

Prologue

Dan's knees buckled under him, heart beating so fast that his ears were ringing. The call disconnected, and as he flopped down onto the mattress, the screen of his mobile telephone reverted to its colourful background. He had downloaded this picture from The Good School's website a year ago, and he gulped when he acknowledged its new significance.

The dazed student needed to tell someone; to share this amazing piece of news. But whom? His mum would be fast asleep at home in Glasgow, as would the mentor who had acted as referee for his application, both five hours in advance of his current location. He stared beyond the window of his shoebox-sized hotel room at the blizzard sleeting across the Charles River to the city of Boston, still having difficulty coming to terms with this superb turn of events.

There was one person who would understand perfectly... What time would it be in Brisbane? Another nine hours ahead of the UK. No... Eleven hours. It was summer down there, wasn't it? Daylight savings, the strange expression people used in America when they moved their clocks forward. Or back. Which was it? It must already be Thursday afternoon on the east coast of Australia. This time-travel thing always confused him much more than it ought to.

The familiar sound of an arrow being drawn and fired from a longbow swooshed from the tablet computer behind him, synchronised with the vibration of his smartphone against his thigh. The dual prompts jolted the Scot out of his trance. A new e-mail; the one he had been told to expect. So he wasn't dreaming after all!

Dan's fingers entered his four-digit "PIN" code to unlock the outdated device and confirm the message's arrival, just as the Admissions bursar foreshadowed. And to cap it all, there was a text from *her*:

"Heard news. Awesome! So happy 4 u. C u @ dinner. Freya ☺"

God Almighty! As if the ambitious teenager wasn't excited enough, now his insides churned for a whole different reason. He hadn't the nerve to ring the winner of last year's scholarship yet, noting she had taken the easy option too. He tapped out a quick reply, itching to read the contents of Kierney Diamond's e-mail.

"Thx. Unreal, my head's spinning. Talk soon. Can't wait to finally meet. DFin"

Was that too obvious? Was it obvious enough? Perhaps Freya meant nothing more than their attendance at the *gala* dinner, where the outgoing leader was to hand over to the next incumbent. She said she was happy for him, that was all. There was probably a line of smart, good-looking guys eager to be her guest that evening, and there was no way he would have the courage to ask her out. Not yet anyway... Not at this stage of his life.

Dan's finger hovered over the unread e-mail, opening it to reveal several short paragraphs with embedded links to four separate documents, the passwords for which had been sent in a text earlier by the friendly Australian United Nations diplomat.

Tap. An acceptance form. No-brainer!

Tap. Details of available accommodation for the first week in January, all expenses paid!

Tap again. Order of Proceedings for the inauguration ceremony, complete with his name printed with "Guest of Honour" underneath.

And one last tap. A certificate for the recipient to print and pin up on his wall, and a logo file to add to his website, LinkedIn profile and *Curriculum Vitæ*. He had done it! After years of dedication to the guiding

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principles set out in “A Life Singular”, the working-classed Partick couple’s surviving twin, born with not much more than an entrepreneurial spirit and a curious drive to rock the boat, was well on his way to true greatness. A place at The Good School was the only thing he had ever coveted, apart from having his father shake his hand as the son whose existence had been so far disavowed.

Dan Finley would make the great Jeff Diamond proud. If it took every last breath in his pale, scrawny body, he would take the teachings from the great man’s autobiography to the next level. After everything he had put himself through up to this point, he needed to trust destiny to deliver him to his dream girl, so they could take carriage of the work their idols had handed down.

It was their destiny. He had already designed the tattoo.

Leading From The Front

One of Australia's most influential men reached the small suburban boxing club belonging to Alberto Santos Fernandez, in town to lay his murdering father to rest once and for all. His heart was heavy, but his head was clear. The biggest question on his mind was whether he could fly in and out before word of his presence broke among the crime gangs of Sydney's west. It had been well over a year since he had heard from Mark Jaworski, but it was still best not to tempt providence.

In reality, Jeff had no evidence to suggest anyone might seek retribution against him. Did Rough Diamond's demise make any difference? The fortunate son's profile had been plenty high enough over the last few years for the victims' families to claim revenge for any grudges they might harbour.

Nevertheless, the star was as jumpy as a sack of motherless joeys as he locked the driver's door of his rented Commodore and crossed the street to Alberto's club. He smiled and shook his head. No-one had thought to mention that his philanthropic contribution included a flashing neon sign above the door!

The benefactor found the old man and his middle son, Felipe, watching television in the basement. He had visited several times in recent months, having paid for a major overhaul of the facilities and equipment in an effort to promote the club too far into the limelight for the underworld element to bother with it anymore. Striding past a series of rings on both sides, he waved at those who called out to him but chose not to stop and talk. He noticed a picture of himself on the wall behind the bar, posing with Alberto and a number of the older boys who trained here. So he had done some good for his hometown at least, in his rush to change the world. It compensated somewhat for the gaudy signage.

The proprietor ushered his worthy sponsor through to the rear lounge, which had been deemed out-of-scope for the renovation project; a stark contrast to the crisp, new *décor* in the public areas. Jeff placed a brown paper bag containing two bottles of an imported, special vintage Chilean wine, prompting Felipe to spring up and produce four ornate goblets from under the bar.

The anxious celebrity downed his first taste of the rich, red *Carmenere* in only a couple of gulps. Alberto's son reached forward to refill his glass. With nerves easing a little, the former local reminded his hosts that the family's youngest child, Carlos, had been in his year at school, extrapolating that Felipe was closer in age to Madalena. The young man with streaks of peroxide highlights in his hair had spent the last few years working in the Mediterranean for a tour company, leading Jeff to believe him to be one of the few men in the neighbourhood who had never slept with his sister.

A while later, a knock on the door signalled the arrival of Joe Cafici, the owner of the hardware store above which the Diamonds had lived in the nineteen-sixties. Although the old man had retired, so overweight that he struggled to walk unaided, and the shop was now run by his sons, concern lurked at the back of Jeff's mind as to who might belong in the card shark's circle these days.

Since deciding not to sell the Stones Road flat, the songwriter had leased it to a husband and wife team of musicians, who used the space to teach children in the area. They had kept him informed of any suspicious activity, repeatedly complaining that the elderly Italian had a habit of snooping around and asking after their famous landlord's schedule and whereabouts.

Jeff was boxed into a corner this evening however, wondering who else might turn up out of the blue to drink with him on the pretext of paying their respects. He had no choice but to trust Alberto's judgement. None of these men had been friends with his father, so perhaps the occasion was more "good riddance" than "for he's a jolly good fellow."

Once Joe had shuffled into a vacated armchair, the local-boy-made-good began to recount the events of the previous week and explained what he hoped to achieve from this trip. He evaded a number of nostalgic questions about days he didn't care to remember, determined to wait until he and Alberto were alone before checking on any gangland activity currently playing out around Fairfield and Parramatta.

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Despite the old man's insistence that Cafici was trustworthy, the celebrity was not prepared to give the grumpy, bow-legged Italian one *iota* of information which could be misused. Moreover, he had forgotten how vile it was to shake the hand of yet another man who had indulged in carnal pleasure at the expense of his sister's youth.

Two bottles of wine and far too many cigarettes later, *Señora* Santos showed their handsome guest to his lodgings for the night. He wasn't at all surprised when they reached the top of the stairs and the door opened into Eva's childhood bedroom. She had since moved to another similar building nearby with her boyfriend, and her former school friend struggled not to laugh when his memory treated him to a few select images from the countless times he had sneaked into this room as a hot-headed colt, right under the nose of this woman who was now breathless and swooning in his presence.

Alberto's wife made sure Jeff had everything he needed, even teaching him how to work the shower in the family's cramped bathroom. As soon as she had disappeared back to her incoherent husband, he closed the door and pushed his overnight bag up against it. Paranoia ripped at the edges of his conscience. Surely no-one would try to break in and attack him in his sleep with the South American couple and their son in residence. Would they?

The walls were most likely paper-thin, the thought of which elicited another *frisson* of embarrassment. The lost boy realised the nocturnal visits of his teenage years may well have been overheard, despite their clumsy efforts to remain undetected! Many a sweat-drenched hour had passed on this bed, while he enjoyed the nubile but mindless companionship of the Chileans' only daughter, sharing minute quantities of weed that one or the other had purloined through various creative means.

The best thing about his current predicament, the world-changer mused as he undressed and rolled his clothes up on top of his suitcase, was the way this salt-of-the-earth and his family had made no effort to pamper him, nor even to apologise for the basic accommodation. They regarded him in the same friendly, compassionate vein to which the poor, fatherless child had been treated fifteen years ago. Tonight, he lay in the single bed once more; this time as a filthy rich, fatherless child.

The songwriter's keen ears tuned in to the sounds of Fairfield's restless suburban nightlife. Women shouted at whoever would listen to their woes, while tanked-up blokes set to, posturing outside seedy bars; the odd dog howling or yelping, babies crying, and cars honing up and down the streets, tyres squealing on the wet bitumen. His mind still fascinated by Madalena's image of their maternal grandmother dancing in the street at the news of her son-in-law's passing, a song was already moulding itself around this tempting hook and demanding to be written down before it prevented him from sleeping.

Flicking on the bedside light and reaching into his bag for a notepad, Jeff found to his amazement that instead of the bitter ritual the phrase initially conjured up, the composition materialised into something decidedly celebratory. A *fiesta* to exalt the irreversible exile of a spectre which had blighted so many people's lives, never more to haunt them.

The multi-millionaire drifted off to sleep, detached in a surreal yet comfortable way from the community he was trying to avoid. He began to envision how life might have turned out if he had become embroiled in the underworld hierarchy, as his arrogance had taunted his ailing dad. Would he have been capable of setting man against man? And if so, could he have committed his firstborn to follow in his footsteps through the dangerous world, where criminals strove every day to stay one step ahead of each other and two steps ahead of the police?

The boy from Canley Vale's wild imagination soon gave way to a vivid dream, where he and a teenaged Jet, still with curly, blond hair but now tall and strong, were ring-leaders for a job offloading a consignment of drugs from a boat moored in a dark inlet somewhere along the Parramatta River. With a mixture of pride and fear, he watched his boy-child handle a gun as if it were his best friend.

Inevitably, sleeping alone in a strange bed with nothing but an overnight bag and an overactive mind to protect him, the dreamer was soon sitting bolt upright, shaking vigorously in a cold sweat and gasping for air. The nightmare had left his head infused with footage of himself fighting his boorish father and their

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hardened Polish opponents, weapons drawn and with blood splattered everywhere. Some of this blood belonged to Jet, even though he had no recollection of why or where his son had disappeared to before naked fear pitched him out of the dream.

'Jesus fucking Christ,' Jeff swore under his breath, springing up and tearing at the handle of the small window which afforded a clear view of the industrial warehouse across the laneway.

