled his glass with the rest of the beer from the small tin, and three hands instantly shot forward to relieve him of the empty vessel and toss it into the rubbish bin. All three tittered, as if they were party to some incredible secret.

'Sure we are. Nothing'll change,' the traveller confirmed, raising his drink to Melanie in thanks. 'Just where we're living. Get away from the parents... You know how it is.'

The flight attendants burst into raucous laughter. To think that even pop stars had rows with their parents was just too funny!

'Shhh!' Jeff urged, glancing out into the cabin to see if anyone had noticed the disturbance. 'What time do we land?'

Jacqui, who appeared to be in charge, consulted her flight plan. 'Singapore, oh-six-hundred hours,' she recited. 'That's six in the morning. You two make a great couple. I saw you do that stage show in Japan. "Everlasting" blew me and my friend away! I love that song. It was fantastic! You're both so amazing-looking and talented.'

The performer thanked her for educating him and for the compliments. 'You guys are looking after us very well. When do you get off duty?'

Melanie and Philip giggled to each other. 'Are you going to join us? We're going to a nightclub on Bugis Street. You should come too. It'd be fab.'

'Love to,' Jeff responded, 'but we've got another plane to catch. I'd better get back to Sleeping Beauty over there. Nice talking to you. Thanks for the beer.'

'Ooh! Wait a minute! Can we get a photo' before you go?' Melanie squeaked, jumping up and down like a child. 'Please, Jeff?'

Posing with each ditsy employee in turn, the celebrity smiled for the camera. As soon as he could, fearing the commotion would wake everyone up, he requested two glasses of chilled water and returned to his row. Slotting his tall frame back into the seat caused Lynn to stir, not entirely accidentally on his part.

The young woman smiled, groaning softly. 'Hi. What time is it?'

Jeff's watch read two-thirty. 'Three and a half hours to go. You OK?'

'I'm fine, thanks. I need to get up though,' his neighbour stretched and pointed to the glass of water on his tray-table. 'Is this mine?'

'Yep,' he answered, passing it to her.

'Ahh... Perfect,' the grateful passenger said, drinking it down. 'Have you slept at all?'

Her boyfriend shook his head. 'No. Not yet. I was waiting for you. I didn't want to fall asleep without you knowing. Just in case. You know...'

Lynn climbed over his long legs, pausing for a kiss when his large hands ensnared her waist. 'OK. I'm sure you'll be fine. Slide into the window seat, and I'll sit here while you sleep.'

Good idea, the tired man agreed. He made himself comfortable with the pillow and blanket, leaning against the aeroplane's cool inner wall. By the time his saviour returned, he was out cold, and her heart glowed. Already this flight was so much more manageable than having to babysit her oversized, highly-strung toddler.

It was time to do her homework, the young songstress decided, happily declining another glass of champagne from Philip. She resisted the temptation to read through Jeff's notes, which had been stuffed untidily into the seat pocket in front of her. A normal life, she mused. For as long as she had known her

hyperactive boyfriend, they had been riding an erratic rollercoaster, mostly at a rapid pace and frequently out of control. With butterflies in her stomach, Lynn thought back to their first night at the theatre, where her friends had been sitting next to an empty seat not fifty metres away. Where would she be now, had she turned him down and seen "A Streetcar Named Desire" with the school group as planned?

On that day in February nineteen-seventy-two, something had compelled the sixteen-year-old Melbourne Academy student to find out more about this exotic-looking stranger who had appeared out of nowhere to ask her for a date. Their very first conversation had foreshadowed a connection the like of which she had not encountered before or since. It was as if this man had placed her under a powerful, intoxicating spell. As their relationship had developed, in equal parts enthralling and frightening, she had found it completely impossible to break free from this fascinating, supernatural incantation.

Lynn had not been brought up with any Christian observances or allegiances but was reasonably well educated about religion nonetheless. Since the rock star sleeping next to her had begun to notch up hit records and acclaimed concert performances, several commentators had mocked and questioned him about the religious themes he often used, not to mention the fact that Gerry's father had even dubbed him the second Messiah.

The impressionable youngster knew her humble intellectual's personal view was that there was no supreme power as such. However, he had also told her that he was happy to be proven wrong, in which case he presumed God was more likely to live inside one's imagination, taking whatever form made sense to that person, rather than the representation of a single, omnipotent being. Her own view was similar, but her idea of religion was less like the worship of a deity and more centred around earthly, moral values and goals which motivated people towards positive and constructive ends.

However, the mysterious notion which Australia's darling thought to be favoured by her mystery man was that somehow he had been selected to do good for the human race, and with his meteoric rise to stardom over the last two years, she now felt inclined to believe it too. People flocked to Jeff Diamond everywhere he went. She had seen it on the television, and more recently first-hand. Females of course, since he was so good to look at, with charisma and an engaging personality as well. But males too, which was more unusual. Jeff had an enormous number of friends, these days in all corners of the globe, and most people he met were keen to stay in touch.

Take Gerry Blake, for example, the young woman continued to ruminate, still not having put pen to paper. Why on Earth had a high-achieving, private schoolboy with the world at his feet and plenty of connections from the same social demographic become inseparable from the self-described worthless manchild of impoverished parents in Sydney's western suburbs? Had the academically-gifted and sporty grammar school student subconsciously recognised something in the thirteen-year-old ragamuffin which had caused him to follow the younger boy's lead on practically everything? At Christmas, Gerry had confessed to adopting his friend's sexual mercenary lifestyle unwittingly. Having now met the Blake parents, Lynn had the definite impression that they were not the type to raise a son who would dive into bed with any woman crossing his path! Therefore, he must have been convinced to behave that way by some other force.

Lynn stared past the dormant Adonis, out of the window at the darkness. So had she seen the same something in Jeff that Gerry had seen? Was it an aura of greatness or the work of an extraordinarily skilful confidence trickster? Her own father had been suspicious, especially when he had investigated the pretender's family background. True, the driven tearaway had been manipulative and persistent while pursuing her, but since she had agreed to be his life partner, he had backed right off. So far, he had given her no reason to distrust him.

Where was she going with all this deliberation? Ah, yes, the nineteen-year-old remembered. She had been asking herself what normality would have looked like if she hadn't renewed her membership to the peculiar but compelling club of Jeff Diamond upon her return from California. In fact, she knew exactly what it would be like, because she had lived for two years without him, unable to forget how powerful an

influence he had been on her. Although she had thrown herself one-hundred percent into her UCLA studies and into the movies she had made, the medals she had won and the hits she had recorded, there had remained a huge void in both her heart and her mind where this beautiful black stallion used to hang out. Other men of standing had moved in and out of her life during this period, yet none had inspired her or enthralled her the way Jeff had done, and now did again.

Yes, there was no doubt that the teenaged sporting celebrity was under the Pied Piper's spell, but she absolutely loved it to bits. Jeff made her insides jump every time she picked up the telephone or saw him for the first time after an absence, no matter how short. He was the love of her life, of that she was certain. She was willing to absorb the flak which Gerry launched her way for pandering too much to the dark-haired control freak's neediness. *You can talk, Mister Indomitable*, she smiled inside. Her willingness was so all-consuming because this imaginative young woman so wanted her man to be happy and to achieve the ambitions he held so dear. She was utterly convinced that, rid of the effects of his childhood trauma, Jeff Diamond would turn out to be the perfect man. And he had been. For the whole nine days since Boxing Day anyway!

What would a normal life do for the troubled soul sleeping next to her? It would bring him a clarity of mind he hadn't previously known, at last allowing him to concentrate without the interference of past calamities and present anxieties. Lynn had studied the paper he had published with Sarah Friedman in great detail, focussing on their analysis of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and how it related to mental illness and dependency. The privileged youngster found it inexplicable how the tortured teenager could have had such a strong grasp on the more sophisticated of self-actualisation needs when some of the most basic ones had gone unmet at the more fundamental levels during his formative years.

When his curious girlfriend had questioned him on the topic, the intellectual had maintained that for each need that was overlooked, he had introduced a compensating addiction into his life; some subconsciously, some not. For example, the absence of the basic physiological requirement for sleep had been compensated for by his addiction to sex, being another bodily need the supply of which he could better control. She had no difficulty in believing this particular scenario!

Next, to substitute for the unsatisfied safety and belonging needs, namely the love and protection of a family, and the lack of a basic moral framework in his childhood, Jeff had become completely obsessed with the idea of the love, protection and stability that Lynn herself could bring him. How this concept had coalesced in his youthful mind was still a complete mystery to the singer. And then, knowing he couldn't realise his own ambitions via the highest level of needs without sufficient credibility or esteem, the nobody from Canley Vale had set about engineering various using and respecting relationships which would build his self-confidence, fuel the mutual respect of like-minded people and ensure he achieved everything he wanted to achieve.

Jeff Diamond had fashioned his own, phenomenal life from virtually nothing. His approach was almost Hitleresque in those early years, Lynn remembered him admitting warily to her one night when they had sat up talking for hours. This sinister comparison had scared her, and more so when she found out that the prolific author was also writing a novel about social engineering loosely based on Joseph Mengele. He had even likened her own father to Mengele, which had fascinated both lovers even more as the two most important men in her life went head-to-head over her.

The romantic but realistic young student concluded that her man of intrigue couldn't possibly be a God, nor even a second son of God. There was nothing remotely divine about Jeff's passage through life. Yet despite this, each step on his perilous journey had been taken quite deliberately, designed to teach him how to meet his own needs on the highest tier of the hierarchy. Indeed, the more she thought about it, the more she found it hard to name anyone with higher moral standards... once adjusted for Jeff's self-fashioned slant on morality, admittedly... and who was more creative, spontaneous and broad-minded. His superior intellect and ability to accept facts and apply them in myriad ways had turned him into a hugely successful businessman and a philanthropist without prejudice.

Unlike his childhood role-models, the man they called The Australian Elvis was entirely motivated by good, while also having grown up with an acute awareness of evil. How powerful could that be? He possessed all the alluring qualities and uncanny acumen of a born leader who was intent on making the world a better place for some of life's most neglected minorities.

This was why Lynn Dyson was happy to help her man realise his dreams, even if it meant slipping into the background while she watched people fawn all over him. It felt almost perverse that Jeff's ability to satisfy her desires had turned out to be the ultimate ticket to his success, since her position in society gave him a springboard to mass exposure, leaving her wondering why she didn't feel as affronted as Gerry by being used in this way.

Was her simple answer to this question too naïve for words? Was she being suckered in on a rampant and romantic scam, in danger of coming to a devastating end as soon as her boyfriend had got what he wanted from her? No, Lynn smiled, remembering their twin tattoos and the deep-seated emotional reaction they had elicited. Their love would stand the test of time, and ostensibly through the ages too...

Her sexual poet had described his role as her passionate, parasitic front-man, yet there was nothing parasitic about their future relationship as far as his dream girl was concerned. There was as much for her to gain from being with him, both behind closed doors and in the public eye.

Hence, suckered in or not, this young lady's idea of their normal but singular life should be one of balance. Jeff had grown up as a man of extremes, a manic depressive who had spent years lurching back and forth between crisis and euphoria. Her role was to shave the tops and bottoms off these extremes, but not so far as to stifle his creativity or dampen his enthusiasm. Neither star could contemplate becoming lost in mediocrity. No self-satisfied fat cats allowed! She had learned enough about her enigmatic stranger to know that he valued the destructive lessons almost as highly as the constructive ones, because they were all instructive. They all contributed to building this incredible strength of self-actualisation he coveted and which he was intent on passing on to others too.

