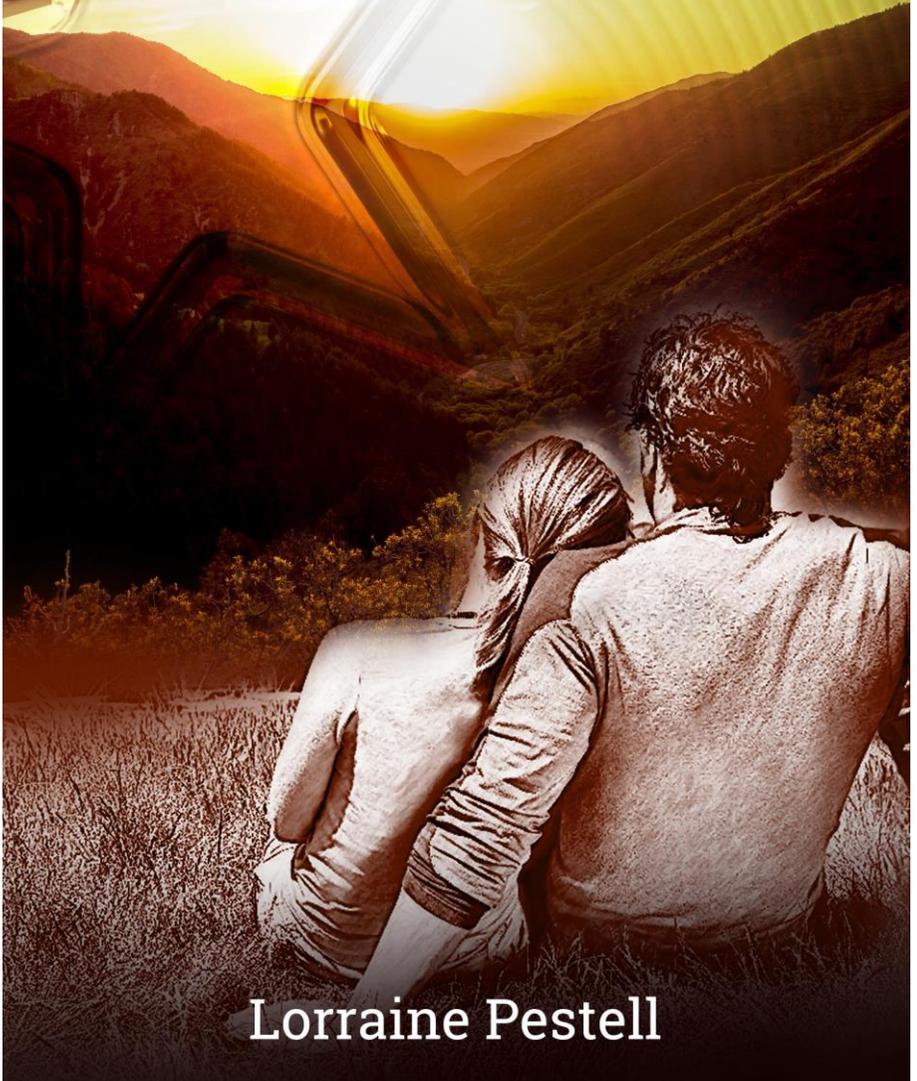


SIXTH IN THE EPIC 7-PART SERIES

A LIFE LOVED



Lorraine Pestell

A Life Loved

A Life Singular
Book 6

Lorraine Pestell

First published worldwide in 2017

© Lorraine Pestell 2017

<http://lorrainepestell.com>

The moral right of this author has been asserted.