He directed his cigarette smoke through the opening, as he had done in this room many times before. Nothing material had changed inside him after all, had it? Lodged in his decadent, loved-up new life, the tormented soul from Sydney's south-west had merely learned to suppress the horrific memories.

While his heart rate slowed to a more normal pace, the stowaway acknowledged a perverse, pleasing pride that immeasurable happiness and quantifiably alarming wealth had not displaced his adolescent flaws altogether. He was not really the new Jeff Diamond, in spite of Lynn dubbing him so. Rather, he was the original but tremendously improved Jeff Diamond.

The next morning, well rested yet uneasy, the songwriter shared a rushed breakfast with the Santos Fernandez family, thanked them for their hospitality and departed before sunrise for Her Majesty's Prison Parklea. Paranoid or not, being followed as he drove to the high-security facility that his father had called home for almost eighteen years was a chilling prospect.

Jeff's memory was these days less accurate on the intricacies of the streets running north-south in his former stomping ground, no longer confident in his ability to outsmart a tail. The anonymous, white Holden sedan wove against the thickening commuter traffic, taking the occasional side-road both deliberately and not so deliberately. It eventually turned into the same visitors' car park where his wife and daughter had danced during their previous visit, not long before the old man had coughed his guts up for the very last time.

The Australian hero locked the car doors from the inside and wound the driver's seat backwards, pulling his baseball cap down low. With a long wait until the administration office's fluorescent lights would surge into life, he read the Sydney Morning Herald for an hour before remembering having spotted a public telephone outside the reception block.

What time was it? His watch reported eight o'clock and a handful of minutes. Lynn had taken the children to Benloch to spend time with their grandparents while her husband had been working overseas, and they were guaranteed to be up and about by now. Their exuberance would do more to brighten his day than a roomful of dazzling strip-lights.

'Marianna, it's Jeff,' the rock star announced. 'How're you going?'

'Oh, hello, dear. My condolences. I'm so sorry to hear about your father. How are you?'

'Ah, I'm fine. Thanks. We were hardly close. Could I speak to Lynn, please? I'm in a call-box and don't have much change.'

'Yes, yes... Of course,' his mother-in-law understood. 'Give us your number. She can ring you back. That's no problem.'

'Great. Thanks again,' the caller said to no-one, hearing the receiver clonk onto the table and the sound of hurrying footsteps.

'Dad!' a young boy's voice burst through the telephone within seconds, brimming with excitement. 'It's Jet.'

'No! It can't be. I must have the wrong number,' his father joked, struck by an overpowering sense of relief that last night's bad dream had not come true.

'Dad, it *is* me!' the five-year-old pleaded, laughing. 'It *is* the right number.'

Concerned the call was about to cut off, the traveller steered the boy on to more serious matters. 'OK. I know. I'm only kidding. But hey, brains... Could you do me a favour and write down my number? Is there some paper by the 'phone?'

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'Yes,' Jet replied, eager to please after being given responsibility for something which sounded important. 'And I've got a pen.'

'Cool. Good man.'

The musician read out the digits on the vandalised telephone booth, remembering to add the area code for New South Wales, then asked the child to play it back to him. His pulse pumping in his ears, he listened to the sequence echoing his son's transcription.

'OK! Perfect, mate. When I hang up, dial that number, and I'll answer. If nothing happens, hang up again and wait for me to ring back. OK?'

'Okey dokey! Hang up, Dad.'

'*Adiós, amigo,*' Jeff chuckled, pressing the button to terminate the call and smiling as he imagined Jet's short, stubby fingers searching for the numbers one by one.

A few cars had begun to circle the car park, staff arriving to prepare for the day's scheduled visits. The Australian icon kept his face to the wall. Before long, the telephone made a peculiar jangling noise, vibrating the cracked Perspex shelter. He snatched the receiver off its hook and leaned into the hooded surround, speaking as softly as he could.

'Hey, mate. Good job. Is *Mamá* there?'

'Yes. Dad wants to talk to you,' he heard the lad say, the volume of his youthful voice fading as he turned his head away from the mouthpiece.

'Hi, *hombre mío*. How are you?' Lynn's tender greeting melted his heart. 'And *where* are you?'

'Pretty good, thanks. I'm at Parklea already,' he whispered. 'Can't really talk 'cause there's people wandering about. Just wanted to say I miss you.'

'Oh, thank you. That's nice. We miss you too. Was last night alright?'

'Ah, y'know...'

'Oh, right. Nightmare?' his wife asked, the conclusion no stretch for her telepathic powers.

'Yep. Correct. Anyway... Anything happening down on the farm?'

'Of course! All manner of action hereabouts,' the young mother asserted. 'We've been swimming, riding, hunting bees... You name it!'

'*¡Excelente!* Much the same as me then.'

Lynn let out a sunny laugh. 'Oh, good! The boxing club's branched out evidently. Hope it all goes OK today. Not too harrowing. Do you have to see your dad?'

'Don't know. Guess so. Although it's not too tricky for them to confirm his identity in this place, I imagine. I'm prepared for it. Morbid fascination and all that. Tell you later. We can have ghost stories round the campfire on Sunday.'

'Ugh! Do we have to?' the singer groaned. 'Do you want to talk to the kids now?'

'Yeah. If they're there. Thanks, angel. I love you so much.'

'I love you too. Here's Kizzy.'

A vision of his deceased father slotted into a mortuary compartment within this building's cold, grey walls dominated the superstar's concentration in the momentary lapse. The distasteful image was soon voided by the sound of his wife coaching their little girl on what to say, followed by the silky softness of breathy giggles growing louder.

How many prisoners waited for such extra-special calls once a week, knowing this was all they deserved? And for those whose liberty remained unshackled, sweet moments like these made being away from home worthwhile too.

'*¡Olá, Papá! Soy Kierney. Ça va là-bas?*'

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'¡Olá, gorguesita!' her dad responded with a lump in his throat. *'Oui. Tout va vraiment bien ici, merci, mademoiselle.* You having fun over there too?'

The youngster giggled. 'We saw bees. Buzzy bees!'

'Buzzy bees? Wow! Fantastic, baby. Were they flying or just sleeping?'

'Flying *and* sleeping,' the toddler explained, her tone most insistent.

'Flying and sleeping at the same time? Isn't that dangerous? They'll buzz straight into a tree or a wall and get a nasty bump on their buzzy heads.'

Kierney's laughter wrapped itself around a long sigh reminiscent of her mother. 'No, *Papá!* Not at the same time. Some sleeping and some flying.'

'Oh, I see. That's a relief. So what else have you guys been up to?'

'Heaps,' she replied. '*Mamá* says stop talking.'

Jeff laughed. 'Right! You'd better give the 'phone back to *Mamá*. I'll see you soon, *pequeñita. Te amo.*'

'*Te amo* too, *Papá,*' the little girl chimed, clearly having the receiver wrestled away by her big brother. '*Adiós.*'

'*Adiós, hija mía.*'

'Dad!' Jet shouted.

'Mate!' the caller replied, cupping his hand over the microphone. 'Can't talk for long. You have a good day, and I'll see you on Sunday. I've got some cool stories to tell you. Please could you give *Mamá* the 'phone?'

'OK. Bye, Dad!'

'Hello!' Lynn was chuckling at the fast exchanges while re-instituting some semblance of peace between the warring siblings. 'Thanks for ringing. Keep safe. I'll let you go. Good luck with everything.'

'Cheers, angel,' Jeff said, wishing he didn't have to terminate the call and rely on their invisible elastic connection for the gruesome task ahead. 'I'll let you listen into all my stories too, I promise.'

'Great. *Gracias, Papá,*' his dream girl gave her husband one of her best audible grins. 'Look forward to it. I love you. Bye.'

The revitalised superstar placed the receiver on its hook and walked over to the reception office's main entrance, wiping a sweaty palm on his trouser leg. Feeling out of place among his own kind, he held the door for a woman sporting a mouth covered in cold sores and with three young children in tow, all unkempt and whining. Not a word of thanks was forthcoming, and his black trousers narrowly avoided falling ash from her cigarette as he followed the brood inside and up to the Admittance desk.

'Mister Diamond!' a lady behind the counter called out, identifying their special guest in an instant and trying not to sound too excited. 'Welcome back!'

'Thanks,' the famous son nodded. 'Sooner than I thought.'

'Step this way, please,' she instructed, pointing to the end of the barrier, where her colleague had lifted a hinged section for him to enter the office.

Jeff sighed. He was passing into the inner sanctum of Her Majesty's Prison Parklea yet again, hoping this was the last time. At the request of a muscle-bound thug in uniform, he sat down at an interview table. Without so much as exchanging pleasantries, he was offered coffee and told to wait.

The square room's walls were at least freshly painted and adorned with benign landscape photographs, in contrast to the desolate, grey prisoners' conjugal rooms. The celebrity wondered if the guard's austere manner was a deliberate ploy to make everyone feel culpable, or whether his conditioning had caused him to forget there was any other way to interact.

Lighting a cigarette, the songwriter leafed through the paperwork he had so far received about his father's incarceration and demise. The cold, hard facts rang like a crowbar against the cage of his vicarious

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guilt. He remembered the counsellor, Chris Williams, promising him biscuits as well as coffee, and asked the guard if he could make an internal telephone call. His request was declined without explanation.

Just as the celebrity's patience was starting to wear thin, in walked the governor himself. He was flanked by two other men, one of whom waved as if greeting an old friend. The personality-free duty officer stood to attention.

'Mister Maloney,' Jeff called to mind, standing up and offering his right hand. 'And Larry Shepherd. Good to see you again.'

'You too, Mister Diamond,' replied Tom Maloney, on the defensive, suspicious that his authority was about to be undermined. 'Have you two met before?'

'Hello, Jeff. Good to see you again,' Larry shook the visitor's hand *con gusto*. 'Yes, sir. I was present when the prisoner met his son a few years back. I was just trying to remember how long ago that was.'

'Seventy-six,' the son in question answered. 'Winter, July or August. It was lashing with rain that day, as I recall. How're you going?'

'Good, Jeff,' the psychologist replied. 'And you?'

'I'm very sorry for your loss, Mister Diamond,' the officious chief warden interrupted.

The lower-ranked officer stepped back. It was clear from Maloney's attitude that they were not here to take a trip down Memory Lane. There was quite obviously a process to which prisoners' relatives were expected to adhere, and they were damned well going to adhere to it.

'Thanks,' Jeff acknowledged. 'And also for coming over personally. You must be busy. I'm sure you're not normally called upon for this kind of thing.'

'That's correct,' the governor replied, appearing to relax. 'Please sit down. I'll leave you in Officer Shepherd's capable hands. He can answer any questions you have about the release of your father's body and any *post mortem* examination you may wish to have carried out. There's a full report of the events leading up to his passing, so please take as long as you need to review it.'