Lynn continued to write about balance. Stability with excitement, the basic functions of life with outrageous experiences, absence with togetherness and intellectual pursuits with simple pleasures. Her list grew steadily: study; anonymous travel, weekends away; living frugally, with one day a month where they spent no money; liberal doses of steamy, desirous sex; long dinners at home... "Learn to cook!" she scribbled next to this last item. "Trips to the library, attend concerts (all types), festivals (Knebworth, Glastonbury, Fringe, not Glyndebourne); teach Jeff how to go to the movies."

Through her concentration, the young woman sensed the engines ease off, and the nose of the aeroplane immediately dipped forwards. They would soon be arriving in Singapore. A series of loud clicks spluttered through the intercom's system, followed by a disembodied voice informing them that they were about to commence their descent into Changi Airport. This remote *veillee* was duly softened in person for those in First Class by the cabin crew, who were preparing to serve breakfast before landing.

Against the window, the contented scribe's handsome travelling companion took a deep breath then slowly exhaled, coming to after two hours of undisturbed sleep. Her heart skipped a beat on spying a cheeky grin that told her how pleased he was to see her. He reached over, brushing an avaricious hand across her back, and pulled her close into his waking body. The pair lay together for a few minutes in silence, until they became aware of the perky, flame-haired flight attendant appearing in the aisle.

'Good morning, Jeff, Miss Dyson. We're going to be landing in an hour.'

'Right,' a deep, croaky voice replied, still half asleep. 'Thanks, Mel.'

'Mel, Jeff and Miss Dyson?' Lynn repeated coquettishly once the young woman had delivered their trays. 'Hmm... Something's wrong with this picture. You're very familiar with each other.'

Her incorrigible boyfriend smiled at his clandestine fraternisation. 'Yeah, well... I got bored. They gave me a beer and wanted to take some photos. It passed the time.'

Dark eyes assured the green-tinged nymph beside him that there was no point in raising even a half-hearted objection, hoping his girlfriend's jealousy would be fleeting. A smile and a resigned shake of the head confirmed this to be true. As they consumed their watery portions of bacon and scrambled egg, she confessed to needing to get used to the adoration that would continue to be lavished on him. The world loved the man whose life she now shared, and he derived energy from the attention.

'It's no different the other way round,' Jeff commented, blowing her a kiss through steam rising from his coffee cup. 'I feel the same whenever blokes melt at your feet too. We're even, I hope.'

'How did you go with your homework?' Jeff asked, after they had stretched their legs and swapped back into their original places in preparation for landing. 'Did you cheat?'

He winked in response to the look of disdain on his girlfriend's face, fishing into the seat pocket and retrieving his assignment, which had become somewhat crumpled over the last few hours. As if to prove him wrong, Lynn brandished a single sheet of paper covered with neatly-aligned paragraphs.

'No. Stop with your cheek, Einstein! Mine's here. I thought a lot but didn't write much.'

'Sometimes less is more,' the kind man responded, inviting her to look outside as the aircraft banked to counter her hesitation. 'I have to remember that myself. The city looks just like any other in the dark, doesn't it? At least we'll see more when we take off again.'

Sipping on orange juice, the songwriter strained to see out of the window as the pre-dawn lights of the busy South-Asian trading hub came into view. His quiet and very sexy neighbour nodded and kissed his stubby cheek, nourishing the morning erection that throbbed undetected in his lap. Flying with his beautiful best friend was an order of magnitude more enjoyable than enduring the endless monotony in the company of strangers.

'How long are we on the ground for? Not long, I hope,' the teenager mused.

'*No recuerdo*,' Jeff responded, shifting position to ease his predicament. 'Couple of hours maybe. I'd rather get going straightaway. I just want to get there now.'

Lynn kissed him again. 'Same here. Still... Nearly halfway.'

Soon, their long, buffeting descent was finally over, and the big bird bounced twice on the runway before the engines screamed into reverse and the aeroplane slowed to taxi speed. The other passengers were ushered out of First Class, while the celebrity *duo* was invited to meet the pilot and co-pilot. They posed for one last photograph with the animated bunch of Qantas employees before succumbing to the familiar assault of perfumed humidity which seeped into the Singapore terminal building in spite of the air-conditioning.

Even though the airport was virtually deserted at this hour of the morning, the tall rock star's senses fought against the opposing forces of human traffic and the mechanical droning of enormous condensers overhead. He was reminded of the last time he had strode through these same corridors, his ears still blocked from the recent change in air pressure and gripped by uncertainty after his dream girl's cry for help. How their life had changed since that day! And because of that day, he admitted with a certain pride.

'Did you want to buy anything?' the seasoned traveller asked, looking up at his smiling face while they passed the long line of arrival and departure gates towards the shopping plaza.

Jeff shook his head. 'Nope. Maybe a bed? Or failing that, a quiet coffee somewhere. We're going to get another breakfast soon anyway. Weird, huh? You'd think, with the number of people flying two legs between Australia and the UK, they'd figure out a better feeding system.'

Lynn laughed and pushed the sex-mad companion sideways, flinching as his arm circled around her shoulders. 'Stop thinking! You're in transit. You don't have to think.'

'Ouch! Sorry,' he chuckled, remembering her tattoo. 'You haven't mentioned it. How was it to sleep on?'

The slender athlete took her favourite man's hand and continued walking, blonde hair a stand-out in their present location. Heads turned continually, but the famous performers had long since perfected the art of pretending to be invisible.

'It's not too bad. Just when you scrape the surface,' she smiled.

The layover hours passed relatively quickly, and before too long the couple found themselves seated at their new departure gate. Boredom was beginning to give way to excitement for the final leg of their journey, especially when more and more British accents gathered to chatter around them. The pair's anonymity was well and truly blown by some Australian holiday makers who had spent several hours in the bar, and they were forced to dodge some fairly intrusive questions. The aircraft was fortunately soon ready for boarding, meaning that the First Class passengers were free to occupy their seats whenever they wished.

Not normally one to take advantage of such privileges, Jeff took the decision to board straightaway in order to save his precious angel from any further annoyance. The group of boisterous travellers had invaded their privacy a little too much for her liking, and he had sensed her patience was wearing thin.

'*¡Dios sea loado!*' the musician exclaimed in frustration, slumping down into seat 2A. 'What arseholes! Are you OK?'

Lynn had seated herself cross-legged in seat 2B, assuming the lotus position with her eyes closed. She began to chant, but burst out laughing instead.

'What was it you said then? God what?'

'Praise the Lord,' Jeff translated, amused at her unusually gregarious reaction. 'You OK? It's not like you to want to let off steam. You're turning me on, lady. Just so you're aware.'

'What's arsehole in Spanish?' the young woman asked, shrugging off his advances with a grin. 'I think I'm going to use it frequently.'

The linguist chuckled. 'I'm not teaching you such vulgarities. Try *hueco de culo*. Or maybe *cretino*. It's less profane but equally offensive.'

'*Bueno*. Nine o'clock,' Lynn announced, adjusting her watch. 'What time is it in London now? Seven hours behind?'

'Yeah. Think so. There's a long way to go until you need to know.'

The pretty teenager laughed again at her boyfriend's nonchalance. 'That's funny!'

Jeff gave her a quizzical stare. 'Why is that so funny? You've breathed in some dodgy fumes or something. You're behaving very strangely all of a sudden.'

Before the normally sedate Olympian had a chance to compose a suitable reply, the senior steward arrived to introduce himself to his new batch of First Class passengers. Lynn Dyson and Jeff Diamond shook his hand, once more launched into their official capacities, and politely exchanged pleasantries over a glass of champagne.

'This is the last thing you need right now,' her man teased. 'What's got into you, angel?'

'Nothing,' Lynn answered, enjoying the cool bubbles in her mouth. 'I'm just happy to be on the plane and heading to London with you. You handled those *huecos de culo* masterfully. I don't know how you didn't hit that tall, skinny, rat-like one.'

'Thanks,' Jeff smiled. 'It did get a little out of hand towards the end. I was glad to hear the boarding announcement, that's for sure.'

Only two other patrons occupied the First Class cabin for this flight, and they had been strategically seated on the other side of the broad fuselage, affording ample privacy to everyone. There was a definite advantage to this *élite* mode of transport, the thrifty, left-winged radical reluctantly admitted. With fourteen hours of flying ahead of them, the studious couple surrounded itself with books and magazines. Jeff found a crossword puzzle in the Straits Times and settled down to solve it, watching out of the corner of his eye as Lynn flicked through the photographs of their new apartment for the umpteenth time.

'Anything changed since you last looked at those?' the comic enquired. 'They'd better be the real deal, or you're going to be very disappointed.'

'Ha ha,' his girlfriend scoffed. 'Of course they are. Oh, look! Breakfast, take two.'

Another female flight attendant introduced herself and talked them through their service at great length. Jeff slid a glance sideways as if to say "Get these people out of my face." To his surprise, he received an empathetic smile in return. Two identical meals in such quick succession wasn't high on the young musicians' agenda, but they felt obliged to accept with diplomatic appreciation nevertheless.

Once breakfast was over, the nineteen-year-old reached into her bag to retrieve her homework. 'Shall we compare notes?'

'Hmm. OK,' Jeff agreed, trying to remember where he had stashed his. 'How do you want to do it? Read each others' and come back with rebuttals?'

'Yes. That'd be a good start,' the happy teenager giggled. 'Have you still got yours?'

The disorganised millionaire stood up and rifled through a folder of paperwork under his jacket in the overhead locker. How could the front-end of their fabled pantomime horse possibly be expected to be systematic as well as mesmerising and charismatic? Filing ought to be the job of the back-end henceforth, he concluded, knowing such a sexist opinion was probably not best verbalised in his current position.

'Somewhere... Hey, look! You can have my HSC certificates instead, if you like. Here it is...'

Lynn took the four sheets of paper that were being fanned out before her eyes, momentarily distracted by the scruffy blue dossier that was slotted into the seat pocket. Not that she doubted for a minute that her boyfriend had earned the many qualifications he claimed, but her curiosity leaped at the chance of seeing the proof and setting her suspicious mind to rest.

'Four pages!' she exclaimed. 'You worked hard. Gold star!'

Jeff took a bow, then slumped down like a dead weight. 'Yeah, but remember, less can be more. It'll put you to sleep.'

The beautiful blonde kissed him. 'No, it won't. You're gorgeous. You're so relaxed. It's great.'

'Why, thank you,' he replied. 'I do feel good, I have to admit. Come on... *¡Leerlo!*'

His fellow passenger picked up the first page; the one that had been divided into four quadrants. The same word had been written in each box: "Freedom." She turned towards him, pouting.

'So explain this one, please. It looks like you never want to see me again.'

The young man strained to see over his playful girlfriend's shoulder and laughed aloud. 'Oh, yeah! Ignore that page,' he advised. 'I was going to be a smart-arse and do it from four perspectives, but it didn't work. That could be Part Two of this exercise.'

He helped himself to the sheet of red herrings which obscured his best efforts, screwed it up into a ball and bounced it off the back of the empty seat in front.