All characters, places and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-925151-08-4

E-book ISBN: 978-1-925151-09-1

Amazon ASIN: B071KTJDCV

Other books in the “A Life Singular” series:

Book 1 – A Life Singular

Book 2 – A Life Found

Book 3 – A Life Entwined

Book 4 – A Life Lived

Book 5 – A Life Tested

Book 7 – A Life After

Author's website: <http://lorrainepestell.com>

Twitter handle: [@LorrainePestell](https://twitter.com/LorrainePestell)

Facebook fanpage: <http://www.facebook.com/ALifeSingular>

Goodreads profile: <https://www.goodreads.com/LorrainePestell>

For Professor Susan Stefan,
who acknowledges my reality

The author supports two not-for-profit organisations providing invaluable assistance to Australian children in need:



EdConnect Australia (formerly the School Volunteer Program)
(<http://EdConnetAustralia.org.au>) *“Training and mobilising an impressive nationwide army of volunteers to deliver the life-changing mentoring and learning support in schools to young people and assist them in fulfilling their education potential.”*

The Smith Family (www.thesmithfamily.com.au). *“The Smith Family, the national children’s charity helping young Australians in need to get the most out of their education, so they can create better futures for themselves.”*

Prologue

‘I’m not that good with words,’ Freya lamented, ‘except after the fact.’

Dan smiled into the telephone. ‘You’re an introvert, like me. It’s a pain, isn’t it? Thinking on our feet’s just not natural.’

Last year’s winner of The Good School’s scholarship was beginning to relax. She always shied away from using the telephone, and the more important the conversation, the harder it was for her to initiate. Why was that? Things usually worked out fine.

‘Oh, I agree!’ she chuckled. ‘And for me, it’s also because I think more in pictures than words. I guess that’s why I’m an artist.’

‘And a real good one,’ the Scot jumped in. ‘And I’m not just suckin’ up to ya! Thanks for all the info’, by the way. I can’t wait to get started, and I hope you’ll stay around for a wee while to help me out.’

Freya glowed inside. There was something very appealing about Dan Finley’s accent, or was it his sense of humour? His apparent vulnerability or his empathetic turn of phrase? What had got into her? Relationships weren’t her thing.

‘Sure. I haven’t decided where I’m heading when my year’s up,’ the Queenslander replied. ‘My mum’s expecting me back in Brisbane by Christmas. My brother’s finishing high school, and she wants us to go on holidays together. Haven’t really thought about it though; accommodation, a job, you know...’

A cough burst through her earpiece. ‘It’s fine, Freya. Just wonderin’. No bother.’

‘Sorry. I was rambling, wasn’t I? I do that all the time. Go off into a daydream and leave everyone else behind. Sorry about that.’

Dan inhaled, his heart rate out of control. ‘It’s fine. Now I know you’ve got a mam and a wee brother, so that’s two new things I’ve learned about you today. I read what happened to your dad too. Must’ve been awful. Do you think about him much?’

‘No,’ the young woman steadied her nerves. ‘Well, yes. More than he deserves probably. That’s what a psychologist said to me once. How about you? Your family, I mean...’

The Glaswegian student, whose application had stood head-and-shoulders above the rest in this year's shortlist, came to Ryan and Kierney Diamond's notice during a recent Childlight Board meeting. With precious few resources and significant entrepreneurial spirit, he had established three youth drop-in centres in his hometown's poorer districts.

One particular sentence in the press release issued by the Diamond Celebration Foundation's media machine to announce Dan's acceptance of the bursary made the siblings jump to attention. Not only had he based the model for his clubs on The Fellowship, a charity sustained by their parents since their early days together, but he also hinted at similar facilities for younger children. "Confusion is a killer" had been highlighted in bold.

'My dad's not part of my life the now,' this year's winner answered. 'He left us when I was a baby. He didn't understand stuff. Couldn't cope, I reckon. I think about him a lot though. Much more than he deserves, just like you said!'

'Oh... That's sad too. Sorry to hear that,' Freya said. 'Living through that made you a stronger person though. That's something for us both to be grateful for. Do you remember the bit in Act Two of "ALS" that talked about that?'

"ALS"? Hey, that's great! Do you call it "ALS" too?'

The painter laughed aloud. 'Yes! I got it from Kierney actually. She's become like my big sister. You'll love her. No, she's not like my big sister at all. Sorry. That was a stupid thing to say. But she's so friendly and helpful. Anyway, there I go again...'