A bolt of revulsion shot through the star's head. *Post mortem*? Did he want one? This was all becoming a little too real for the man who had managed to keep his next of kin at a healthy distance for his whole life. Flashbacks flooded his mind of the afternoon he had sat in an almost identical room at Fairfield Hospital, working his way through the same material in connection with his mother's death. No matter how much more mature he was these days, whether actual or perceived, this was still an onerous circumstance. Some of life's responsibilities were just plain difficult, regardless of any mental preparation put in ahead of time.

The rock star was disturbed by how profoundly this experience was affecting him. If this feeling of desolation came in the aftermath of an estranged parent's demise, how awful must it be to clean up after the death of someone special? Children were expected to outlast their parents, although not usually by as long as in his case. Nevertheless, this latest epiphany gave rise to a new level of sympathy for the lines of desperate adults outside the feeding camps and hospitals in the poor African countries he had visited in recent years, let alone for the parents of Amanda Fallon and Mary-Anne Pearce back in Chicago.

Get over it, Jeff scolded himself. *You didn't even like the bastard*. He had no right to compare himself with any of these bereaved folk. He ought to dispense with the bureaucracy as quickly as possible so he could fly home and concentrate on more important people than this murdering Polish Jew who had never dispensed an ounce of charity.

His official duty fulfilled, the governor clipped his heels and coughed, spurring both subordinates into a rushed salute. He left the room exuding military swagger, and the three remaining men sat around the table, staring at each other's collection of paperwork. The younger officer present, who had hung back until this point while in the company of superiors, introduced himself as Lindsay and offered to assist with completing the array of forms. The celebrity had no chance to ask if he were Lindsay somebody or somebody Lindsay.

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'So this is all that remains of my dad,' the philosopher remarked, looking from one pile to the next. 'Weird, isn't it?'

'Not quite all,' Larry replied. 'And I'm also sorry, Jeff, although I hear you had a good meeting with him last week with your family. The visit caused a stir among the ladies in the office, I must say.'

'We did,' the superstar nodded, smirking at the quaint allegory. 'Yeah. I bet! Our kids are good value with ladies in offices. My dad almost seemed human compared to the previous time. I remember saying to my sister that it's amazing how staring death in the face can change one's perspective on things.'

The senior staff member laughed aloud, whereas Lindsay tried not to.

'You're right,' the kindly psychologist agreed. 'And young children tend to soften even the hardest of hearts. I believe you met my colleague, Chris Williams, last time too.'

'Yep. That's right. Chris came and prepared us for what we were about to receive,' the comic leaned back into his chair, now much more at ease. 'She was very professional. She asked me to swing by today, so I'd like to do that, if I can.'

'Oh, definitely. We work in the same building. I'll walk you over later.'

Officer Lindsay Lindsay pulled out a sheet of paper from his folder and laid it on the table in front of the imposing figure, who instantly recognised it as a death certificate. Its companion artefact was stored in the filing cabinet at *Escondido*.

'Is that for me to sign?' he asked the prison employee, who had drawn the short straw of *administrivia* for the day.

'Yes, sir. It provides details of the deceased and the doctor's comments as to cause of death. You need to check it to make sure the information's accurate before you sign it.'

'Do I?' Jeff replied, stealing a quick glance at Larry. 'How do I check it's accurate? I wasn't there at the time.'

Shepherd intervened, appreciating the sardonic observation. 'What Lindsay means, Jeff, is that if you can verify your father's personal details, please, and initial to say you've read the doctor's statement, that would be fine.'

The visitor nodded. 'Thanks. Sure. Aren't many personal details I can verify either, to be honest.'

He perused the form, bile rising as confused flashbacks dimmed and then intensified behind his eyes. The medical report asserted that the prisoner suffered respiratory failure after an extended bout of coughing, and that subsequently he had fallen unconscious and was unable to be resuscitated. The cynic wondered if they had made much effort to revive him, but fell short of voicing this view. It was far better for everyone that they hadn't tried too hard.

As Governor Maloney had hinted earlier, the form also contained a small box which the next of kin could tick to request a *post mortem*. The celebrity's pen floated over it for a second or so before leaving it blank. What difference would it make? How often did relatives of such hardcore criminals sue Her Majesty for damages?

'Y'know...' he muttered, as he adorned the death certificate with his lightning-fast autograph, these days as consistent as a rubber stamp. 'I signed one of these for my mum when I was fourteen.'

Larry gasped. 'Really? As a minor?'

'Yep. As a minor. Fucked, huh?'

The greying man let out a low whistle. 'You went through a lot back then,' he stated the obvious. 'I wonder how the law actually stands on that? Your dad was technically her next of kin, but he probably wasn't involved at all. I haven't been around all that long here, but I'm curious to find out.'

'I'm a hundred percent sure he wasn't involved,' Jeff confirmed. 'Please don't worry about it on my behalf. What's the use in finding out? To arrest me for falsifying my mother's death certificate? She's no less dead with my signature than with his! I'd have been more than happy not to sign it.'

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'No. Absolutely not. I apologise if I offended you. It just beggars belief that they'd get a young bloke to sign an official document.'

'Yeah. No offence taken, mate. I thought so too, but it made me feel kind o' powerful doing it. The most important thing I'd ever done, up to that point,' the celebrity paused, letting his observation sink in. 'My sister's older than me too, so by rights she should've signed it before me. I can't think of a single ramification from a death certificate being declared null and void. It certainly leads you to question the purpose of all this red tape, doesn't it?'

Officer Lindsay sniggered, all three sharing the black humour.

'Now, Jeff... First things first,' the psychologist said, laying his palm on the forearm of the young man's smart leather jacket. 'Can we get you another cup of coffee?'

The friendly millionaire smiled. 'No, thanks, Larry. I'll wait and have one with Chris. What's next on your list, Officer Lindsay?'

Officer Shepherd stepped in due to a discomfited expression on his younger colleague's face. 'We can accompany you to view the deceased, if you so wish,' he informed their famous visitor, noticing his limbs stiffen too. 'But there's no obligation. One of us can formally identify him if you'd prefer.'

'Jeez. What the hell! I'll do it. It's pretty much the only reason I'm here, if I'm being perfectly honest.'

'Very good. Then we can go through the process for organising a funeral, if you haven't already got your own people in mind.'

Jeff sighed and shook his head. 'No. My people don't do funerals. Their territory normally has much louder audiences these days, if I'm allowed to say that without sounding too arrogant. And hopefully a bit more upbeat too.'

The fawning staff members bellowed, appreciating both the irony and the abject humility which the entertainment industry powerhouse consistently failed to hide.

'And I should see for myself that he's truly gone, in case my sister wants to know how he looked. I might as well take a peek at the old bastard at rest. For Christ's sake, he gave us enough grief. He deserves a final kick in the balls.'

The threesome rose to their feet, Jeff towering above the pair clad in prison blue. Lindsay led the way, still red in the face, sandwiching the plain-clothed rock star between them. Again, he was struck by how all these institutionalised routines made him feel so much like a criminal.

They twisted and turned through several corridors until they reached the mortuary. The smell from within was as unfamiliar as it was obnoxious to the young man's finely-tuned nasal passages. In fact, all five senses battled to take in the austere, cold surroundings, while the clash of disinfectant and formaldehyde threatened to strip his throat of any moisture.

Dressed in white laboratory coats and the type of steel-capped boots more often associated with construction workers, four attendants were milling around examination tables topped with stainless steel. Nursing navvies for deceased wrongdoers, the itinerant minstrel pondered. There was bound to be a song in there somewhere, given a sleepless night here or there...

Two corpses lay out on trolleys, one zipped inside its body-bag and the other with its face and torso exposed. Each had a small label stuck to the coarse fabric with sellotape: name, initial, prisoner identification number and a six-figure date. Any other data were presumably superfluous by this stage.

'How many people go through here in your average month?' Jeff asked Larry, struggling to stop his left hand fidgeting with the lighter and packet of cigarettes in his pants pocket.

'Oh, only one or two. Sometimes none.'

'Many suicides?'

The psychologist stared at the classic mask of impertinence. 'We do our best to prevent it, but yes. Of course.'

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Officer Lindsay had sloped off without saying goodbye, his part of the proceedings either complete or temporarily suspended. A female with a white coat over her uniform now stood beside the men, trying not to make it too obvious that she was ogling the tall, good-looking superstar in their midst.

'Jeff Diamond,' he addressed her, extending his hand.

The woman allowed the musician's long fingers to close around hers, performing a sort of curtsey and stuttering over her own name. 'Vi-, V-Vicky Taylor. It's great to meet you.'

Officer Shepherd frowned. 'Mister Diamond's father has just passed away.'

Too star-struck to have made the connection, V-Vicky blushed again. 'In here? Oh, my God. I'm so sorry.'

'No worries,' the songwriter reassured her with one of his sexiest, lopsided smiles. 'I detested the bloke.'

The mortuary assistant giggled after seeking permission from the higher-ranking officer, who also shared the joke. To make the most of the cheerful mood, Jeff produced his cigarette packet, flipped the lid and offered it round, much to the young woman's astonishment. She declined with a flick of her hand.

'Only kidding,' the comic quipped, closing the pack and dropping it back into his pocket.

'You have a great way with people,' Larry chuckled. 'You make everyone feel very comfortable around you. It's a real skill.'

'Cheers. Let's see if I can do anything to make my arsehole father more comfortable, shall we? Can't say this'd be my favourite place to work.'

Vicky smiled. 'Over here, Mister Diamond, please.'

She slid open a drawer and checked the label on the body-bag against her list, coughing in embarrassment. Satisfied that the prisoner number corresponded to the one on her clipboard, she asked the two men whether they wished her to unzip the bag.

Jeff nodded in response to the officer's invitation, inhaling to shore up his internal defences. 'Go for it.'

Paul Diamond's eyes stared straight ahead as his son's met them. Apart from the initial shock at being confronted with a lifeless human being, the celebrity felt nothing. The lined features could have belonged to a total stranger as far as his heart was concerned.

The pallid, corrugated face wore a peaceful expression which was foreign both to the wearer and his son. Still dressed in inmate's clothing, Diamond Senior's greying, wispy fringe had been combed back to reveal a healed wound above his left eye, about five centimetres in length under the hairline.

'I never knew he had a scar up there,' Jeff remarked to no-one in particular, drawing an index finger down his own forehead. 'Doesn't look too old.'

'No,' Larry agreed. 'Probably happened in the carpentry sheds. I could look it up on his medical records, if you're worried.'

The celebrity shook his head and smiled. 'No. It's nothing. I'm pretty sure we can rule it out as a cause of death.'