'What's smart-arse in Spanish?' Lynn asked, smiling at his antics.

'*Genio*,' the quick wit answered, straight-faced.

'Liar! That sounds like genius.'

Jeff feigned disbelief that she should doubt his word. 'Just read, woman! Jesus!'

He sighed heavily, feeling a wave of emotion course through his veins. Freedom was right on the money, he thought. If this teasing, kittenish side to his dream girl was the result of their break for a new frontier, he was about to redefine his own happiness all over again. Doing his best to suppress a fresh urge to rip her clothes off, the intellectual clicked the end of his ballpoint pen and frowned, making her giggle again.

With the backdrop of darkening skies as they were propelled anticlockwise around the planet, the pair made themselves comfortable, and each set about digesting the plans the other had written for their impending normal life. With Lynn's missive being so short, her examiner soon began to make notes and doodle all over it. Every time she attempted to see what he was doing, he made an extravagant effort to hide it from her.

'I feel ashamed,' the songstress lamented, reaching the end of the learned gentleman to her left's submission. 'It was my idea, and you've given me heaps more than I gave you.'

'This is great though,' Jeff dismissed her concern. 'Who cares? Don't worry about it. I'm glad you gave me the challenge.'

'So you think I need more surprises?' Lynn asked, flipping back to the section on spontaneity.

'Yes, I do. Shut up and think about it for a while, then we'll talk afterwards. I want to wallow in this dream for a bit, knowing how soon we can make it come true.'

His obedient girlfriend relaxed back into her chair, swooning at another Pied Piper phrase. They sat in silence for a few minutes. The songwriter noticed she was chewing on her lower lip, as if fighting with her emotions and longing to express herself. She looked very cute, and it aroused him again. He felt his penis swelling under the tray-table, fantasising that Lynn's fingers were about to unzip his fly and lean over until her mouth made contact.

Snapping himself back to reality, the twenty-two-year-old fixed his eyes back on to the sheet of paper covering his lap and diverted his attention to Lynn's words instead. This long journey was proving to be a veritable endurance of *libido*-suppression which was rapidly exiting the enjoyable stage. Surely an opportunity would present itself, with their latest artificial night-time soon to be induced as part of the cabin staff's regular routine.

'Hey! Isn't this interesting?' he exclaimed, nudging his girlfriend's arm, very happy with what he was reading.

'There's nothing here that I don't want, and yet the only real duplicate is going to the movies. How weird is that? It's fascinating how differently we express the same ideas. I love it!'

Lynn nodded. 'They're actually two very complementary lists, I agree. Exactly as you put it originally. What did you say? Philosophical arguments or a checklist of practical something? We need to stick to what we're good at because the combination is powerful. Don't you think?'

'Absolutely, angel. So you're going to learn to cook, and I'm going to learn to go to the movies,' her partner summarised, leaning over to kiss her tempting mouth. 'And you mentioned sex when I didn't, so what does that tell you?'

'That you omitted it intentionally?' the intelligent woman suggested after a few seconds' pause.

Jeff smiled wryly. 'Damn! Got it in one, baby. You can see straight through me. But seriously, I love the whole idea of balance. That's exactly right. We need to find that middle ground. And I really like the idea of a day when we don't spend any money too. The "make do" day, because we don't have to.'

The tennis champion snuggled against her handsome intellectual's arm, the warmth of proximity causing her heartbeat to accelerate. 'And I like the long conversations over dinner. I have a lot of learning to do too, and there's only so much we can absorb from reading and attending classes. That's why I need to learn to cook, otherwise we'll be meeting people in restaurants and getting thrown out at closing time, just when you're getting fired up.'

‘Maybe,’ he responded, ‘but there are plenty of restaurants in London that are open all night, trust me.’

‘I’ve had an idea,’ his fellow passenger announced, sitting up straight and changing the subject abruptly, ‘for creating a school for people like you.’

The long-haired rock star looked at her in amazement. ‘What d’you mean? What kind of school?’

‘A senior school for positively-charged empaths,’ the re-energised woman explained. ‘Gifted kids who have that leadership quality and drive to do good things. Those who have what it takes to turn knowledge into wisdom but haven’t got the right connections or enough money to bring their dreams to fruition. It’d be the job of this school to create a stream of young adults who want to change the world for the better, just like you do.’

‘Isn’t that a bit *élitist*?’ her boyfriend asked, intrigued and highly flattered by this new concept. ‘I don’t want us to create another Dyson movement.’

‘It *has* to be *élitist*!’ Lynn insisted excitedly. ‘Listen! Sometimes you’re too egalitarian, mate. How many people like you are there? Not many. It wouldn’t be a big school.’

The cool philosopher stared straight ahead, plunged into a delightful mental turmoil of conflicting ideals. How could he rationalise his beautiful best friend’s tangential proposal? He believed that everyone should be offered the same opportunities, but her assessment was perfectly correct. Some opportunities were wasted on some people. Indeed, he would have leaped at the chance to attend such an institution, with progressive teachers and the ability to mix with like-minded students and potential investors while they developed their individual projects.

‘I guess so. What would we call it?’ he asked, raising his hands and drawing a banner in the air. ‘The Good School? Hey! Did you go to a good school? No, I went to *The Good School!*’

Lynn laughed, stoked that her mastermind had taken the time to consider her not-so-left-field idea. ‘The Better World School. Sounds a bit wanky.’

‘The Wanky School?’

The former private school student feigned alarm. ‘Yes! You’ve got it. We’d get a lot of interest for that one.’

‘Is it really a whole school or just a program to offer to certain students?’ her boyfriend offered. ‘You could align it with a university, like an MBA program but for kids.’

The young woman beamed, preferring this idea to her own. ‘Actually, that does make much more sense. Yeah... Much better. I’d been wondering about the feasibility of keeping a whole set of teachers across all subjects, but a program would be much more focussed and easier to fund.’

‘Right, and this type of kid wouldn’t need to be asked twice to attend, so you’d have no problem getting them there outside school hours,’ Jeff added.

This might work, the information-hungry technocrat figured, thrilled by the energy generated by their high-altitude brainstorming session. They hadn’t even landed in London, and his *Regala* was already sharing his vision and even building on it. This year out of Australia would be the making of them, without a doubt.

‘Residential’d be good too,’ Lynn suggested. ‘That way it could be like immersion, like your long conversations over dinner. It’s no good when you just get started and then your mum turns up.’

Caught off-guard, the songwriter let out a bitter chuckle. ‘If your mum turns up.’

‘Sorry,’ the compassionate teenager smiled, knowing she had hit a raw nerve. ‘I didn’t mean...’

‘Stop right there,’ Jeff kissed her contrite lips. ‘Don’t indulge me, angel. It’s my fault for being so sensitive. I know you didn’t mean anything. It’s an open wound, that’s all. Like our tats.’

‘How is yours, by the way?’ the smiling songstress asked, fondling the sexy dip in the centre of his chest where the older tattoo had already healed nicely.

'Can hardly feel it,' he answered, touching the new one gingerly. 'Well, no... Now you come to mention it, it is pretty sore.'

'Mine too,' Lynn agreed, 'but dull rather than sharp. Easily tolerated.'

The happy man chuckled at her turn of phrase. 'Sounds like you're talking about a person. He's dull rather than sharp, but easily tolerated. That wasn't a Freudian slip by any chance, was it?'

'Absolutely not!' his dream girl yelped in jest. 'I'm talking about the pain. Now you *are* being oversensitive.'

'Well, whatever... I love the idea of The Good School,' her dark-eyed stranger proclaimed, settling back into his wide, comfortable *élitist* seat and closing his commoner's eyes. 'We should sleep on it and see what it's turned into by morning.'

'OK. Thanks. Are you tired?' his girlfriend asked. 'It's like you flicked a switch all of a sudden. High energy one minute, no energy the next.'

Jeff smiled without opening his eyes. 'It's this backwards time travel,' he moaned. 'It fucks with my brain.'

Soul-mates were very observant, the drowsy man's mind registered, and he jumped when loving lips touched his, kissing her hungrily. Was it his imagination, but had their relationship already taken on a richer aspect? The multitude of dimensions he had described for their normal life were taking hold as they sped further westwards, unleashing a liberating form of combined creativity which filled his contented heart with joy.

And as if this wasn't wonderful enough, it seemed to be having a most amorous effect on his travelling companion.

'Did you want to join that club now?' Jeff asked, seizing the opportunity.

'No. Not yet,' Lynn shook her head, sounding tired too.

'Shame,' her man murmured, lifting her hand and tugging it towards his crotch, only to divert at the last minute and bring it to his lips. 'Later then. *Dors bien, mon amie.*'

London Town

Two hours before landing at Heathrow, the flight attendants began to rouse their four First Class passengers. It was still dark outside the little portholes, with only the faintest stripe of sunrise behind them. Craning her neck to take in the magnificent view without tripping over her sleeping partner's legs, Lynn decided against waking him for a while longer. He looked at peace, and it gave her time to take him up on his invitation to leaf through the folder of official documents he had produced earlier.

Sure enough, it contained all his examination certificates; an impressive collection gained gradually from the age of thirteen at Fairfield High School until his Bachelor's degree in Computer Science. Butterflies churning in her stomach on recalling the time when her handsome nobody had cornered her in the corridor of RMIT and asked her out for the very first time, and the young woman let out quiet gasp after quiet gasp at the full extent of her rock star's academic achievements.

She was already privy to the regular battles Jeff had faced at school to obtain permission to take some of the easier tests in advance of his age group, so that he might concentrate on excelling at other subjects. His graduation from RMIT had also been with High Distinction, which was news to the Melbourne Academy *alumna*. And here was evidence of the Masters he had recently completed, the certificate still in its envelope.

What was this? A birth certificate. Lynn suddenly felt guilty for prying into something so personal but was simply unable to resist. There were the names of his parents, she drew a sharp breath again. Father: Paul Diamond, Mother: Luciana Maria Diamond *née* Moreno, Date: 2nd June 1952, Time: 10:30am, Place of Birth: Parramatta Hospital.

Next in the pile was a rather succinct letter from the New South Wales Department of Social Services, addressed to Pavel Diamant at their Stones Road address, dated February nineteen-fifty-seven. It made reference to a prior report into the welfare of his children, informing him that social workers had raised serious concerns about their declining health and sanitary conditions, followed by a comment concerning the ability of his wife to take sufficient care of their family.

Lynn counted the years in her head, hoping she was reconstructing events chronologically. Luciana had died when her son was fourteen, and the spellbound young woman was fairly sure she remembered Jeff's father being imprisoned when the boy was twelve or thirteen. February nineteen-fifty-seven, she re-read the letter. Her boyfriend would have been nearly fifteen by that time. What a poor example of State Government record-keeping... No wonder he had seen fit to keep hold of this item of ill-timed correspondence! She tried to imagine what it would have been like for the troubled adolescent to receive such a letter, and pictured him swearing profusely and tossing the useless piece of paper across the room with all his strength.

There followed a death certificate, immediately sending shivers down the caring singer's spine. Tears welled up in her eyes while she read the details: "Accidental death due to an overdose of amphetamines and alcohol. Lacerations to arms and upper body leading to significant blood loss." Lynn was about to turn the page when she noticed the date of death in the top right-hand corner. The unfortunate woman had met her doom on her son's fourteenth birthday. The reader stifled an involuntary sob, jamming her hand across her mouth, determined that Jeff must not wake up to find her crying.