Dan chuckled. 'Fine, whatever! Which bit? Are you thinking of when Jeff's talking about arriving in the next life with a brain already full of knowledge?'

'Yes, exactly! Oh, wow! It's so cool that you know the book so well. I loved when he wrote about how some people don't learn how to do anything during their lives, so they start from Square One again next time round. I feel that way too. I find it amazing that some people aren't interested in stuff. Why not learn as much as you can while you're here, to give yourself a head-start in your next life?'

Suddenly light-headed, the sociology undergraduate forced himself to take a few deep breaths. He stood up and opened his lungs to ingest more oxygen, but this only made matters worse. Sitting back down, he rested his elbow on the desk and let his chin drop into the cup of his free hand. Had he read "A Life Singular" so many times that he could hear the prose in his own mind?

'I'd really like to talk to you some more about this. Can we Skype next week, please? My ID's on my auto-signature. I've got exams this week, but next week's much freer.'

'OK,' the young woman responded. 'I'd like that too. Not Thursday, but any other day at this time'd be good. It's great to speak to you, Dan. Congratulations again! And good luck with your exams.'

'*Ta!* I should be studying the now, but can I ask one more thing?'

‘Yes. What?’

‘This is going to sound weird, but if you could paint your experience of The Good School, what would the picture be of? I was going to ask you for three words to sum it up, but you said you weren’t a words person.’

Freya giggled. ‘No, I’m not, and I need time to think about it. My gut-feel says something like I’ve grown in every dimension, but that sounds as if I’ve just put on heaps of weight. Can I e-mail you later? I’m an introvert too, remember?’

A LIFE LOVED

Bathurst Bar Mitzvah

Quite a crowd had gathered while the outside broadcast crew set the stage. Ryan and Kierney were to be interviewed in the foyer of Her Majesty's Theatre on Exhibition Street, where a new season of "The Black Sheep" was opening. Five months had passed since their dad's suicide, and Melbourne was hungry for good news from the Dyson-Diamond stable.

Penny Reid, a veteran ABC journalist, was all smiles, seated opposite two of the town's best loved Generation Ys. 'Welcome, everybody, to a very special programme. Tonight must be bittersweet for our guests, who need absolutely no introduction. Please join me in thanking Jet and Kierney Diamond for stopping off on their way into the show.'

To polite applause, the brother and sister sat tall in their chairs and acknowledged the smiling faces. 'Thanks, Penny,' they responded in unison.

'It's great to be here,' Ryan added, reaching for his sister's hand. 'Thanks to everyone for supporting the new cast.'

The pair had been warned to expect some intrusive questions about their father's unexpected exit, wondering what sort of reception their frank answers might engender from the locals. Stonebridge Music staff had fielded the full spectrum of public opinion, from abusive telephone calls to compassionate letters, disbelief and sadness being uppermost in people's minds.

From the change in her facial expression, the teenagers presumed Penny had exhausted her stock of pleasantries. 'I read in your dad's autobiography that your parents had you kidnapped,' she stated in a somewhat condescending tone. 'What was that like? How did you feel about them putting you through something like that?'

Remnants of grief bubbled in the pit of Kierney's stomach as she prepared to answer, determined to remain even-tempered. 'Oh, that was years ago! I can hardly remember, to be honest. I can see how some people might think it was unnecessary, but Mum and Dad understood what it takes to be resilient. And people in the public eye certainly need to be resilient and prepared for anything.'

Her brother leaned forward, also feeling a little defensive. 'Yes, it was a horrible experience at the time,' he forced a grin, picking out an attractive brunette in the crowd to steady his nerves. 'I was pretty angry when we found out it'd been a set-up all along, but at least we then had the confidence of

knowing what it feels like to be in that situation, and how we'd cope if it ever happened for real.'

'Our parents believed a person can get through almost any hardship if they're loved,' the Sydney University student chipped in. 'We were unbelievably well loved. End of story, as *Papá* would've said.'