The mortician gulped, desperate to stifle a laugh, and grabbed onto the bag's zip, unable to take her eyes off this perfectly irresistible specimen. 'Have you seen enough?'

'Oh, yeah,' he confirmed. 'Quite enough, thanks, Vicky. What do I have to do now?'

The older man placed a kindly hand on the visitor's back and steered him towards a desk on the other side of the room. 'We just need a signature to record you've sighted the deceased and are satisfied that everything's in order.'

'And if I'm not?'

Larry refused to be drawn into excessive playfulness, conscious of the fact that he and the mortuary assistant were supposed to be working. This might well be what work was like for someone at the top of

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the entertainment industry's ivory tower, but it was incumbent upon him to set an example, as the superior officer.

'If you're not, we put things right,' he responded.

Jeff raised his hand to thank the affable psychologist for humouring him. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I should show more respect. It's just bloody hard to care what happens to him now he's dead, seeing how little care we had for each other while he was alive.'

'Fair do. I understand. Let's go back to the office. We can discuss funeral details and hand over his belongings, then we're free to share a coffee with Ms Williams.'

The superstar said goodbye to the amiable young lady in the white coat, who had continued to watch his every move with distinct interest, and turned to follow Larry along the maze of corridors. Catching the view through a window into the visitors' reception area, he noticed most seats were now occupied by relatives and friends. A large number of people found themselves in a similar situation to his. He oughtn't to forget how well he was being treated, considering he was, as they were, regrettably linked to a serious criminal.

'Now... Would you like us to arrange the funeral for you?' the older staff member asked. 'A lot of men die in here with no-one willing or available to organise their funeral. It's no trouble. Just a simple service. Was your father Jewish?'

'Thanks,' Jeff nodded. 'It would be helpful. He was born a Jew, but I have no idea whether he considered himself Jewish as a man. Did he sign up to anything when he came in?'

'No, he didn't. I checked yesterday.'

'Then a short, secular service'll be fine,' the son decided. 'Lynn, the kids, my sister and me. No-one else'd want to be there, unless Parklea wants to send the murdering bastard off?'

Neither men saw fit to comment any further, and within a couple of minutes, they had arrived back to the original sitting room. As he had become accustomed in this bizarre, privileged lifestyle of his, the multi-millionaire sat in the mission brown, Government-issue chair and waited until it was time for the next stop on today's itinerary.

Soon enough, Larry brought in a small box sealed with a label marked "DIAMOND, P.", under which was a series of digits which must have been his father's unique identifier.

'Do I have your permission to open it?' the officer asked.

'No worries, mate. Go right ahead.'

The cover's removal divulged nothing to the son about a man who had shared little more than a surname with his kith and kin. It contained a pair of reading glasses, the photographs and manuscript left with him after the family's visit, and a gold signet ring that had been an eighteenth birthday gift from the reprobate's own father, to whom he had also been a stranger.

Briefly lifting the ring up to the light to verify the engraved initials before dropping it back into the box, Jeff's eyes fell on a heavy stainless steel chain he recognised. His dad would have likely been wearing it when he was arrested. A hairbrush and a wallet containing fifteen pounds and some loose change constituted the prisoner's remaining worldly goods.

'Hey. That's interesting,' the twenty-eight-year-old exclaimed, picking up the obsolete currency. 'Shows how long he was in here for!'

'Yes, indeed,' Larry nodded, pointing to yet another form. 'Just a signature here, please, and you can either take these things away with you or we'll dispose of them.'

'Not much to show for a life, is it?' Jeff sighed, melancholy seeping in at the impending closure. 'I'll take the box with me. At least I can show my kids the sum total of their grandfather.'

The star's autograph was witnessed for a third time by the patient man. 'That's fine. Let's go and get some coffee. Did you want to put that in your car first? We have to cross the car park anyway.'

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As the two men marched through the busy waiting room, Larry Shepherd was fascinated by to observe how the volume of chatter dropped to a whisper as the charismatic celebrity passed by, noticing how people's eyes and fingers followed him all the way to the exit.

'Does it bother you, everyone staring all the time?'

'Yes and no,' he smirked, the gust of fresh air dispersing the pressure cloud from above his head. 'It depends who, when, where... Impossible to answer without a beer in my hand.'

The elder cynic slammed the boot of the hired car and chuckled. 'You're a good politician too. Do you ever answer a question seriously?'

'Sometimes,' the visitor smiled. 'When I have a beer in my hand.'

'Ha! Very good. Pity I'm on duty, or I'd share a few with you.'

'Next time I'm here,' Jeff offered, pausing for a couple of seconds before grinning at the amicable uniformed officer beside him.

Larry let rip with another belly laugh, knowing how ridiculous a *scenario* this was. From the plain, rented sedan to the flamboyant signature, and from the cavalier strides through Reception to the vulnerability pasted on his forehead, this enigmatic star was a walking, talking set of contradictions. In a different space and time, he had no doubt they could become firm friends, and he already regretted not being able to see Jeff Diamond again.

Chris Williams stood up from her desk and rushed towards the two men as they approached the entrance of the prison medical centre's psychiatric wing. Grinning from ear to ear, she motioned to a room off to one side, furnished only with armchairs covered in bland, hard-wearing upholstery and a coffee table which had seen better days.

'Hello again, Jeff,' the motherly woman said, arms outstretched. 'Welcome. I'm so sorry for the loss of your father.'

With no appetite for public intimacy and still queasy after their detour, the superstar took a diagonal step out of her path. Chris followed his lead, unperturbed, until they reached the doorway and out of plain sight.

By way of apology, he placed a conciliatory hand on her shoulder and pecked her cheek. 'Now don't you start!'

'Aw... Don't be like that,' she moaned, winking at her colleague who had not waited to be asked to sit down. 'You only just found him.'

Jeff nodded, dropping heavily into one of the armchairs. 'That's true enough, but it was too late. To feel anything, I mean.'

'Oh, well... It wasn't too late for him,' Chris countered in all seriousness. 'He was deeply affected by your last visit; seeing you with your beautiful family, and how you look after your sister. He asked to see me the very next morning.'

'Ah, yeah?'

Officer Shepherd shifted in his chair, unsure whether he should be party to these confidences.

'Larry, it's fine,' Jeff said, sensing the man's discomfort. 'No secrets. There's no point, is there?'

'I suppose not. If you're sure...'

Chris disappeared to the kitchen on the other side of the corridor, soon returning with three mugs of coffee on a tray. She offered round the sugar and milk, first sniffing the jug to verify it was fresh. Chuckling

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at more homely traits so infrequently bestowed upon him, the superstar took three spoonfuls of sugar and whisked them in before chancing the milk.

'Cheers, ma'am. Bloody hell!' he groaned, taking a swig of the hot drink. 'Thank Christ this is nearly over. I'll be glad to get home tomorrow. Where are those bickies you promised?'

The counsellor scrambled to her feet and fetched a bumper pack of biscuits from a shopping bag which sat on a shelf by the door. Along with the supermarket snacks, she produced a white envelope and handed it to its addressee. Jeff flinched, unsettled by the conspicuous act. This second offering must contain his father's last documented thoughts.

'I'm so sorry,' Chris laughed. 'I fully intended to give you this when you first came in. And the biscuits too! Help yourself. Eat them all because I shouldn't have any.'

Watching the plump lady pat her hips critically, all in a dither, the others tucked into the simple fare without such reservations. Her guest slipped the envelope into the inside pocket of his jacket, whence it immediately began to emit "Read me" signals.

'Thank you,' Jeff said, sipping his coffee and feeling more relaxed. 'So Chris, how long've you been working in this weird environment? Both of you, I guess... There must be heaps of easier types of patients to devote your time to.'

The two members of staff exchanged knowing stares while the counsellor answered. 'Don't you want to know what your father told me during our last couple of meetings?'

'Don't know. Do I?' the distracted man turned her question around like a pro'. 'Will it make me remember him differently?'

'Yes. I think it might. Or you could just open the envelope and read about it instead. I thought it might do you good to discuss it while you're still here.'

Jeff exhaled, sweat prickling the skin on the back of his neck as his shirt collar rubbed against it. The atmosphere created by this concentration of experts in human cognition was fast brewing stronger than the instant coffee, with the odds of surviving unscathed stacked against his inner child. This woman knew as much about his *modus operandi* as he did. Probably more. It was her job after all.

'Jesus Christ! Of course it would. Sure. I'm shit-scared, if you hadn't guessed already. I got blamed for everything when my parents were around,' he hazarded, feeling his ribcage tighten and a headache began to throb in his temples. 'Everything. That's why I'm stalling.'

Both sages nodded in true psychologist's style, making the entertainer chuckle.

'I finally reconciled all that shit, after I'd grown up and met someone interested in the real me,' he went on. 'So I'm scared that if I open this letter, I'll start liking him and conclude that I *was* to blame all along. Or else, he'll appeal to me so much with his dying words that I'll blame myself for letting him die alone. Or both, knowing me.'

Larry leaned over and clattered his empty mug down onto the coffee table. 'To me, it sounds as if you're coming to these conclusions whether you read what's in the letter or not.'

The philosopher directed a long index finger at the man sitting to his right. 'Spot on, mate. So what good would it do to read it? That's what I meant about remembering him differently.'

Chris smiled, captivated by the young leader at his most personable. 'You're very intelligent, Jeff. I've read a lot about you and have seen just as many interviews on TV. I don't think I've ever met someone who understands the world as well as you do. And someone who understands himself too... I don't mean to interfere or invade your privacy, but I'm guessing you must've overcome significant obstacles to get where you are, and I can completely understand what you just expressed.'

Jeff felt tears stinging at the back of his eyes. 'In other words, my fears are grounded?' he asked, resigned to an unpalatable answer.

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'Yes. Absolutely. But you *will* read the letter because you already know how it's going to affect you. It's a good idea, I assure you. It'll bring you some closure, even though it might take some time to come to terms with your own feelings.'

Wiping his face, their guest sniffed. 'Great! Just when you think it's safe to cross the street, along comes a semi-trailer with no brakes.'

With a hearty laugh, Larry took this opportunity to make another round of coffee, leaving the star in the custody of his hypnotised female colleague. Spooning sugar into over-full mugs, he looked from doctor to patient, wondering whose turn it was to impart the next insightful piece of advice.

'Can I tell you something only Lynn knows?' the young man launched forth.

'Most certainly,' Chris responded. 'Completely confidential, of course.'

'Thanks. Oh, that's not important,' he said, taking a deep breath and lifting his mug to his lips to hide his uncertainty. 'I don't know whether you read about it here, but while I was performing in Chicago last year, two female med' students were crushed to death in the crowd, right next to the stage.'

The older man shook his head, deferring to his colleague.

'No! I didn't hear,' she gasped. 'I'm surprised I don't remember that. I call myself a big fan. Was it on the news?'