Quickly and with trembling hands, the ashamed *voyeuse* closed the folder, replaced it in the seat pocket and reached her toiletry bag down from the bulkhead compartment. Putting on a smile for the flight attendants and obliging them with an autograph each, she disappeared inside the lavatory

to freshen up and to recover from the shocking information her piece of detective work had unearthed. Poor, poor Jeff. Was there no end to the tragic details which would unfold about her perfect stranger over time?

Some minutes later, another announcement crackled over the loudspeaker, letting passengers know that they were about to be served with their latest meal. The musician opened his eyes to the sight of his gorgeous co-conspirator sitting to his right, reading a novel and looking radiant for her arrival in their new hometown. He checked his watch. Fantastic, he thought. Little more than two hours to go until they landed at Heathrow. He must have slept for a good stretch. Another benefit the touring rebel would do well to acknowledge about flying in the front rows.

‘Morning,’ his husky, rock star’s vocal chords sprang to life. ‘Did you sleep?’

Lynn greeted her boyfriend with a broad smile. ‘Good morning! Nearly there, finally. Yes, thanks. I slept well until about half an hour ago. How are you feeling?’

‘Don’t know yet,’ Jeff answered with a grin, twisting round in his seat. ‘Fucking breakfast again? I’m boycotting breckies for a week once we get there.’

Lynn chuckled. She was looking forward to disembarking and couldn’t wait to see their new living quarters. Her roguish bad-boy had sought to dispel his default morning blues by staring out of the window, rather than by goading her into the usual physical gratification. Delighted by another good sign, she jumped when he suddenly reached his right arm backwards and tapped her knee.

She followed his gaze and his pointing finger to look outside and share the view which had impressed him so much. ‘Wow! That’s amazing!’

The sunrise was spectacular. Thick, lumpy clouds covered the ground thousands of metres below, with a layer of fiery orange icing. Next, seeming to rest on the orange, was spread a light blue layer where the sun was emerging over the horizon. The blue became progressively darker the further west and high in the sky the couple looked, and there were stars still clearly visible at the top, way above the aeroplane.

The young woman knelt down in the footwell next to her partner’s legs, resting her left arm across his knees. ‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’

‘Certainly is.’

The pair stayed gazing at the scene in silence for a good few minutes, lost in their own thoughts of London.

‘This is a picture of us,’ the romantic teenager ventured, eyes shining as they turned to meet their encouraging, brown counterparts. ‘All that cloud down there’s the confusion and chaos we’re going to have when we first arrive and while we’re figuring out what’s what. Every now and again, we can see clearly down to the ground. See?’

Lynn continued her imaginative description. ‘The orange stripe is our excitement at starting our new life singular; meeting people, starting uni’, loving each other... Gradually burning off more gaps in the clouds of confusion. Does that make sense?’

The excited woman giggled self-consciously at her tentative attempt at sensuous composition, glancing across at her reticent boyfriend. A tear was making its way down his face, rolling slowly from his right eye. She paused, squeezing his thigh to see if he was alright.

‘Don’t stop,’ Jeff urged without turning his head, his voice cracking. ‘I want to hear the end of the story.’

The happy teenager took a deep breath. ‘The light blue’s your new self and the dark blue is what’s left of your old self. And the stars are your flashes of inspiration: the songs; your ideas...

You know... The creative stuff that you don't want to let go of. We need to make the light blue stripe bigger without hiding the brilliance of the stars.'

Her black stallion sniffed back more tears, overcome by the powerful allegory his dream girl was painting. 'Christ,' he whispered. 'You're amazing, Lynn. I love you so much. That's exactly what I want to do. It's so unbelievably good that you understand.'

The Olympian stood up, leaning over to kiss the corner of his right eye, surprisingly enlivened by the taste of salt on his skin. 'I love you too,' she replied. 'We're going to have so much fun.'

Long arms reached around Lynn's hips and pulled her down onto his lap in the half-light of the cabin. The flight crew remained ensconced in the galley, preparing to serve another meal. As far as Jeff could see, the other passengers were still asleep. He slotted his hand through the gap between the seats in front and drew an unused blanket deftly towards him. A passionate kiss smothered her mouth while his hands unravelled the folds and threw the layer of tartan weave roughly over themselves, beginning to fondle her breasts and abdomen underneath her clothes. The breathless woman could feel his erection pressing against her buttocks and longed to feel it inside her after the anticipation of being so close for so long.

'You have to let me induct you into the Mile High Club,' the ardent lover hissed in her ear. 'You've turned me on so much with your picture of us. I am so horny that I'm not gonna make it off the 'plane.'

'Won't someone see us?' his furtive partner hissed, fighting her own arousal. 'It sounds exciting but dangerous. What if we get interrupted?'

Jeff's teeth nipped the back of her neck, his breath warm on her skin. 'That's the whole idea. Not just anyone gets admitted into the Mile High Club. *Il faut du courage, mi amor*. They won't interrupt us,' he assured her. 'They're used to it. We hardly need to move. I'm so ready to blow. I need to be inside you right now.'

'OK,' Lynn agreed apprehensively. 'If you're sure.'

The surreptitious superstars undressed as far as necessary under the blanket, their eyes still fixed on the ever-lightening skies. The sunrise was following the young woman's plan to the letter, and the light blue of the day had begun to stretch upwards into the darker and starrier night.

'Let's live dangerously,' she affirmed, feigning confidence.

Her lover's expert fingers worked their magic as she sat on his lap, finding her moist and ready. He shifted her weight slightly until he could slip his engorged penis inside without causing her to cry out in shock. However, after a few moments, they both agreed that the friction on their twin tattoos was too painful, desperately trying not to laugh too loudly while they switched chairs and faced into the cabin.

'This is way too exposed!' the young woman whispered. 'What if I make eye contact with someone?'

'Close your eyes then, you chicken,' the sexy baritone voice vibrated against her cheek. 'I'll keep a lookout. One of us has got to be brave around here.'

Slow movements under the blanket, combined with his caring hands inside her shirt stroking her breasts and back, built a sensation that was exquisite in the extreme, mixed with the excitement and the odd twinge of discomfort from their touching tattoos. The warm walls of her vagina flooding around him, Jeff opened his eyes to see tears of rapture in those of his beautiful best friend.

'You can guarantee I won't ever, ever remember my previous Mile High experience now,' he assured her, kissing her neck and feeling her body sink further into his embrace. 'This is unbelievably sexy, angel. You are the absolute best.'

The euphoric young woman could feel a great man's heart thumping against her back, and rapid breathing gave away his imminent climax. She couldn't help herself as his fingers brought her to orgasm for a second time, and she let out a low moan.

'Shhh!' Jeff panted, laughing softly. 'You're supposed to be being quiet. Oh, Jesus! This is all your fault...'

Three or four slow and subtle thrusts of his hips against which Lynn resisted flagrantly, and her lover's long-awaited nirvana surged forth. Checking quickly that they had not been rumbled, he did his best to prolong their heavenly, hushed hiatus until the screaming inside receded. His right hand emerged from the top edge of the blanket and guided the blonde head gently into the crook of his neck, stroking her hair and kissing her blazing cheek. The serene stars sat linked together in the same spot for several minutes, basking in the erudite pleasure of having done something so imperceptibly shameless.

'We have to move,' the teenager murmured soon afterwards. 'We'll get sprung.'

'OK,' the patient man answered, still languishing in an inner glow. 'We're fine, but if you're scared... You go.'

The long-legged nymph slipped out from under the blanket and made her way gracefully to the lavatory. It felt impossibly childish not to be able to wipe the grin off her face when she walked along the aisle, such was the exhilarating experience, and then again upon her return, since her fellow passenger was now fully dressed. The blankets were folded, and he was reading the in-flight magazine as if nothing untoward had taken place.

'Where've you been?' the comic asked. 'It's been so bloody boring here. I wish something worthwhile would happen for once.'

Lynn was embarrassed by how loudly her boyfriend was speaking and slid into her seat, almost unwilling to look at him. Amused but sympathetic to her blushes, he grinned and helped himself to the toothpaste and his toothbrush from her toiletry bag and dropped them cockily into the breast pocket of his shirt.

On the way to the bathroom facilities, he stopped in at the galley and attracted the attention of one of the flight attendants. 'Hi, Alison. I'm Jeff. Do you guys still carry postcards of the 'plane?'

'Yes, sir,' the slim, fair-haired woman replied, reaching into a high compartment in the kitchen and pulling a few out. 'I mean, Jeff. Sorry! We do. How many do you want?'

'Cheers. Just one. Perfect. Could I borrow a pen too, please?'

'Certainly,' the stewardess' face reddened.

Their famous guest had one more request. 'Also, please could you bring us a glass of champagne each with our food?'

'Of course. We'd be glad to. I'm such a big fan of both of you. It's amazing to have you flying with us, and together...'

Armed with a pen and his postcard, the charmer thanked the gushing woman, disappeared into the tiny space and locked the door. He reappeared a few minutes later, climbed over the stunning passenger in his row and made himself comfortable again in the window seat. No sooner had he sat down than their breakfasts arrived, along with two bubbling flutes.

The celebrity princess looked a little surprised but accepted graciously, guessing this to be part of some scheme or other. Her suspicions were confirmed when her handsome partner winked and thanked the flight attendant before raising his glass to his beautiful best friend.

'Here's to us and to our colourful London life,' he toasted with a smile so sincere that it warmed her heart.

Lynn clinked glasses and echoed his words. 'Did you arrange this? You don't even like champagne...'

From his shirt pocket, Jeff produced the postcard and held it out. 'Lynn Dyson, it is my great honour and extreme, orgasmic pleasure to welcome you into the Mile High Club.'

The young woman gazed open-mouthed at her latest award, leaning over to kiss her smiling *paramour*. 'Thank you! Mine too. What *is* this?'

She chuckled under her breath as she examined the innocent picture of the Boeing 747 aircraft on one side, and then turned her makeshift certificate over to read a message written in her boyfriend's handwriting.

"Mile High Club Entrance Exam (Score out of 10):

- | | |
|--------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Tacky | 0 |
| 2. Awkward | 2 |
| 3. Painful | 4 (extenuating circumstances) |
| 4. Sexy | 20 |
| 5. Memorable | ∞ (room for improvement) |

ALL my love,
Jeff"

'Room for improvement!' Lynn laughed aloud. 'Is that an infinity symbol?'

Jeff cocked his head, happy to elicit such an unaffected response from this amazing woman.

'Thanks! You're so sweet,' the delighted woman said, still grinning from ear to ear. 'I couldn't have done it without you.'

'I'm glad to hear that! Let's hope it's the first of many. I love you, angel. And see this...' his left-hand index finger pointed to the three-letter word above his name. 'These glidesmaids, and everyone else I might flirt with... They mean nothing, Lynn. It's all an act. Part of the show.'

The blonde teenager put a hand over his mouth to silence her perfect stranger. 'I know, Jeff. It's the same for me. You have all my love too. Let's eat, and try to pretend it's not eggs again.'