A tentative ripple of applause broke out behind the cameras. No-one could ever doubt the celebrity couple's dedication to their children prior to Lynn's fatal shooting. Then, in the aftermath of this tragedy, their father's mature adjustment to the loss of his professed soul-mate had been publicly admired and privately sobbed over, as the sackfuls of fan-mail still pouring into their management company's offices bore testament.

However, since the showman's final statement-to-end-all-statements, views expressed from all quarters were polarising to say the least. Twenty years of blissful marriage brought to such a sudden and unfair conclusion was bound to take its toll, said some. Many others wondered what sort of man deserted his own children in their hour of need?

'So how can you rationalise your father taking his own life and leaving you without that love?' Penny posed the question on everyone's lips.

Ryan was ready for it. 'Oh, we're still loved. Just from a long way off. We believe the way you're treated as a child sets you up for life, for better or for worse. We had the best childhood anyone could possibly ask for, and already knew about Mum and Dad's pact not to stick around if one of them died. It was very tough, of course, but we talked everything through beforehand. I know it's hard to believe, but not even we expected to recover as quickly as we did!

'Children are supposed to outlive their parents. It's the natural way of things,' the sportsman continued, sounding more like his dad every day. 'We had come through losing Mum, and there's no way of telling if we'd have found it harder to lose him too so soon than if he'd stuck around for another ten years or so. No-one knows the answer to that conundrum, and there's nothing we can do about it anyway. *Ergo*, let's just all move on, shall we?'

Penny scowled at the shouts of encouragement booming from over her producer's shoulder. 'That's one way of rationalising it, I suppose. I hope it doesn't creep up on you in the future.'

'It's possible, I agree,' Kierney acceded. 'But I'm pretty sure we're safe from any ill effects. I think they would've been evident by now. We have a lot of help from psychologists and counsellors. We're bearing up as well as can be expected so far. For example, it was *Papá*'s forty-fifth birthday yesterday.'

A few people cried out in dismay, startling the young woman. Whether these were ardent fans mindful of the significant date or stickybeaks uncovering this showbusiness nugget for the first time, she couldn't be sure. Her elder brother beside her, strong, handsome and smiling, boosted her confidence. She ought not to doubt herself. Her parents brought her up with the courage of her

convictions. There was no shame in showing them now, objectionable public opinion notwithstanding.

‘So we took a bottle of his favourite wine up to the dam at the Dysons’ Benloch farm, to the spot where *Papá* re-joined *Mamá*. Their special place. We were definitely a bit nervous, but it was great. We feel close to them all the time. I know it sounds weird, but we’ve always been comfortable with weird.

‘He was confident we’d be fine, and he was right. I remember a conversation we had on the day I got my driver’s licence. It was the day before *Mamá* died, in fact. *Papá* joked that their parenting days were over because I didn’t need driving around anymore and because Ry was already living overseas quite independently. Jet you were then, I guess...’

The cricketer nodded. ‘Yeah. I was still Jet at that point. We’d become more like mates than father and son, so it made sense to leave us to our own devices.’

Ryan “Jet” Diamond sailed through his first year at Melbourne Academy without drawing breath. Gregarious and interested in everything, he had jumped at the offer made by his proud parents to become a weekly boarder at the start of Year Eight, following in his Uncle Junior’s footsteps. He couldn’t wait to immerse himself in after-school activities and the inevitable *camaraderie* which such a diverse range of ages and backgrounds was bound to generate. Endowed with endless physical and mental capacity and an incurable zest for fun, he threw himself into life with courage and determination every single day.

The man who had sworn repeatedly that no child of his would ever be sent away to school had no choice but to eat his words when he saw how well their son was thriving in this new mode. Since his travel schedule continued at a ridiculous pace, and Lynn’s career had been relaunched now that their kids’ demands on her were greatly reduced, the reluctant concessionaire into the moneyed set admitted to his father-in-law that the arrangement was by far the best option for all concerned.