Jeff smiled at her endorsement and prepared to fill in the blanks. 'Cheers. Sure was on the news! The story did die down pretty fast though, *Allah* be praised. It was horrendous for a while; first having to confront the families, and then making sure they were taken care of. But it was like retribution for me, y'know what I mean? An eye for an eye almost, because what did it turn me into?'

The dumbstruck pair shook their heads. They watched a thunderous expression spread over the songwriter's erstwhile smiling face.

'I killed two people, just like my fucking father. But much worse... At least he took out two low-life scum wankers like him. I killed two innocent women.'

'Oh, come on... That's nonsense, mate,' Larry insisted. 'You didn't kill them. It was an accident.'

'Oh, I know,' the tormented soul corrected himself, the hems of his trouser legs flapping as his muscles quivered inside. 'I do have a tendency to over-dramatise, in case you'd never noticed! But at the end of the day, there are two families out there who lost loved ones because of me. It comes to the same thing.'

Eyes filling with tears, Chris was rendered speechless by the genuine guilt and grief on display. 'Now listen, Jeff...' her professional side resumed control. 'I understand how you might think that way, but no-one's blaming you for the death of those young girls.'

'Aren't they? Are you sure?'

'Well... No. I'm not sure, obviously,' the red-faced woman contradicted herself. 'I've no knowledge of these families. But it'd be very wrong of them to blame you, if they do.'

'I agree,' Jeff replied, standing up and shaking the cramp out of his legs. 'And by the same token, I also think it was very wrong of my father to blame me for not protecting my mum and sister from being raped by the fuckers he ended up stabbing to death. It didn't make any difference what I thought, or even what the truth was. As far as he was concerned, I'd let 'em all down, and he died before I could get him to change his mind.'

'Oh, right. Yes. I see your point,' Larry muttered, the puzzle's various pieces beginning to fit together. 'Bugger! We never know the whole story, do we, Chris?'

Jeff took his seat again, feeling better for having the confession off his chest at last. 'Those girls... I went to their funerals. Paid compensation to their families. I visit them whenever I'm over there, and even sent them cards on the anniversary of their daughters' deaths. It's human nature to want to blame someone, even if it's only secretly. You have to admit their easiest target is me.'

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‘And you have to live with this knowledge. I hear you. What about the staff at the venue?’ Chris asked. ‘Surely they’re more to blame than you? Stadium ground staff, security guards or whoever they are?’

‘Maybe,’ the musician nodded. ‘We all tried to stop it. I got a message from security that the crowd was pushing forwards. Shit! I even got them to do this stupid dance move to take several paces back, but it wasn’t enough to save those girls’ lives, nor stop a few more from getting injured and suffocating.’

‘Mister Diamond, sir...’ Larry’s stern voice interrupted. ‘You didn’t kill those young ladies in cold blood. What you need to get clear in your mind is that your father pre-meditated the murder of two men known to him for many years, and men who were hardly pillars of society. His wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment crime of passion, or even an accident that went badly wrong. He intended to do exactly what he did. You cannot put yourself in the same category.’

‘No, mate. Thanks. And I don’t,’ Jeff assured him. ‘And I have the most beautiful woman in the world sitting at home, who knows me inside out and is just as good a therapist as you guys... no offence... who’ll tell me the same thing over and over again.’

Chris smiled, swooning. ‘Oh, you should have seen them, Shep! Lynn and the children. They’re adorable, the little ones.’

‘Thanks again,’ the proud parent chuckled. ‘They’re very cute, even if I do say so myself. Anyway... I’m not bothered about me. I know I’ll get through any more nightmares, and the uncontrollable anger’s pretty much gone. It’s more the guilt at not being able to help my dad change like I did. I had this wild idea that I’d somehow avenge those girls’ deaths by abetting his repentance.’

‘What makes you think he could’ve changed?’ Larry issued a gentle challenge. ‘Let alone wanted to change?’

‘Cause that’s what I do,’ the intellectual asserted, not with conceit but with a modest audacity which was both endearing and disarming. ‘I help people behave differently towards other people. That’s why I’m on this Earth. Dad said to us last week that he never got past the teenaged anger. I mastered that skill, so I could’ve helped him do the same.’

‘And you wanted to help him even after everything he put you and your family through?’ the spellbound counsellor asked. ‘Perhaps you just didn’t want it enough?’

‘Who knows? That’s a good point,’ Jeff nodded, pausing to weigh up this latest offering. ‘And I do still hate his guts for all that. It’s like the whole lung transplant question we’d started to debate: does a murdering smoker deserve to receive a new pair of lungs ahead of a law-abiding person who never smoked in his or her life?’

‘Or does a selfish bastard who gave up his wife’s dignity as payment for botched heists deserve to have his life rebuilt, in advance of a community of farmers suffering ethnic persecution in Africa? I can’t do anything about Dad now, so I have to hope I get another opportunity to redress the balance later on. But hey? Where *is* the list handed down from on high that tells us what our accountabilities are? Whose sins do we inherit if they’re not atoned in their lifetime?’

‘Gee. Can’t say I’ve ever thought about that! Something else for you to work through with your adorable wife,’ Larry answered, his tone laden with empathy. ‘As you say, it’s what you do. You’re more than capable of making the right decision. Either you do nothing, which is an option you’ll never be comfortable with, or you just have to learn to deal with the after-effects, because you can’t be all things to all men.’

‘Christ Almighty! You’re damned right, mate,’ the world-changer raised his voice, smiling. ‘The legacy I can’t bloody shake. I can never repay a debt that stems from becoming so unbelievably successful either. And it’s been so long, I don’t even remember whom it’s owed to...’

Jeff exhaled, laughing along with the others and levering himself up from the low armchair. ‘Whatever... I can’t stay here chatting all day. You guys’ve got a prison to run. Thanks for everything you’ve done for me, both of you, and mostly for Dad. I hope he said some nice things about you too the other day, Chris.’

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'Oh, yes. He did,' the woman confirmed. 'He was quite gentlemanly in those closing hours. Your influence had rubbed off.'

'Whoa! Is that right? That's good to hear,' the showman said, shaking both their hands in turn. 'Larry, cheers for arranging the funeral and for making sure we followed all the right protocols. I'm off to downtown Parramatta now, to see if I can track down my wayward sister. Oh, and I totally forgot to ask... Was there a will?'

'No, there wasn't, mate. At least not lodged with us. He might've had one outside we didn't know about. Did he mention one to you, Chris?'

The counsellor shook her head.

'The only reason for asking was that I wanted to know whether to bury him or cremate him,' Jeff clarified. 'And if I find out he's got millions of bucks' worth of treasure stashed away somewhere, I'll send it to you.'

'Oh, great! That'd come in handy!' the middle-aged woman exclaimed.

Larry chuckled. 'You never know with these buggers. We'd recommend a cremation, if you have no preference. It's easier for everyone.'

'Takes up less room,' the irreverent superstar joked. 'Right. That's what we'll do. Thanks again.'

'I'll ring you early next week to let you know when the service will be. So I will see you again after all,' the middle-aged psychologist smiled. 'We might even get a chance to go for that beer?'

'Absolutely,' Jeff nodded, shaking his hand once more. 'I'll ask my office to think about a place we can all go afterwards. Somewhere kid-friendly. You're welcome too, Chris. A quiet lunch somewhere'd round things out well.'

Jeff Diamond left the Parklea prison complex for the final time, spinning the car's rear wheels on a patch of damp gravel which had been spread to fill in a widening ditch between the bitumen of the car park and the concrete driveway. He felt free and content that the morning had finished on a positive note. He couldn't wait to hear Lynn's opinion on the topics he had shared with two fine psychoanalysts.

Farewell To A Stranger

The rock star found his sister at home and very busy indeed. In fact, when he reached her landing, there were two other men hanging about, pretending they weren't in line for a good shag. He descended to ground level again and walked to a nearby public telephone, wondering if the street-girl had replaced the broken answering machine with the new one sent up by his office manager.

A resounding negatory! The bemused brother heard the strident warbling in Madalena's apartment from all the way across the road, calling through the wide-open windows. He secreted himself in his ordinary car to scribble a note, then climbed the stairs once more and slipped it under her door. It crossed his mind that the press would have a field day if "The Australian Elvis" were to be spotted coming out of a known prostitute's place of work in the western suburbs. Almost worth giving them a tip-off...

To kill some time, Jeff drove back to Fairfield, turning into the park where he and Lynn had sheltered under huge oaks from the Christmas Day sunshine to share hopes and dreams for their trip to wintry London; the day before he had confronted his greatest fear.

Climbing the hill and sitting down on a lichen-clad bench under one of the trees, he opened the letter Chris Williams had given him. He had expected the blood to rush to his head in anxiety's nauseating pall as the envelope's tear grew longer. Peculiarly however, he felt nothing.

Inside was a single sheet of paper adorned with the same neat handwriting that had provided the corrections on a previous letter penned by his father.

"Dear Jeff,"

Good start, sarcasm rose from his inner child.

"I think this is the end for me. I am in a lot of pain and have decided not to get treatment. It was grouse..."

The word "good" had been written first but crossed out.

"...to see you, your family and Madaleine too. Nice to see you were all so happy. I was jealous but grateful you haven't ended up like me. No hard feelings."

The orphan son exhaled and bit back the tears, unable to bring himself to banish his own hard feelings. Not yet anyway. The ignorant man hadn't even known how to spell his daughter's name, requiring Chris to take a guess. With increasing bitterness, he read the next paragraph.

"Your little girl is so like your mum that I can't get her out of my head. I know you will give them a good life. Perhaps they will have a better life in some way because I gave you such a bad one. That's a good ending for me, after all the bad stuff, like you said."

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Bloody cheek! Was his father taking the credit for making his son a good parent? Jeff cursed out loud, mainly because he would have said the same thing in his father's place. Begrudgingly, he admitted to an element of truth in the old man's statement.

"I read some of your book. Powerful stuff, mate. Too rich for me, but I get what you mean. I did waste my life, except I gave you to the world by accident. Beats me how you ended up like you are. Me and your mum said that when you were a kid, but that's nothing to how you turned out."

Whoa! So the self-centred criminal had been paying attention in those early days after all, the lost boy realised. It was a surprise to read about his parents discussing the topic of their children. The last paragraph was a short one, its backhanded compliment well meant.

"You and your sister keep well. And finally, love that classy, sexy woman of yours long and hard for me. She is good for you, so be good to her, for me.

Good luck,

Dad."

The initial "D" of Dad had an extra-long tail, exposing this last, important correction as an afterthought. Nevertheless, reading the letter for the second and third times, Jeff was satisfied with how his relationship with his father had concluded. He was damned if he would be good to Lynn as a tribute to the abusive bastard. This was way beyond the call of duty.