The couple ate their third breakfast in a row amid cheerful discourse about how close they were to landing and what their plans were. A car was to pick them up from Terminal Three and take them to meet the real estate agent, who would in turn take them to their accommodation. With Dyson Administration's assistance, the sportswoman had arranged every single detail for immediate occupation, even down to a full refrigerator of food, a case of *Rioja* and some European beer.

The captain announced that they were about to commence their descent into London Heathrow, followed by the usual requests to prepare the cabin for landing. The flight attendants rushed to clear away breakfast and provided arrival cards for the four passengers in their special care.

'What's our address?' Jeff asked his efficient sidekick, reaching this box on the form. 'I suppose I'd better start trying to remember it now. And please could you throw over my passport?'

Lynn recited the address she had already memorised and skimmed her man's passport through the air in his direction, scoring a direct hit on his nose.

'Cheers, darling,' he mocked. 'I didn't mean literally, but thanks anyway.'

The weather over London was predictably murky, making it difficult for the excited musician to identify many famous landmarks on their way down. The pilot had been directed to approach the runway from the south-west, flying over Windsor Castle. The collection of turrets and courtyards dating back to the eleventh century suddenly came into view as the aeroplane dropped beneath the cloud-cover and tracked southwards. It then banked steeply over the expanse of Windsor Great Park, which was shrouded in a layer of fog leading all the way down to Virginia Water, eventually straightening into its final approach.

Appeased at last, Jeff traced the winding path of the Thames as far east as he could see, until the mist obscured the bridges beyond Hammersmith. He had hoped to be able to point out the three-way split in the Grand Union Canal near their new flat, where he had spent many happy hours while on tour. After describing the area in words and hand gestures instead to his eager concubine, they were also surprised to see how heavy the traffic was, especially seeing that it was still very early on a Saturday morning.

'Jeez, I never knew there was so much water around London. This is fantastic,' the twenty-two-year-old turned to his lover, taking her hand. 'It's so different to home, even from up here. From the air, it's so much easier to see everything all so squashed up together, but low-rise, like Paris. Not like Manhattan at all.'

Lynn tried to catch the view, but the First Class seats were too wide. All she could see was more grey sky. The aircraft touched down in light January rain, taking a long while to wind around the complex web of taxiways and come to a standstill at the gate. Within a few minutes of unlocking the doors however, the celebrity passengers had said goodbye to the flight crew, crossed onto the aerobridge and were soon in the terminal building, ready to be whisked through Passport Control on the double.

Sure enough, reunited with their luggage, the young stars emerged through the doors into a noisy arrivals hall and spotted a man in uniform carrying a sign saying "Victoria", their agreed code word. The driver recognised them immediately and shook their hands with vigour.

'Welcome to London, sir, miss.'

Jeff helped the short, stocky Englishman to load their luggage into a waiting Jaguar and in no time at all had struck up a conversation about cars, as if the two men had been mates forever. He moved to open the passenger door and jump into the front seat, before remembering that riding up-front in a taxi was a peculiarly Australian thing. Besides, as Lynn's questioning look reminded him, this prestige vehicle was slightly more refined than one's average Hackney cab.

'Hey, pretty lady,' the larrikin started, climbing in beside his beaming girlfriend. 'D'you mind if I share your cab? Where are you going? Christ, it's easy to pick up beautiful women in this town! I've only been here five minutes...'

The driver laughed as the stunning blonde hit the clown next to her.

'Shut up!'

The car dropped its famous passengers outside a nondescript real estate agency in Maida Vale. The pokey office was a hive of activity, which then further erupted with excitement as soon as the couple opened the door and set off a tinkling bell reminiscent of a British situation comedy show.

Jeff couldn't help but suspect that most of these people didn't usually work in this tiny branch, and especially not before eight o'clock in the morning on a Saturday! The new arrivals were

pounced upon with cups of percolated coffee and biscuits, while a woman who introduced herself as Rita fussed around them.

‘Have you had breakfast?’ the office manager asked, supervising as they were signed the various lease documents.

The couple stifled their laughter.

‘Thanks, but you wouldn’t believe how many breakfasts we’ve had over the last thirty-six hours,’ Lynn shared with the confused woman. ‘The coffee’s great though.’

Formalities complete, Rita led her good-looking celebrity clients outside, through the back of the office, where the same driver was waiting. They all piled into the back of his luxury car, rendering it a far tighter squeeze than before. The songwriter sneaked a sideways glance at his blonde beauty and grinned. It was actually very welcoming to be among friendly people who were failing miserably at treating them like VIPs and thereby meeting their every expectation of a normal life rather well.

The Jaguar soon pulled up in front of a four-storey apartment building behind tall security gates, set back from the road in mature gardens. Rita clambered out of the car with difficulty and punched a combination of numbers into a keypad, starting the gates rolling open. Once inside, the young couple could make out a double set of glass doors between lines of rose bushes.

How very English, Lynn thought, genuinely impressed with their new surroundings. ‘This is beautiful.’

They followed the talkative agent up to the second floor in a rickety lift; one which still required a concertina grille to be pulled across before it would function. The entrance hall was lined with mirrors, and there were flowering plants on small tables on each landing. Flat Six was at the rear of the building, and Jeff was almost disappointed to find that the front door was made of obscured glass. His girlfriend touched his hand, which was immediately covered by a covetous warmth.

Rita opened the door, inviting the couple to enter. The chivalrous gentleman stood back and let his lady go in first, following closely behind. The building was fairly old, with high ceilings and narrow corridors. There was plenty of light though, and they soon found themselves in a large, airy living room with a view over a small quadrangle. The *décor* was warm and cosy, tastefully furnished and with a white baby grand piano waiting to be put through its paces.

The real estate agent was anxious for their approval, wringing her hands as her clients gazed around quietly. ‘Do you like it?’

‘It’s fantastic,’ Jeff responded, looking for his partner’s endorsement. ‘Thanks very much for arranging everything.’

Lynn nodded to the relieved woman. ‘I agree. It’s perfect. Thanks, Rita.’

They completed the tour and were given thorough instruction on how to operate the various appliances and the central heating system. The kitchen was newly modernised, as was the stark, tiled bathroom. A second bathroom had been created *en suite* to the main bedroom, which left both quite small, but it didn’t matter. Everything was fresh and clean, and the whole set-up fitted superbly with the stars’ ambitions to live frugally and in a minimalist style.

‘Happy?’ the young man asked, hugging Lynn close.

‘Really happy, yes. Rita, it’s lovely. Thanks so much.’

The driver had brought their luggage up in the lift and was waiting patiently on the landing. Jeff left the two women discussing the arrangements for maintenance and went to help to bring everything in, dumping it all in the hallway.

‘We’ll sort it out later, thanks, mate,’ he told him. ‘Can we offer anyone a drink? Do we even have the technology for that?’

Rita declined. ‘Thank you. That’s very kind, but I’ll leave you to it. Give us a ring if you need to know about the area or anything. Your bank is just a few doors down from our office on Elgin Avenue. There’s a Post Office there too. You’ll easily get your bearings, won’t you?’

‘Yeah. Thanks. We’ll explore later,’ the imposing musician assured her.

The awestruck woman was dying to ask for autographs but decided it was too unprofessional under the circumstances. Instead, they all shook hands again, and the newly-installed man of the house closed the door once the estate agent and their driver had entered the lift.

Smiling and yawning at the same time, Lynn wrapped her arms around him. ‘Do you really like it?’

‘Of course I really like it,’ her boyfriend answered. ‘You’re here, and it’s just like the photos. What more could I want? You’ve done a great job of getting exactly what we were looking for. I love it. Just think of the long conversations over dinner we could have in that dining room, and the piano looking out the window... It’s exactly what we need, angel.’

The nineteen-year-old was ecstatic that her flatmate was as taken with the place as she was. She picked up one of the suitcases and began to lug it towards the main bedroom. Jeff grabbed another, and within minutes, they had everything open and items strewn all over the carpet. Pausing to stretch his back and feast his eyes on his beautiful partner, his gaze alighted on the bed with a beseeching look on his face.

The comic heard a deep sigh. ‘I’m just kidding,’ he grinned, throwing a stray T-shirt at her. ‘I made you a promise and I’ll keep it, OK? Besides, I met this brazen mile-high chick earlier. She gave me one hell of a good time.’

Lynn laughed in relief. ‘Good. Shall we make some tea?’

‘Why not? How jolly English of you,’ The Australian Elvis joked. ‘That would be splendid. Ring for the butler, m’lady.’

Climbing over the obstacles on the bedroom floor, the couple made their way back into the kitchen and opened each cupboard in turn, searching for the wherewithal to make tea. Before too long, they had assembled everything required and paused to take in their surroundings in a little more detail.

‘That’s right,’ Jeff observed. ‘They put their washing machines in the kitchen over here. I remember someone telling me that a while ago. Odd, but strangely OK.’

While the kettle was boiling, the songstress left her man pushing buttons and twisting knobs in an attempt to master their new appliances, intent on checking out the far less complicated features of the polished, black piano. A few bars rang out of a tune that her collaborator didn’t recognise. He poured water into the very English teapot and stirred the leaves vigorously before joining in the early morning jam session.

‘That sounds good,’ he approved, sitting down beside her on the wide piano stool. ‘This looks brand new.’

Lynn agreed. ‘Yeah. I think it is. The keys are very stiff. Have a go.’

Jeff slid across and began to pick out a melody for one of the songs he had written during the flight. It was the first time he had tried to piece it together, and he quickly gave up, falling back to an old favourite. “Shelter” was not only one of his girlfriend’s favourite ballads but was also perfectly apt for their new circumstance. The sound echoed loud beneath the low ceiling, prompting his

flatmate to flatten the damper pedal to the floor, her arms reaching around the romantic soul at the piano.

‘We’re going to have to be careful for the sake of the neighbours,’ she rued. ‘What was that you started playing?’

The songwriter tried again, and the new song took a little better shape the second time. ‘Just something that came to me on the ‘plane,’ he answered. ‘It needs more work. Not a big enough idea to stand on its own, but we’ll see. I wonder when the guitars’ll get here.’

‘Probably a couple of weeks. They have to be cleared by customs and everything, so it’ll take a while. We could buy a cheap one to tide us over.’

‘Yeah,’ her minstrel shrugged. ‘I’ll cope. So what day are we going to have as our thrift day?’

‘Hmm... We probably need to see what our spending patterns are first, in case we pick a day that doesn’t work.’

The philanthropist scoffed. ‘That’s not the idea! Poor families can’t just pick a day that works.’

‘Sorry. I know,’ Lynn hesitated, clearly ashamed. ‘OK. Pick one.’

‘Don’t be sorry. You’re probably right. We’ll see how the land lies first. I’ll get the tea.’

Fending off a conciliatory hug, the blonde musician continued to play softly, looking out over the trees and beyond to the rows of rectangular, white-framed windows in the distance. Every building appeared to be a block of flats exactly like theirs. How many interesting people must live around here? She was beginning to understand why her boyfriend was so keen to base themselves in this area. It was intriguing to contemplate other people’s lives proceeding in parallel behind each identical brick wall.

Within a couple of minutes, the young man returned with two china cups and saucers. ‘I bloody well hope you’re not expecting to use these god-awful tiny things when our stuff gets here,’ he moaned, placing them gingerly down onto the coffee table. ‘It’s just not us, is it? I mean, two mouthfuls, and it’s gone.’

Lynn smiled. ‘Thanks. My dad would say they were “twee”.’