'I don't need any additional inspiration to love her long and hard,' he murmured to the piece of paper in his hand. 'Thanks all the same.'

A modicum of pride seeped into the humble intellectual's brain, knowing he had managed to nudge his father in some small way towards finding his heart. The old codger had also reaffirmed his place in their so-called family. He wondered if a similar letter lay in store for Madalena too. Chris hadn't mentioned one. At least the father had met his maker with a better idea of who his children were, which gave the young man an odd sense of accomplishment. He didn't view these small positive steps as a victory by any means, since the prisoner was dead and gone.

The vindication the celebrity had felt when leaving the maximum security facility after their last meeting was no longer apparent, yet it hardly mattered anymore. Proving himself to his father was irrelevant now he was the head of the family, such as it was. Time to wipe the slate clean.

Looking at his watch, the driver wondered whether diverting back to Madalena's flat might be another total waste of effort. It was coming up for two o'clock, and he was hungry after an early breakfast. Should he don his cap and sunglasses and join the line outside her door? At least this should guarantee him half an hour out of her working day...

Lynn and the children left the Dysons' Benloch homestead on Saturday afternoon, keen to be home in time for Jeff's return. She had found the excitement in his voice infectious the night before, when he recounted the day's events with much more cheer than she had expected. Jet and Kierney were asleep in the back of the car, allowing her to sing the finishing touches of a new melody into a cassette recorder sitting in her lap while she drove.

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This was the raw material for a perfect Tex Fletcher song, and the masterful composer was intending to send a tape to the British songwriter to have him improve on it. Ideally, she would have liked to ask him to record a version before she gave it to her favourite stallion, but time was of the essence for the upcoming occasion. She planned to celebrate the fact that he had come through the trials of recent weeks stronger and happier, having almost shaken off his last remaining ghouls.

Driving down the outside lane of the Nepean Highway, the young mother became aware of lights flashing in her rear-view mirror. Checking her speedometer, at first she feared a police car had picked up her speeding tail. Looking over her shoulder for a clearer picture, she made out a familiar regal *bête noir* bearing down on them. She pulled into the left-hand lane at the next opportunity, and husband and wife exchanged muted greetings through their respective car windows.

The pair of luxury vehicles cruised in convoy for the rest of the journey, meandering the last few kilometres along the tranquil, undulating Mount Eliza roads until they reached the gates of *Escondido*, which pivoted open in front of them on command. Merak, the six-year-old German Shepherd whom the family shared with one of their drivers, bounded alongside the cars on their way to the garage, where Greg was busy working on a restoration project.

Waving to the friendly former Air Force engineer, the couple embraced without inhibition at the rear of Lynn's BMW. The children were still asleep inside, giving their parents a rare opportunity for the type of impetuous, red-blooded reunion they had always shared as new lovers.

After a drawn-out kiss, Jeff held his wife at arms' length to stare into her welcoming eyes. 'Jeez, angel! What a fantastic way to arrive home, escorting each other back to base like that.'

'Yes, it was. How are you? You look much better than I expected,' Lynn pressed against his eager body. 'And feel great too!'

'Cheers, you tease! It's so good to see you guys. If I wasn't already the horniest man on the planet, that was one hell of a way to get me going. Thanks for coming home early. I'm stoked at having this extra night together.'

'No worries!' the woman giggled, leaning back and gazing into his smiling face. 'Your eyes are so alive, even in this light. I think you dropped a few years.'

The happy man loosened his grip and patted his various pockets. 'Nope. They'll be here somewhere. You can't miss 'em. They come in packs of ten.'

The young mother opened the door next to Kierney, taking care not to frighten her. Her husband went around to the other side of the car and did the same for their son, who was already stirring. He gave his dad a wide smile as soon as his eyes focussed, too excited to regulate his volume setting.

'Hey, you're back! Are we home? I didn't know you were here.'

'Shhh!' Jeff hissed. 'Kizzy's still asleep. I was following you for the last twenty minutes, and you didn't even twig, Batman. How're you going?'

'We're having a barby tonight,' the boy couldn't wait to spill the beans. 'We brought the meat from Grandma's.'

'*Excelente*,' his father replied, pressing a finger to his lips. 'Grandma-burgers. *¡Muy sabroso!*'

The young boy doubled over with laughter, almost wriggling his way out of Jeff's grip. 'Mum! Dad said "Grandma-burgers"!'

'Jetto, shush, please,' Lynn raised a finger to her mouth too, her eyes pointing out the sleeping toddler in her arms. 'Yum! Lovely. Looking forward to trying them. Go indoors, please.'

Once inside the house, the patient sportswoman stretched Kierney's limp body out along one of the sofas in the lounge room while her husband unloaded the rest of the luggage from both cars. Jet

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did his best to keep quiet around his little sister, but as usual, failed with consummate flair. The little girl woke up and rubbed her eyes, slid off the couch and wandered out to find her parents.

'Where's *Papá*?' she asked her mother, wandering past the bottom of the stairs and into the kitchen.

'Upstairs. Go and find him. He needs a big cuddle.'

The two-year-old climbed the staircase and trotted towards the master bedroom at the far end of the corridor. She found her special friend lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling and on the verge of sleep. Feather-light footsteps and excited breathing gave her away, but he pretended the friendly ambush was a total surprise.

'*¿Papá, qué tal?*' she whispered. '*¿Estás dormido?*'

'*Sí. ¿Has despertado?*'

'*¡Sí! No me sleepwalking.*' Kierney giggled at his statement of the obvious, holding both arms out straight in front of her and marching from one side of the bed to the other, there and back until it made the horizontal comic feel quite sick.

The little girl stopped and pivoted on her heels. 'Granddad died.'

'Yeah, baby. Sleepwalking *es somnambulismo. El abuelo murió. ¿Estás triste?*'

'*Un poco.*'

'*Yo también,*' her dad agreed, slotting his hands under her armpits and elevating her lightness over his legs to set her down on Lynn's side of the bed. '*Bueno, pequeñita. Muy bueno. I need a big hug from one of my two special ladies.*'

The dark-haired pair, both descended from a departed prisoner and somehow tuned to the same wavelength, grieved together. With no desire to curtail this inexplicable process for fear of disconcerting the pensive youngster, Jeff let his opinions be known.

'It's good that we feel a bit sad, Kizzy. Granddad was a bad man who could've been a good man. Now he's gone, he won't ever be a good man. That's what's sad, isn't it?'

Kierney nodded. 'We can be good for him.'

The bereaved son opened his eyes and gaped at the tiny soothsayer. 'You said exactly what Granddad said. Did *Mamá* tell you?'

'No,' she shook her head, mystified by the question.

'Then that's what we'll do,' the philosopher cuddled the precious child into his chest, kissing her forehead. 'Do we have a deal?'

'*Sí,*' the vibration of her breath answered. '*¿Y Jetto y la mamá?*'

'*Bien sûr, ma petite. D'you know Granddad thought you were as beautiful as *mi mamá, tu abuela?**'

'Am I?'

'Well, I think you're even more beautiful,' the romantic insisted. "'Cause you're like *tu mamá* too. Beautiful on the outside and on the inside.'

'How? You can't see me on the inside,' she challenged, pouting.

'Oh, yes, I can,' her dad objected, bouncing the clever-clogs up and down on his midriff. 'I'm the *papá*. I can see everything, remember? I can see your thoughts are beautiful, just like your pretty face. Know what I mean?'

Kierney sat upright and nodded to her smiling hero, who caught his breath as his mind pondered their profound connection. It was an entirely different bond from the one he shared with Lynn, and noticeably more intense than his feelings for his son.

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The intellectual had learned not to be too critical of this heartfelt affinity, although some guilt and shame were destined to endure. His wife had no complaints about his devotion to their boisterous firstborn, understanding only too well that this tiny female clone was his carbon-copy. Indeed, Jet exhibited many more Dyson traits than the Diamond equivalent at his current age.

The three-year-old unravelled her arms from her dad's embrace and stretched them around his chest, squeezing hard. 'You're beautiful on the outside and inside too, *Papá*.'

Jeff sniffed. '*Gracias, pequeñita*. That's kind of you. Shall we go down and help get the barbecue ready? *Mamá*'ll be missing us.'

'OK,' his eager sidekick agreed, rolling off his stomach and careening all the way down to the floor in a single, uncoordinated fling.

'Hey! Careful,' the concerned man cried out, seeing the youngster pick herself up and affix a sweet smile to her face. 'You're like those bees of yours, flying and sleeping at the same time.'

Daughter and father wandered downstairs hand-in-hand, the little girl following him as he paced down several steps and then back up a few, then down a few more, and so on and so forth. Dancing from the sweeping bannister on one side to the handrail attached to the curved wall on the other, they eventually reached the bottom in fits of laughter.

'What are you two doing?' Lynn asked, hearing the giggling conspirators coming towards the kitchen.

'Taking an awful long time to come down the stairs,' Jeff answered, planting a tender kiss on his wife's cheek. 'What are you two doing?'

'Waiting for you to light the barbecue.'

'Right you are, ma'am. That I can do,' he said, saluting with the tongs he had been handed by his accuser and shaking them at his son, who had arrived at a run to present for duty. 'Mate! Barby time. Man's work.'

'I vote let's all go up to our room and watch the stars,' Jeff suggested after their tasty, carnivorous feast.

It was eight-thirty, and all four were tired from the day's excitement. Thankfully, the parents hadn't needed to fend off a discussion about "grannibalism" at the table, which Lynn had feared after her son's inquisitive mind had latched onto yet another of her husband's dangerous plays on words.

Merak had returned to his master earlier for his own dinner and evening walk, leaving the foursome to their own devices. Kierney had dozed off once or twice on her mother's lap while pretending to be a kitten. She awoke again when the strength in Lynn's Olympian limbs lifted her off the couch and carried her upstairs, soon followed by the others.

The children cleaned their teeth and dressed in their pyjamas. An unusually mild, cloudless night for the end of July allowed for the two heavy shutters behind the French windows in the main bedroom to be opened before the family climbed under the quilt. The soul-mates linked hands over their babies' heads, currents of love zipping from heart to heart along their arms.

'Y'see all those stars up there?' Jeff asked his sleepy bedfellows. 'Well... Imagine they're all the people who've died, like Granddad, who didn't do all the good things they wanted to, or should've done.'

'OK,' his wife replied on behalf of them all.

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Kierney had no trouble recalling her last conversation in this room, sitting up proudly and pointing with both index fingers. 'Yes, I know! Granddad wanted me to be good for him, so how 'bout we're all good for the star people?'

'Yeah!' her brother agreed with equal enthusiasm, reaching his hands towards the open window as well.

'Which one's Granddad?' the little girl pondered aloud.

'Which star?' Lynn prompted.

'Yes. Which star? And which is *Papá's mamá*?'

'Any stars you like, *pequeñita*,' her father suggested. 'That's between you and them. Pick whichever ones you like the look of.'

Jet's right arm extending as far as it could, he waved into the heavens. 'I pick that one for Granddad and that one *para la Abuela*.'

'Good man,' Jeff said, placing a weighty, approving hand on the lad's forehead.

His partner turned to the drowsy toddler. 'Which ones are you choosing, Kizzo?'

'I'll choose tomorrow,' she whimpered, eyelids drooping as she scanned the distant lights. 'I don't know yet.'

'Fair enough,' her father replied, cocking his head towards his amused lover. 'Perfectly fine, in fact.'

'In that case...' Lynn suggested, stroking their daughter's hair. 'How about tomorrow you guys draw a picture for Granddad's funeral, showing him which star you picked and what you're going to do to be good for him?'

The songwriter squeezed his dream girl's forearm, unable to put his feelings into words. Both children were as keen as mustard, and he couldn't wait to see the results of this endeavour.

'And now you two have to get into your own beds, because it's far too squasy in here,' Lynn announced, cuddling Kierney in close.

The parents decamped with the youngsters to Jet's bedroom and read them a quick story, again all crowded onto the boy's bed. Father and daughter were both fast asleep by the time the sportswoman closed the book. Waking at his wife's touch, Jeff transported the little girl into her own room and turned out the light.

'*Hasta mañana, Jetto*,' he waved, passing the door. '*Te amo*.'

Back in their inviting king-sized bed, with windows sealed but shutters open, the blonde beauty wrapped her arms around her melancholy husband and kissed his lips. 'So, *Don Corleone*,' she opened with a cheeky smile, running tantalising fingernails down his chest and stomach with enough force to rekindle his latent fire. 'Are you going to make it worth my while to stay with you, now you're the head of the family?'

'Sure am. Every fucking day, lady,' he enunciated syllable by syllable, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes. 'Every fucking day.'

'Thanks,' Lynn gasped as he began to caress her all over. 'I know you would anyway, despite what was in the letter.'

Sex between the homecoming lovers was as intense as ever, rendered all the sweeter by several days apart and the renewed commitment both felt towards each other after the latest major milestone in their life singular. Jeff was in full control of his destiny, and therefore that of the whole family, and his dream girl wouldn't have had it any other way.

'Before you go to sleep...' she whispered.

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'Yeah?' her husband murmured, on the edge of slumber.

'I've written a song for you, from your dad. Can I play it to you now, or would you like to hear it tomorrow morning?'

The rock star chuckled, turning over and propping himself up on his elbow. 'If you wanted me to hear it tomorrow morning, you wouldn't have mentioned it now.'

His wife shrugged. 'Sorry. I didn't plan this very well, did I?'

'Do we have to go downstairs, or can you play it up here?' Jeff asked, his interest in this novel angle well and truly roused.

Delighted, the lithe musician sprang halfway across the bedroom in one bound and switched on an electric piano which lived in the far corner. Often caught in such songwriting emergencies after lovemaking had inspired their creative juices, the six-octave instrument was put to regular use. Balancing it on her knee, she played a progression of pronounced opening chords and was soon giving her most favourite Prince Charming a taste of the tender melody which would hit the charts all over the world in a month's time.

'Are you OK?' the singer asked as she powered off the keyboard and lowered it onto the floor beside the bed. 'About the way you feel, I mean.'

'Yep. Why? Are you ready to go again?' the larrikin teased. 'Jesus! You're insatiable. And I love it.'

Fending off rapturous arms, the young mother yelped. 'No! I'm just glad you're feeling better.'

'Damn!'

The traveller's firm grip closed around his wife's waist, climbing on top and smothering her mouth into a deep kiss. He knew she was powerless to resist him this way, the muscles of his heart taut and as fit to burst as his balls.

'OK, so I'm horny too...' Lynn gasped. 'Come here, you gorgeous hulk.'

'Well, I'm not,' a hundred kilogrammes of sexual chemistry dropped sideways onto the mattress, facing away from his abandoned bedfellow. 'I'm officially in mourning. See you in four weeks.'

The tennis champion groaned, sitting up and reaching for her pyjamas. 'Four weeks? Wow! OK. Leaving me in the cold. Winter'll be nearly over by then... I'll have to outsource.'

'You do that,' Jeff held his ground, stroking his aching penis and wondering how long his playmate would be able to maintain the *charade*. 'Let me know how it goes.'

The couple fell silent, losing themselves in their marriage's irresistible emotional rollercoaster, both knowing neither could hold out for much longer. "I'm still your father. You're still my son." The simple sentences at the core of Lynn's new lyric ran through her mind over and over again. Her man was bearing up admirably in comparison to previous crossroads, and her heart glowed.

'*Je t'adore, mon ami,*' she whispered, brushing his shoulder with loving fingertips.

'Oh, *je t'adore aussi,*' the boy from Canley Vale cried. 'Jesus, angel. I'm so confused. Seeing him in that bloody morgue was like being kicked by a shoe with no foot inside.'

The caring woman spooned in behind her exhausted husband, her hand drawn into his. 'Ugh! What a horrible analogy. What do you mean?'

'Like it hurt, but I knew there wouldn't be a second blow.'

Neither lover moved for the longest time, grief tumbling from the world-changer's core. Cradling his substantial, quaking frame as best she could, Lynn traced lazy kisses over the heaving expanse of muscular shoulders and stroked her warm feet in a slow rhythm up and down his calves.

Jeff moaned in pleasure. 'You make me so happy.'

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‘So happy that you’re sad?’

The orphan sniffed at the conundrum. ‘Yeah. That’s me.’

‘I s’pose so,’ the sportswoman sighed. ‘It’s fine, and I love you all the more for it, my beautiful black stallion. Together, forever, wherever. That’s us.’

Twisting around to face his dream girl, overjoyed with the imagery these three words conjured up. ‘Jeez, I don’t want this to end.’

‘It won’t end,’ she promised. ‘Why would it end? I’m as happy as you are. Let me sing you the song again. Can I? Then I’ll force myself upon you.’

The keyboard’s lights flashed for the second time as the singer prepared to reprise her poignant composition. Keeping the volume lower this time, in case she disturbed their slumbering gnomes, the tune carried its message around the room. After she had played the final cadence and removed her fingers from the keys, Jeff lay for several minutes in virtual silence, his deep breathing the only sound.

‘It’s beautiful,’ he said at last, relishing the sensation of soft lips against his tear-stained cheek. ‘I think that’s the most beautiful song ever written in the history of time. Thanks again.’

Lynn smiled, dismissing the exaggerated compliment. ‘I don’t think so, but I hoped you’d like it. I wanted to say how good it was to see the two of you together the other week. You were so impressive with him after what he did to you. How you reunited us all before it was too late, and how well you are now you’re home and king of the castle. Masterful, magic man.’

As much as the musical tribute, this touching testament did nothing to stem the peacemaker’s tears. They were the expression of pure euphoria rather than loss. As usual, his soul-mate understood him perfectly. Introducing the generation before to the generation after had indeed happened just in time. He wouldn’t want Jet and Kierney to spend any more time with their Granddad even if he had survived. The old man didn’t deserve it, no matter how much it had warmed his heart to witness the bastard fighting with his own, under-used humanity.

‘I do kind o’ miss him,’ he confessed, after another few moments of silence.

‘It’s probably the grieving process kicking in,’ Lynn offered. ‘Do you think you’ll sleep without nightmares tonight?’

‘Hope so. When I was at Alberto’s, I dreamed Jetto and I were involved in the old gang, and he got stabbed. Our son’s blood on the ground. Jesus! Not being able to find him woke me up, I think.’

‘Oh, my God. That’s horrible too. Another dream where you wanted to save someone but couldn’t,’ his wife posited. ‘That’s the recurring theme, isn’t it? I bet you were relieved to see him this afternoon, loud and clear as ever.’

Jeff turned and kissed her, emotions overflowing. ‘Got it in one, gorgeous.’

‘Well, we’re all safe and all together in our own house. Let’s hope it’s enough to let you sleep peacefully.’

‘Yeah. Thanks. But can I just tell you one more thing that came up while I was talking to Chris and Larry? Then I promise I’ll leave you alone.’

‘Of course. I want to know.’

‘Larry made a comment that I needed to realise I can’t be all things to all men,’ the philosopher explained.

‘That was brave of him,’ his beautiful best friend checked, a broad grin on her face. ‘Based on what?’

Her husband sniggered at the snide retort. ‘Yeah, yeah... I mentioned we’d been talking about whether Dad would’ve deserved a transplant if he’d lived long enough, and posed a question about

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how we're supposed to find out what we're accountable for... You know, by which rules do we choose who deserves something more?'

Lynn frowned. 'I don't understand the connection, but tell me anyway.'

'No. Well... *No importa,*' Jeff replied. 'I told them the reason I'm compelled to do as much as I possibly can, and that it looks like I'm trying to solve every single problem in the world, is because I'm stuck with this debt for having become so successful and so damned happy.'

'Hmm...' the young woman nodded, none the wiser as to her intellectual's point.

'And I said that I'd been carrying this debt around for so long that I've forgotten whose it is.'

Blue eyes widened in the darkness, reflecting the full moon streaming in through the French windows. 'Right! OK. Do you mean now you *are* free, you still don't feel free and don't know why?'

Kissing her forehead, Jeff was stoked at this lateral deduction. 'Exactly, genius!'

'And it's definitely not a debt to me? Didn't it used to be me?'

'Yeah. No. It's not you any more,' the boy from Canley Vale confirmed. 'I learned to believe you.'

Lynn stroked his face. 'Good. Well, tell you what?'

'What?'

'Stop the standing order and wait for someone to complain,' she suggested. 'Just do what *you* think is right, and figure out if anything changes. If it does, you'll know what's left to deal with. And if nothing happens, you really are free.'

Jeff rolled over onto his back and stared at the ceiling, processing this new plan handed down by his trusted adviser. 'That'll do nicely. Now go to sleep and leave me alone.'

'Sorry,' his dream girl laughed, giving his lips one last kiss for luck. 'Anything you wish, boss.'

'Hey!' the rock star objected, rolling over and enveloping her in his arms. 'That's enough of that. I'm not in mourning anymore, I've decided. You couldn't do without me for four hours, let alone four weeks, could you?'

'Goodnight. *Hasta la vista.* You're the Ace of Diamonds now. Make it count.'

The funeral of Paul Diamond was, as predicted, a simple affair. Madalena agreed to forgo some appointments and had made an effort to don appropriate attire. She stood tall in a floral skirt with a black background, long enough to cover the unsightly, bruised thighs and knobby knees normally on full view. She had borrowed a dark green top from her flatmate and rounded out the mutation with a formal black jacket which Lynn had packed as a contingency. The wind blew icy cold, blustery and damp, as befitting a cremation ceremony.