‘For once, I can’t help but agree,’ the comic rhymed. ‘What d’you want to do now? Our first adventure. What time is it?’

Jeff looked at his watch and answered his own question. ‘It’s still not even ten o’clock. Jeez! I wonder how long before we feel adjusted to the time. It feels like mid-afternoon to me.’

‘Breakfast?’ the happy woman joked. ‘It was so hard to keep a straight face when Rita asked. How about showing me one of those Little Venice cafés for a less twee cup of coffee?’

Jeff clattered the fine Royal Doulton piece down onto its chintzy saucer. ‘Tremendous idea, old girl! I’ll probably get us lost, but that’s half the fun. What’s our address again? I need to write it down and keep it in my wallet, in case I need to get a taxi home.’

His ever-organised flatmate lifted a sheet of paper from the top of the pile of documentation which Rita had left on the piano and pointed to the address on their paperwork, before picking up the plastic envelope of odds and ends that went with the flat and delving inside.

‘There are three sets of keys,’ she said, dangling one towards her boyfriend. ‘We’ll hide the third set somewhere.’

‘Downstairs in the garden, you mean?’ he chuckled. ‘Along with everyone else’s? I don’t need all these to carry round. Which one’s the front door?’

The lovers proceeded down the hallway to test out the locks. They agreed it felt peculiar to have supplanted their life to a brand new location, peering down the landing to see if any other residents

were spying on them while they attempted to figure out which key was which. And how long would it be before the other flats' occupants cottoned on to their famous neighbours in Number Six?

'You're disappointed the door's glass, aren't you?' the nineteen-year-old remarked.

'You bet! Now I can do solid doors, I want a solid door to practise on.'

'Too bad,' Lynn quipped, pecking his hairy cheek. 'Look at how fast this grows! You've grown a real beard in the time it's taken us to travel halfway across the world.'

Again, the young woman was gathered into loving arms, and her face was brushed by the softening stubble on the tall man's jowls while they kissed. She was almost disappointed that he made no mention of the other body part growing between them. The keys sorted out, the happy pair put their winter coats on and left their new home, buzzing themselves through the security gate. They checked the combination against the number which Rita had given them, and thankfully it re-opened first time.

'So much to learn after such a long journey,' the tired sportswoman moaned to her companion.

Jeff put his arm around her non-tattooed shoulder, and the couple strolled down the street. He took stock of where he was: in London with the girl of his dreams and looking forward to a year of blissful happiness in the old city. The temperature was cold, but with virtually no breeze. He found the old canal easily, and they made their way down to Little Venice within five minutes.

'*¡Aquí está!*' the guide cried out with aplomb. 'Browning's Pool. Looks very different at night, I remember. Let's go over there...'

The teenager's gaze followed his pointing finger to see a longboat which had been turned into a café, complete with tables on the canal bank. 'It's a bit like the Melbourne laneways crossed with Amsterdam.'

'Yeah, but colder,' he agreed, hugging her close. 'If it's too cold to sit outside, we can go in.'

They took their seats, buttoning their jackets to the collar and shoving their hands in their pockets to warm up. A smartly dressed waiter soon came out to take his new customers' order. Before he had even reached their table however, a broad grin had spread across his face.

'Jeff Diamond, *c'est vous?*'

'*Marcel, oui. Bien sûr, c'est moi!*' the francophone replied, springing to his feet and embracing the waiter enthusiastically. '*Comment ça va?*'

The two men kissed each other on both cheeks, the very French way. What a perfect start to their outing, Lynn thought, as she waited to be introduced to yet another long-lost friend whom the Pied Piper had encountered so soon into their stay.

'*Marcel, voilà mon amie, Lynn.*'

Standing up, the tall blonde allowed the flamboyant, moustachioed waiter to kiss her on both cheeks too. Twice, in fact.

'*Mademoiselle Lynn Dyson. J'suis enchanté à faire votre connaissance enfin.*'

'*Merci, Marcel. Enfin?*' the young woman enquired.

At last? Neither man reacted to her enquiring tone, so she continued the introduction, hoping she had chosen the correct form of address.

'*Et le vôtre aussi, Marcel.*'

'*Ah, très bien, mon brave,*' the Frenchman gushed. '*Une beauté qui parle français en plus. Magnifique! Bienvenus, tout les deux. Qu'est-ce que vous voudriez comme boissons?*'

The pair ordered coffee in accordance with their master plan, *cognac* to heat them up and *croissants* because it seemed *de rigueur*. Sitting back down at their table close to the canal, Lynn shot a warm smile towards her proud boyfriend.

'You're loving this, aren't you?' she said. 'What did he mean by "*enfin*"?'

'Loving it? It's bloody fantastic! I don't know what he meant. We had many a drunken conversation about you, so I guess he remembered. D'you mind?'

'No,' the kind celebrity responded. 'Not at all. It's lovely. I only hope I can continue to come up with the goods, French-wise.'

'You'll do fine. He speaks perfect English. The Lucky Pierre accent's all part of the show.'

Jeff fetched a copy of The Guardian newspaper from a nearby table and lit a cigarette, stretching his long legs and letting out a long, contented sigh. 'My first London ciggie,' he proclaimed. 'D'you want one?'

Lynn shook her head and watched him drag hard and swallow the smoke, only to breathe it straight back out again. A long tubular plume formed as it mixed with the chilly air. This man was certainly the sexiest smoker she had ever seen, and how he knew it!

Their drinks and *croissants* arrived *tout de suite*. The young woman grabbed a section of the thick Saturday edition, and the twosome settled down to enjoy the peaceful setting. A family of ducks trailed a gentle wake behind them in the dirty, brown water of the Grand Union Canal, and people on bicycles courteously made way for each other on the narrow towpath.

'I thought we moved to London,' she thought aloud, breaking off a corner of her *croissant* and covering it with *beurre blanc* and *confiture d'abricôt*, 'but somehow we've ended up in Belgium.'

Jeff smiled and sniffed his approval without looking up from the newspaper, setting butterflies in flight again in her stomach. Who cared? This was an extremely good adventure to kick off their new life singular, she concluded, reaching into her handbag and bringing out a pen and notepad. She began to write down details of various West End shows which were advertised in the entertainment pages.

'I wonder where the sports centre is,' Lynn changed the subject, not really expecting her boyfriend to know the answer. 'It's supposed to be near the tube station.'

Again, the Sydneysider's finger drew a confident arc, pointing beyond the café and to the other side of the waterway.

'The tube's in that direction. We can go there after this, *si tu veux*. Someone's bound to know. We'll pick a fit-looking person in the street and follow him or her. I could do with a burn actually, now you come to mention it. Along the canal'd be good. Tomorrow, nice and early. Why don't we aim to go in the morning and then come back here for breakfast?'

'Breakfast?' the Olympian exclaimed. 'No. Not again! What about your boycott?'

Grinning, Jeff caught Marcel's eye and shouted. '*Encore des cafés, s'il vous plaît, mate.*'

Having acclimatised to the temperature, the pair settled down to read for a while longer, the damp English weather gradually seeping into their southern hemisphere heads through foreign nostrils and clearing the stale aeroplane air from their lungs. Lynn's eyelids were desperate to close, so she encouraged them to remain open by staring down the canal at the rows of houseboats moored against the stone wall. She recalled her learned friend speaking about people living in them and felt a shiver run down her spine as he rolled his shoulders.

'Aching?' the sympathetic woman asked.

'Yeah. Really,' he replied. 'I'll be alright after a few nights' sleep.'

‘Will you?’ Lynn didn’t believe him for a minute. ‘I forgot to tell you... I did some research on the topic of neck and shoulder tension with our sports *masseur*. He says the problem will eventually go away but it could take months.’

Jeff listened absentmindedly. ‘Ah, yeah? You didn’t tell me you’d been discussing my body with other people.’

‘I haven’t,’ the mischief in his playmate’s voice was accompanied by a suggestive smile. ‘I didn’t mention any names. I was just talking to him about long-term muscle injuries, cramping and prolonged contraction. It was a theoretical, hypothetical discussion, that’s all. He didn’t ask any questions, so I didn’t have to give him any details.’

‘Good,’ the songwriter responded, feeling a little self-conscious. ‘So what’s the prognosis? Are you going to shoot me?’

His lover giggled. ‘If you were a horse, I might.’

‘I thought I was.’

‘Oh, yes! So you are! Oh, well...’ she shrugged, taking his hand across the table but stopping short of any further flippancy on the subject of murder. ‘He suggested getting regular deep tissue massage and neck manipulation by a physio’ to undo the knots that cause the pain and cramps. The reason I didn’t mention it before is that it’ll probably be fairly overwhelming. Like when we were in Queenstown...’

‘What d’you mean by overwhelming?’ the patient asked. ‘Painful? I don’t care about that, if it’s going to fix the problem.’

Lynn shook her head. ‘No. Well, yes. It would hurt too, but mainly because the physical effects are inextricably linked with the emotional effects. Don’t you remember how you reacted in New Zealand, that night before Gerry and Suzanne interrupted us? It’s why, as your emotional side gets better, the physical side will eventually too. But in order to speed up the physical, we’ll most likely need to speed up the emotional.’

‘I’m not sure I understand why you’re looking so worried though,’ Jeff looked confused. ‘I can handle it as long as you’re around.’

‘I can’t explain it,’ the concerned nineteen-year-old continued, smiling. ‘It’s a gut feeling, I suppose. I just think it’ll bring back all the painful memories when they work on your muscles.’

Her boyfriend shrugged, draining the last of his coffee. ‘Well, you know I believe in gut feel, so who knows? I’m willing to give it a shot, whether it fucks with my head or not. I’d pay a high price to get rid of these headaches and the concrete shoulders.’

‘What I was going to suggest was learning about it together,’ Lynn ventured, looking him directly in the eyes. ‘I’d love to be able to work on you, if you know what I mean. Then if my gut feeling ends up being right, it’d be a safe environment at least. Do you know what I mean?’

‘Yeah. Sure I do. Thanks. I appreciate it. So where do we have to go? A faith healer? Witch-doctor?’

The sportswoman laughed. ‘Yes. Sort of. Not a sports *masseur* anyway. This guy suggested someone who’s more into holistic medicine. Mind, body and soul. So, yes, faith healer’s pretty close. Spiritual healing.’

‘Are there drugs involved?’

Images appeared in Jeff’s head of the famous music festivals of the late nineteen-sixties, in the era of free love and all manner of other stimulants. He tried his luck with his conservative helper, but predictably, she shook her head with true Dyson disdain.

‘Can I at least have an out-of-body experience?’ he pushed a little further. ‘I’ve always wanted one of those.’

‘As long as you come back,’ Lynn laughed, relenting somewhat. ‘No. I can’t imagine it would involve drugs. I’ll do some investigation when we get set up. That’s the other thing we need to find... Where the nearest decent library is.’

Her bad boy sighed. ‘So much to do. Shall we make a move then? Thanks, by the way, angel. It sounds great, drugs or no drugs.’

The young singer stood up and reached her wallet out of her handbag. ‘You’re welcome. I’ll get this.’