Jeff toyed with the idea of wearing a suit and tie, deciding against it at the last minute. His father only knew him in the leather jacket given to him by his guardian angel on his twentieth birthday. The bitter son couldn't work out if he chose to put it on because his dad had coveted it, or whether he simply wanted to remind the old bastard that he was the only one permitted to wear this well-travelled item of clothing.

His wife looked as elegant and sophisticated as usual in a black pencil skirt and figure-hugging coat, with black stockings and high-heeled shoes which elevated her almost to her husband's height. The children were also smartly turned out, causing Chris Williams to breach protocol and ask if she could take a photograph of the stylish celebrity family.

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Jet and Kierney had each drawn a picture of their Granddad's star, and their parents helped to place them on top of the pine coffin. The boy had asked to see inside many times, fascinated to the point of obsession that a dead body lay right next to them. Lynn had needed to reprimand him quite forcefully before he agreed to keep quiet.

The youngest Diamond held her father's hand through the short service provided by Parklea's chaplain. The two parents exchanged glances, coming to realise how empathetic their little girl was becoming. When the time came to say his few rehearsed lines, Jeff spoke from where he stood rather than moving to the front, not wanting to break the spell for the diminutive angel.

The record producer had invited a promising Melbourne Academy musician by the name of Rod Germany to record the special song, backed by her piano accompaniment. Although neither could articulate why, both musicians considered singing live at the murderer's funeral as inappropriate. The plaintive rendition moved everyone to tears, even the hard-hearted Madalena.

Lifting Jet up in her arms as the coffin slipped behind the sliding doors into the crematorium, the young mum noticed he was shivering. The simplicity of the service was perfect to emphasise to their children the importance of recognising people for the significance they bore on one's life, and she hugged her son close as the polished brown casket disappeared. With Kierney also hoisted high enough to watch, the abandoned child put his arm around the blond half of his family, and they all whispered goodbye to Granddad.

Lunch had been arranged at a pub about five kilometres from the prison, in a small function room leading out to a beer garden. Too cold to sit outside, the kids were given a chance to let off steam while the adults shared a meal and a few drinks. Larry Shepherd was utterly awestruck by the intelligent and personable Missus Diamond, sharing a private confession with his colleague that he had been somewhat cynical about the match-made-in-heaven portrayed for the cameras. He was delighted to prove his suspicions wrong, conceding that the two high-achievers from such different walks of life were harmony personified.

After lunch, the family said farewell to Chris and Larry and headed off to the cemetery where Lucy Diamond was buried. The urn containing her husband's ashes was placed in a box and into the rear luggage compartment, amid much curiosity from both children. Jet's reckless enthusiasm again became impossible to quell when he was told the container would be opened at some point, to scatter the chundering old jailbird's remains into the air.

'Mate,' Jeff growled, taking his son by the upper arm and shaking him still. 'This is not a game, OK? We need to show respect for Granddad now.'

'Sorry, Dad,' the boy replied, climbing into the car without another word, only turning round once every ten seconds, checking with his x-ray eyes to make sure the small box didn't vanish from the boot.

Madalena hadn't visited her mother's grave a single time since the desolate woman had been interred fifteen years earlier. Her brother remembered stopping by at least twice before moving to Melbourne, yet neither sibling knew how to find the location without resorting to the street directory.

'Shameful, huh?' the songwriter said. 'What a sad indictment on how we felt about our *mamá*.'

However, once in the graveyard, the troubled adolescent's memory came up trumps, and he guided his relatives almost straight to the simple headstone for which he had saved six weeks' wages after the drug addict's funeral. He informed them all of this fact for the express purpose of shaming his disinterested sister, yet the obvious hint zipped by unnoticed by its intended recipient.

'Come and look at this, kids,' their mum invited, crouching down beside them and pointing to the words carved into the moss-eaten stone. 'This is your grandmother, *Papá's mamá*. Luciana, her

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name was. She died in nineteen-sixty-six. See? Ten years before *Mamá* and *Papá* got married. She died on *Papá*'s birthday. Isn't that sad?'

Kierney nodded, gazing at her mother and then at her father. Her bottom lip quivered as the statement hit home.

'How d'you know that, angel?' the Sydney native asked, putting his hand on his daughter's head and stroking her hair. 'I sure as hell didn't tell you.'

'No, you didn't. I saw her death certificate once,' Lynn confessed. 'Remember, on the plane to London? You handed me the folder with all your exam' certificates in?'

Jeff fended off a hostile glare from his sister before nodding. 'Yeah. Whoa! That's right. It is in there.'

'I didn't know it was your birthday,' Madalena remarked, momentarily saddened for her brother. 'Was it really? Shit birthday!'

Lynn gave her husband a sympathetic smile, both disappointed that their youngsters were subjected to more foul language. Instead of lambasting the hapless aunt, they shared a telepathic private joke. Compared to other childhood birthdays spent alone and tortured by mental scars, this was an apt enough description for the day that kicked off his fifteenth year!

Meanwhile, Jet drilled his finger along the headstone's sunken lettering, reading out each letter one by one before reciting his grandmother's name. 'Luciana Moreno Diamond.'

'That's it, mate. *Muy bien*,' his dad praised, sinking down on his haunches and embracing his son. '*Es tu abuela*.'

Madalena was still clutching the small brown urn, initial disgust giving way to annoyance. 'When are we going to do this?' she asked, shaking it as if she were collecting coins for charity. 'And where?'

Jeff stood up and laced an arm around his beautiful best friend, reeling from the discovery that she had been in on this secret for some time without letting on. 'Well... You and I need to make a choice,' he told his sister. 'Do we get another headstone and put them side-by-side, thereby reuniting our parents? Or do we take him somewhere else because they've been apart for so long.'

'Do you think they still loved each other when your mum passed away?' Lynn asked the siblings.

Her sister-in-law screwed her face up. 'Na. Doubt it.'

The rock star nodded. 'Yeah. I tend to agree, to be honest. You'd like to think there was some romance to be had in leaving them together in death, but I'm with Lena. It doesn't sit right with me either. Their love got lost in the general crap of life. Good point, angel.'

Smiling, his wife shrugged, pleased to have been useful. She sensed a new plan being formulated on the fly, almost able to hear the cogs ratcheting around in the deep thinker's mind as he searched for a suitable spot to release Paul Diamond's remains into the elements. The others followed his gaze too, tracking full circle over the cemetery grounds. Kierney ran to her dad and asked to be carried.

'Hey, *pequeñita*,' the tall man said, hoisting her up into the air and kissing her lips. '*¿Estás OK?*'

The little girl nodded and hugged her daddy's neck. The wind had picked up, causing the trees' boughs and branches to sway with frightening, supernatural whooshes and crackles. The ghost stories they had dreamed up at bedtime the night before were about to be acted out for real.

'Here's what we'll do... ' Jeff announced, staring into a pair of deep blue eyes.

'What?' Jet shouted, fired up by the prospect of more excitement.

'We're going to take this little tin of Granddad home with us, and when we next go to New York, we can find out where he was born and scatter him there. How does that sound?'

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Lynn nodded. 'Sounds perfect. Good thinking.'

'But what about me?' Madalena whined. 'Why don't I get to see it?'

'You can if you like,' the multi-millionaire contradicted his older sister, who had never grown out of her childlike fear of missing out. 'You'd like Auntie Lena to come to New York with us, wouldn't you, guys?'

Both niece and nephew gave their wholehearted support to this idea, as did their uncouth relative. The compassionate blonde read her husband's thoughts. Only the previous week, his sister had bade good riddance to their father and questioned why they should even go to the trouble of arranging a funeral. Jeff caught her eye out of the children's field of vision and winked, before his attention was summarily snapped back to more disrespectful overtones.

'Can I?' she shrieked. 'Yeah. Take me to New York. Wow! I always wanted to go.'

Her brother winced, an injection of acid wrath boiling his blood. 'Sure. Why not? As long as you can get the time off work...'

Madalena hit his arm hard and uttered an incomprehensible Spanish expletive at the top of her voice, much to the kids' astonishment.

'That's settled then,' Lynn laughed. 'Shall we go? These guys are getting cold.'

'Sure,' the world-changer agreed. 'We all are.'

Over the following weeks, the couple hatched a plan for an unusual type of memorial service for the double-murderer on the Stones Road, coinciding with the launch of a revitalisation project The Fellowship had been incubating for a few years. While the philanthropist was overseas on another African negotiation mission, the rear-end of the Diamond pantomime horse used her political connections in Sydney to help paint the vision of a procession through the streets to commemorate the city's favourite son. He was the ideal role model for the current generation of teenagers and young adults, his early life spent among people who had fallen victim to the poverty, apathy and lack of opportunity so typical in the western suburbs.

Local councils had been hesitant at first, doubting the level of support they would garner from residents and the business community for an event which might be perceived as glorifying the stand-over tactics of the criminal thugs still operating in the area. Also worried about reactivating some of the old feuds, the millionaire had sided with the officials initially.

As they often did, the eternal collaborators worked through their differences in the recording studio, emerging with a hit song to be released as a single in the months leading up to the anniversary of Diamond Senior's passing, the scheduled date of the parade. Education sessions at local high schools were to be provided by staff at Parklea and other prisons, to warn students of the dangers of becoming involved with the underworld and to convince them that school was a much better solution for staying out of trouble.

Gerry's tax specialists assisted the Diamonds to create two annual university bursaries to be offered at Fairfield High School, to be granted in Jeff's name to one boy and one girl from disadvantaged families who had succeeded against the odds.

The deceased and latterly infamous character who had started out in New York and who was soon to return there in a rather different form, courtesy of the family he abused, was to have his pathetic, good-for-nothing life honoured far more highly than he deserved. This disproportionate tribute inflicted only a fleeting blight on Jeff's conscience, soon rationalising it by projecting forward. In reality, the celebration was meant for those who managed to rise above.

As his gorgeous lover reminded him from time to time, the neglected son had turned bad to good. No-one else had sought to end the Jaworskis' *vendetta* against his family, and it had not been Pavel Diament who secured his daughter's release from the prostitution ring and set her up in a

A Life Tested

Chapter Two

modest apartment in Parramatta. The rock star with an overpowering sense of true justice was in the process of providing hope and opportunity to neighbourhood schoolchildren with backgrounds like his. He gave them something to believe in: themselves.

So the deadbeat father's character had been written out of the skilful artist's life-story. With his dream girl by his side, and their two inspired and enlightened beings, Unity and Liberty, sprouting up before their eyes, Jeff Diamond left the burden of the pretender behind. He was the chief now; free to be whoever he wanted for whomever he chose. And so far no creditors had come forward to call in his debt.