Jeff lit another cigarette and watched the stunning vision enter the café to pay their bill. There was another item to add to their normal life’s checklist: he must force Lynn to think of herself once in a while. Did she really have nothing to focus on which wasn’t already completely under control? Maybe this was the root cause. Being Lynn Dyson was too easy. Everything was so straightforward in her world; she made a decision to do something, found out how to do it and then did it. Her whole life had been one long stretch target, and it was now up to him to supply new challenges. This would not be difficult!

‘Marcel says we have to come in for dinner soon,’ the nineteen-year-old blonde told her boyfriend as they waved to the waiter standing in his doorway.

‘Sure. I’m up for that. It’s great at night here. All the trees are lit up, and the houseboats. It’s magical,’ the thoughtful man explained. ‘And the beauty of it is we’re just a few minutes’ staggering distance from home.’

‘Provided we can remember the code to get back in,’ Lynn giggled.

Six weeks had gone by in a flash since Lynn Dyson and Jeff Diamond first arrived in London. They had settled in well to their respective university courses and had resumed hectic travel schedules in earnest. Free of the restrictions of her MAC contract, the popular singer was now able to work with whomever she chose. She had complete access to recording studios at the Royal College of Music, which gave both performers ample time to develop new musical ideas, either separately or together. They had also booked a fortnight’s holiday in the Caribbean over Easter and were looking forward to jetting out of the damp, grey days of early spring.

Gerry and Heather’s baby was due at about the same time, sending Celia Blake into overdrive. Fortunately, she and the mum-to-be got on famously and schemed together to ensure that the nefarious dad-to-be stayed on the straight and narrow. He had arranged to come out to Britain in June to play with the rally car which he and his distant business partner had bought and was safely garaged somewhere up north, in the Lake District.

Jeff had reacquainted himself with Professor John Francis, and they had struck up a close working relationship which regularly spilled over into their social lives. Staying true to their pact, the famous new arrivals had hosted several successful dinner parties and they were soon receiving return invitations to a host of interesting events all over the country.

By dint of London University’s solid reputation, in addition to the city’s general level of curiosity, the PhD student also found himself with access to many great thinkers in the world of politics, anthropology and economics across Europe and in the United States. He was stoked to be finally

able to explore issues of discrimination and injustice in all parts of the world and all walks of life with people who had real, practical experience.

The swarthy rock star was in his element, even going so far as to precipitate an unexpected stir with an off-the-cuff comment which hit a raw nerve in the academic community for its obvious simplicity. He had been arguing one day with a group of students and lecturers about the causes and effects of discrimination.

'You want to talk about discrimination?' he had asked of them. 'You should try being left-handed!'

All of a sudden, there had been research papers commissioned on the breadth and depth of learnings from everyday difference and discrimination in society, and the outspoken celebrity had been interviewed several times on the radio and television. He had been amazed by the response to what was merely an observation on one of the more regular but always overlooked instances of discrimination to which he had fallen victim his whole life, and the disproportionate reaction fuelled by his public profile gave him a perverse kick.

It was only just beginning to dawn on the intellectual just how influential he had become, solely from having sold a few albums and making an appearance on the Michael Parkinson Show. Or was it also due to the fact that his name was these days officially linked to the great Australian dynasty? Not entirely comfortable with the possibility, he could scarcely discount or even devalue this factor, since this had been his *modus operandi* all along.

With this level of sway over serious opinion, and moreover, on people he hardly knew, came a huge weight of responsibility too. The chart-topping musician realised that from now on he would need to be particularly careful what he put on public record. His stunning and suitably taciturn sidekick was not shy in mentioning that on occasion he was known to express some less than mainstream views which, in the wrong hands, might be twisted and used against him.

For example, if the star were to advocate, as he often did, for the castration of all brutal sex offenders, his newfound hold over the nation's pop culture may catapult this irrevocable punishment as a serious contender for legislation in no time. The wise young man understood this concept only too well, since if this were to happen, he would lose all control over the debate. And furthermore, he might be forced to live with the consequences of whatever those in power chose to make of his grandiose statements.

Therefore, the new Jeff Diamond vowed to practise the art of circumspection, as his beautiful and judicious best friend advised him. Politics for politics' sake had always irked him, yet he had to learn to accept it as a necessary evil now that he was mixing with the big end of town. Reluctantly, the pretender bowed in humble deference to Bart Dyson, who was these days a master of the political stage after learning these same lessons as a hot-headed twenty-something with similarly big ideas.

Behind the scenes however, the lovers' steady progress in smoothing out the troubled soul's rough edges still occasionally fell foul of circumstances. Neither Lynn nor her pragmatic nobleman was especially surprised when the first mind-numbing wake-up call mounted a debilitating assault on their UK happiness. It happened one evening, in a crowded Circle Line train, when the couple had synchronised their return home from classes with the plan of visiting the gymnasium before grabbing dinner at a favourite restaurant.

Watching more and more people squeeze onto the train and cram their way inside the packed carriage, Jeff's attention was transfixed by the sight of several smaller passengers being jostled and knocked off their feet as they attempted to keep hold of the rails and dangling, coiled spring handles, for the first time in over a month fearing the onset of a panic attack.

‘Are you OK?’ his girlfriend asked, herself squeezed up against the wall at the far end of a carriage. ‘You look terrible.’

The songwriter, who had managed to shield himself and his precious companion from detection on the crowded platform, inhaled as nausea threatened to rise from his stomach. He could see from the look on Lynn’s face that she had guessed the boy from Canley Vale’s return was upon them, and her disappointment both saddened and reassured him. He had rejoiced in the dependency’s retreat over the last few weeks but now found his mind full of compulsive hallucinations.

‘I need to get out,’ he hissed, looking around with crazy-horse eyes and hoping they weren’t far from the next station. ‘I can’t deal with this. Can we?’

Mercifully, the brakes had already begun to squeal, and the lights of a Baker Street platform flashed past. Beads of sweat had formed on Jeff’s forehead, and by the time the train had come to a stop and the doors had opened, he was struggling for breath. The stars fended off eager advances as they forced their way through the sea of commuters, who were all amazed to catch sight of the newest A-list local residents.

The young man’s legs had turned to jelly, obsessed with the prospect of dropping to the ground and being humiliated in front of so many wide-eyed people, and it took the athlete’s entire strength to stop him from overbalancing.

After two interminably long switches of escalator, the couple finally reached street level and flashed their passes at the uniformed ticket collector. Spying fresh air up ahead, Lynn guided her spaced-out boyfriend through the exit and scanned the pavement for somewhere to sit down. There were no seats, so she took hold of his elbow and practically dragged him to the nearest tree, against which he threw his weight in relief.

‘Wow!’ the shocked teenager exclaimed. ‘Are you OK? You never told me your tube phobia affected you that badly. Do you want me to get some water or something?’

‘There’s Lynn Dyson!’ the pair heard from a male voice over their shoulders.

‘Jeff Diamond!’ another shouted.

Within next to no time, an excited throng had gathered around the ancient elm whose gnarly roots had lifted the paving slabs at the stars’ feet. The twenty-two-year-old sucked in another lungful of air and prepared to don his crowd-pleasing mask once again, although his insides still churned. These fans would surmise he was drunk again, or high on drugs, and tomorrow’s newspaper headlines would drag Lynn’s name down with his if he didn’t set the story straight as soon as possible.

His girlfriend had jumped to the same conclusion, judging by her own fake smile, and the two musicians gamely answered a barrage of questions and agreed to sign autographs on any piece of paper thrust towards them.

‘We have to go now,’ the caring singer raised her voice at a suitable lull in proceedings, gesturing across to a dimly-lit Greek restaurant on the corner of the next side-street. ‘We’re meeting friends for dinner. Sorry, everyone. Have a good evening.’

Jeff’s eyes shouted his thanks as the lovers joined hands and walked calmly away from their spellbound admirers, letting themselves into the nearby restaurant and requesting a table. Colour was returning to his face, and he was forced to admit that the onslaught of impromptu adoration had actually done him a favour.

‘You told a barefaced lie, Miss Dyson,’ the dark-haired superstar whispered, their heads coming together as they sat down at the small table. ‘That must be a first. You’re going to join me in hell after all.’

Lynn smiled. 'Too bad... I hear heaven's not all it's cracked up to be.'

'Who told you that?'

'I seem to remember an enigmatic stranger saying something similar when he drove me back from a convent a few years ago. Are you feeling better?'

Love beamed from his guardian angel's face, and Jeff was at once hit with an extreme sense of gratitude and a raging rush of sexual energy. 'Yeah. Much better, thanks. You were fantastic. I love you so much. Can we go to a hotel?'

'A hotel?' the nineteen-year-old held her hand over her mouth and scanned the faces of the other diners in the quiet restaurant in the hope that no-one could overhear them. 'No. We can't walk out now.'

'We can,' her boyfriend smiled. 'I'm too turned on to think about eating. Come on. There's bound to be one close by.'

'Jeff! No! Are you serious?'

The boy from Sydney's west took a deep breath, knowing he shouldn't succumb to the old urges so easily. His saviour had come to his rescue again, engineering a most ingenious diversionary tactic. The least he could do was buy her dinner before he assuaged his bestial needs. But, Jesus! His psyche hadn't slipped this far out of whack for several months, and the pull towards an easy conquest to restore his equilibrium was staunch in its persistence.

The handsome man's mouth was about to respond when the waiter arrived at their table with the wine list and two menus. Taking one folder politely and seeing the other two handed to her dinner date, the dignified aristocrat heard a soft chuckle emanating from the opposite side of the table, followed by a half-smile and a long sigh.

'Yes, angel. Let's have dinner. *T'as faim?*'

Lynn's face reddened as she fought back tears, just as her lover's leather boot edged forward and made contact with her own shoe. She always knew when he was sorry, even though she had forbidden him from uttering the word whenever she came to his aid. When he spoke to her in French, it was meant as a call to her soul. This much she understood.

'Not really,' the beauty answered. '*Merci*, my perfect stranger. Are you going to tell me what hit you so hard?'

'*De nada, Regala.* Sure, if you want to know.'

Of course Lynn Dyson wanted to know. And Jeff Diamond absolutely needed to tell her.

Waiting for their meals to arrive, the couple enjoyed their wine while the story of a young boy being suspended from rough, thorny leather straps hanging from the ceiling of a train bound for Cabramatta was unravelled into words for the first time. It was more troublesome to listen to than to vocalise, the grown man acknowledged, noting looks of horror exchanged for gasps of disbelief in equal measure. He recounted how his drug addict mother had ignored his pleas to be helped down to the floor, and how he could still feel the drop's depth reverberating through his knees whenever he thought of that traumatic episode.

The contrast of the irresponsibility shown by the child's cackling witch of a parent and the kindly but inaccessible solace offered by an elderly man across the aisle brought tears to his girlfriend's eyes again. How could one's flesh and blood be so cruel? And how powerless that elderly gentleman and his fellow passengers must have felt... Why hadn't someone spoken up? This was another reason why she oughtn't to silence her world-changing boyfriend when he aired his opinions. He spoke up when no-one else dared.

'I love you, Jeff,' she raised her chin and said aloud, much to her partner's surprise.

Both diners refused dessert on the house, as offered by a proprietor who recognised the drawcards currently attracting attention towards his modest establishment. Lynn was restless, worried about missing her workout. Her boyfriend paid their bill and shook the restaurant owner's hand as they passed through the door which had been expansively held open for the famous patrons.

'Are you up for getting back on the tube?' the young woman asked. 'It won't still be crowded. We'll get a seat.'

'Yeah,' Jeff agreed. 'I feel like walking, but I know you're in a hurry. No point prolonging the fear of getting back on the horse either, I guess. You're a hard taskmaster, gorgeous, but we should.'

The songwriter felt strong, slender fingers grip his hand tightly, rejoicing once again at his ability to do the right thing despite the nagging desire to claim his prize for actions already completed. This learning process was edifying in its own way, and he felt sure he wouldn't be denied his pleasure for long.

'I have to train,' Lynn repeated. 'The French Open's only a few weeks away.'

'Train tomorrow,' he quipped, lifting her hand to his lips.

'I have to train tomorrow too.'

'Sure you do. Train, train, train. It's all you ever do. You never have time for me anymore. Are you sure you're not having an affair?'

The champion giggled. 'With the handle of my tennis racquet?'

'Christ Almighty!' her boyfriend yelled. 'I did not expect you to say that! That's actually a pretty erotic fantasy, baby. Are you sure you need to go to training right now?'

Clattering down the steep wooden slats of a deactivated escalator, down to the Bakerloo Line platforms, the laughing pair was relieved to find itself two of only a handful of other travellers. By the time they had alighted at Warwick Avenue and surfaced into the tree-lined boulevard, the sportswoman's peculiar *peccadillo* had morphed into a smutty song which her entertainer had vowed to fashion into something significantly more respectable while she was at the gymnasium.

After walking for a few minutes towards Blomfield Road and the canal, Lynn hesitated for a second at the opening of a narrow lane which led behind the houses, as if disconcerted by a noise or having spied a person in the shadows. Her protective chaperone scanned the darkness but drew a blank.

'What's up?'

The teenager's hand suddenly tugged on his own, pulling him around the corner. 'Take me in the park.'

'What?'

Jeff had heard her correctly, he was sure. In the course of the last two hours, their very normal evening had turned decidedly abnormal after his uncontrollable trip to the dark side. Yet whether it was the unconventional re-purposing of sports equipment or suggesting sex in the park, his conservative golden princess was already showing promising signs of a daring and altogether less straight-laced adulthood in which his presence appeared to figure prominently.

The dumbstruck rock star took no persuading, letting himself be led towards the blackness of Little Venice Gardens, not even confident that they could gain access after dusk. Sure enough, the determined teenager dragged him through the nearest gateway. She pointed into the obscured

depths within, past a children's playground and beyond the pair of tennis courts where the celebrities had hammed it up with a crowd of locals a couple of weekends ago.

'Are you sure about this?' it was his turn to ask.

'Yes, I am. Come on. There's no-one here.'

The young man was not so certain of this fact, given that the evening was not too cold and the area was known to be inhabited by a number of vagrants. Mildly concerned for their safety, his carnal instincts deterred him from issuing the naïve woman some sort of warning before throwing caution to the wind.

'You're going to have to let me take a piss first,' he joked, kissing the appealing mouth of his partner-in-crime. 'You plied me with too much alcohol.'

Lynn shrugged, standing firm. 'If you have to.'

'Jesus, Lynn! Please don't stop making my dreams come true,' Jeff shouted, lowering his fly and turning to face into the bushes. 'I have to, and with you loitering right there, it's going to take a bloody long time to hit the ground.'

The young woman wandered around the small, secluded piece of lawn, selecting a spot where they would be the least conspicuous. 'You're an animal,' she responded with a hearty laugh.

'I am,' her boyfriend affirmed, running up behind her and grabbing her waist, and the couple whipped round in a circle and crumpled into the wet grass. 'And you love it, don't you? Tell me you do.'

'I love it. I really love it, and I love you, Jeff. Is this spontaneous?'

'Pretty much,' his mouth uttered through a fevered kiss.

Blissfully happy at the end of their most unusual evening, Lynn and Jeff had returned home from the sports centre just before midnight and tumbled straight into bed, exhausted and unable to deny the huge high that lingered from their brief, fumbling encounter in the gardens.

The songwriter lay in the dark and listened to the regular breathing of his sleeping angel, an erection rock hard under the covers. His troubled mind refused to slow down, and his body responded with its habitual craving for power. Forcing himself to channel this energy into a new lyric or melody, he stared at the intricate rose from which the lampshade hung above their heads and willed his heart to beat more quietly.

'You're like a fish out of water, aren't you?' his bedfellow said out of the blue, having woken a few minutes earlier in the midst of his gargantuan struggle.

'Yep,' the frustrated man affirmed. 'Sorry.'

'Don't say sorry. No more sorries, we agreed.'

'You agreed...'

Lynn hitched herself up onto one elbow and pouted. 'What? I don't think so...'

'I didn't agree to anything,' Jeff shrugged, unable to resist her lips. 'You told me that was how it was going to be. I didn't make any promises.'

'Damn!' the beautiful woman laughed. 'That's true.'

Her strung-out stallion hugged her and planted a big kiss on her furrowed brow as she flattened onto her back and pulled the covers back up towards her chin. 'Sorry, angel,' he whispered directly into her ear. 'Got you on a technicality. Go back to sleep.'

Obediently, the blonde singer closed her eyes and turned her body away from the heat radiating on the other side of the bed. She felt sorry for this man who was trying so hard to please her in

every possible way, remembering the extreme symptoms which had thrown their world into chaos earlier that day.

Two steps forward and one step back, they had agreed during dinner, in itself much better than the other way around. There was no deadline on his path to reparation, was there? It wouldn't harm their progress if she were to give in once in a while, particularly since he was due in New York in a few days' time to fulfil some pre-tour promotional obligations. The sympathetic musician shifted a little, knowing this would offer sufficient rope for her drowning man to seize onto if he needed to.

'I can't sleep.'

'Can I help?'

Jeff's heart soared. 'D'you wanna help?' he dared to cough suggestively, with a smirk hidden in the nocturnal shadows.

'I always want to help. You know that,' Lynn whispered.

'Yeah, but *that* kind of help?'

'Oh, I always want to help.'

'Then yeah, I want some help.'

Tangling arms and legs moved in a bonded, sensual dance, awakening the passions of Jeff's sleepy therapist. He loved how her fingers immediately encased themselves around his aching penis, guiding it towards her vagina and meandering it around for her pleasure. Groaning softly, his own fingers worked until he was able to push his size inside her, feeling her come within seconds.

An owl hooted in the distance, from the direction of Little Venice Gardens, making them chuckle in shame for their *al fresco* interlude under the bird's watchful eye. The poet teased his tired muse that they had received a score of two hoots earlier, which was bound to indicate room for improvement, and was chuffed to hear no objection to a return match for the purpose of eliciting a higher score.

Instead, the young woman climaxed again, holding his body so tightly that he could do nothing to prevent himself from following her lead. Lying together in the warmth of their exertion, no words were spoken until Lynn heard her relaxed lover's breathing change.

'Will you put your hand on my back, like you used to?' she asked, moving to her right and curling her back.

'Like this?' his voice croaked, her generosity overwhelming him again.

'Yes. Thank you.'

'Does it feel good?' he sniffed, stroking her hair with his free hand.

The nineteen-year-old sighed. 'Yeah. It's perfect.'

'Different?'

'No. Just the same. Exactly how I hoped it'd feel.'

A tear rolled down the millionaire's face, safe in the knowledge that the word "hoped" had been chosen over "expected" for a good reason. 'Sweet. Like I'm glad I'm not always him anymore.'

'It's OK. It doesn't matter how long it takes,' Lynn sighed.

Jeff kissed the delicate skin of his Regala's shoulder, where their two initials were etched side-by-side into her flesh. 'G'night, angel.'

'Goodnight, mercenary.'

'Former mercenary,' her old soul reminded her.

'Forever angel,' she returned. "Night.'

'Did my dad really become demanding after he'd had an anxiety attack?' Freya asked her mother out of the blue.

'Pardon?' Alison Gunarwardene looked up, shocked to hear her daughter raise this topic.

'Dad,' the schoolgirl clarified. 'When he'd had an episode of rage or whatever. Was he... you know... Did he force you into anything?'

The *divorcée* flinched, perturbed to have been reminded of a past she had put behind her. 'Why are you asking? Have you been reading that damned book again?'

'Yes,' Freya sighed. 'Please don't call it "that damned book", Mum. It's an awesome book. It's my Bible, and nothing you say's going to make me stop reading it.'

Unbeknown to her mother, the seventeen-year-old was making her way through Jeff Diamond's bestseller for a fourth time, and this edition actually belonged to her. Already having downloaded it onto her Kindle, she had requested a hardback copy from her grandparents as a present for passing her examinations with flying colours, and it had immediately been elevated to her most treasured possession.

Alison frowned. 'I'd rather not talk about how your dad behaved towards me when he was angry,' she said. 'I've read the book too. I can only guess you're trying to tell me I wasn't kind enough to him.'

'No!' Freya leaped to her own defence. 'That's not at all what I was going to say. I know you tried to help him.'

'Well, you shouldn't go drawing so many parallels with Jeff Diamond purely because he and your dad both had PTSD. Your dad was a violent man; couldn't control his temper. He had a mean streak, Freya. Something you know very well, so pull your head in a tad.'

The young woman bit her lip. She did have a habit of speaking her mind, even though she always tried to do it as tactfully as she could. It was inside her. She could often see things so clearly that it unnerved her, frustrated not to be able to express herself around adults who always claimed they knew best.

She also hated the fact that she had become so curious about sex. All her friends were too, some already having lost their virginity in all manner of embarrassing ways. She couldn't bear the thought of being touched by a man, especially after the abuse her father had put her through before he took his own life. Yet how amazing it would be to fall in love with someone like Jeff Diamond, who seemed to know everything and was so sensitive to the world's needs... Just like she was, in fact.

'Sorry, Mum. You don't need to keep reminding me. You're supposed to be helping me forget.'

The older woman's gaze met that of her daughter, having inadvertently grasped the barb on the olive branch that had been proffered. Her intelligent little girl was turning into a feisty adolescent, eager to exert her authority over the rest of her family while she tested her wings. These were the words the psychiatrist had used at any rate, not that the mother's frame of mind had been open to understanding them. Ten years of denial hard to shake off, she too had read between Jeff Diamond's superbly crafted lines and learned lessons too late to save her marriage or the life of the Sri Lankan refugee whom she had married in a fit of pity.

Unfortunately for Freya too, the feeling of apathy which surrounded her Australian parent at that time had only intensified when it came to her creative but scarred eldest child. Her younger brother didn't seem to incur their mum's wrath to the same extent, and the daughter struggled to come to terms with this perceived favouritism. These doubts compounded her own unease, wondering if distancing herself from her family was the right thing to do. The counsellors had advised against it, but her instincts told her to flee. She longed for "A Life Singular" to send her a signal that would help her make this life-changing decision.

Picking up her copy of the Diamonds' autobiography, the student tucked it into her schoolbag. Her fingers flicked the edge of a large white envelope which had arrived in the post that morning. Freya knew what it contained. She asked her mother to call her when dinner was ready because she planned to spend the next few hours painting in her studio, hardly able to stand the suspense of climbing the stairs and vanishing behind her door with the secret packet silently screaming to be opened.

With any luck, the artist's eighteenth birthday would be celebrated in another city, on another continent and with people who knew her worth.