By contrast, Kierney was fast becoming the invisible child. Happy to amuse herself for hours, either in her bedroom reading or writing, or in the gymnasium training or dancing with the music turned up as high as the mirrored wall would tolerate. More recently, she had discovered new inspiration in the studio, experimenting with recordings, and would invariably emerge at dinner-time spoiling for a fight.

There was nothing the young girl enjoyed more than fierce arguments and wide-ranging debates which often lasted well into the evening, challenged but never thwarted by her parents’ *penchant* for playing devil’s advocate. No topic was off-limits, the celebrity couple only too happy for her to test the boundaries of childhood in such a safe and supportive environment. They hadn’t forgotten

their own desperation to discover whether treasures currently beyond their reach were worth having.

Although their firstborn was outwardly every bit a Dyson and his sister was the dark, sultry spitting image of her father, as each child grew, it became obvious to everyone that both were a perfect combination of traditional dynasty and *radicale nouvelle*. Younger than most of their classmates, the Diamond progeny presented to the world as happy, mature and autonomous products of their well-rounded upbringing.

Weekends at *Escondido* were sacrosanct though. Whenever they were in Australia, all four Diamonds gravitated to Mount Eliza on Friday nights with few exceptions, keen to share their news and collaborate on all manner of projects *en famille*. The Polish Jew in Jeff now appreciated the pull of the Sabbath, and with it the feeling of security which came from knowing that everyone he held dear was under one roof by sundown.

This awakening had nothing to do with religion, as true for many social customs. It had everything to do with love.

Most nights spent in the city would see the family fending for themselves, but on the occasions when the influential couple invited locals and visitors over for dinner, or if they foresaw a particularly hectic day, certain extra members of household also made their way to the apartment to help out.

Nannies long forsaken in favour of occasional childminding, nineteen-ninety had seen this role scratched from the famous family's payroll. Taking their place, a retired non-commissioned army officer and his wife were employed as housekeepers. Ross and June Monroe, accompanied by two lively Jack Russell terriers, took up residence in one of the modest cottages on the property in time for the new school year.

Lynn had spent the majority of the last twelve months producing and promoting the success of various albums, both her own and those of others. From outside *Escondido*'s serene and homely walled courtyard, the new arrivals found themselves rubbing shoulders with the "A List", who all considered the Diamonds' luxurious Mornington Peninsula hideaway a home-away-from-home while working on their forthcoming offerings.

'Are we going to give Jet a *bar mitzvah*?' the worldly woman asked one morning, lying in bed listening to a summer rainstorm lashing against the French windows.

Jeff turned over and stroked his wife's shoulder, massaging it while he considered her question. '*Bar mitzvah*? Never even thought about it. Cool idea though. He is getting pretty horny these days.'

'Horny?' his wife yelped. 'Whatever's that got to do with anything?'

'Yeah, horny! What d'you mean? It's got everything to do with it, angel! A *bar mitzvah* heralds your passage to manhood. You know that.'

'OK. Sure. But in that case, why did your grandmother feed you cake? She didn't make it about sex. I reckon you're making that part up for your own

benefit. It's supposed to be when boys are responsible for their own actions, isn't it?'

His bluff called yet again, the billionaire rolled onto his back and issued a laboured sigh of defeat. 'Yeah, yeah, yeah...' he moaned. 'Spoilsport. It's also meant to be a religious thing, and not a cake-eating thing. So my *Bubshka* was just as much of a heretic as I am.'

'Hmm... Anyway,' Lynn reached over and hugged the man she loved so much. 'Whatever the reason, I think he should have one. Don't you?'

For the rest of the day, Jeff's normally unswerving concentration sprang regular leaks; thought-bubbles of their son's impending transition from child to adolescent. What might be the best way to recognise this milestone? Turning thirteen had seen his own first watershed, flanked by his father's imprisonment and his mother's violent death. However, the doting dad was less keen to hurry his obstreperous upstart into adulthood. "The Boy Who Would Be King" was living up to every expectation his family had set for him. Why exert additional pressure for no good reason?

Teenaged years, the boy from Canley Vale recalled, were for the most part troublesome and confusing. He was pretty sure Jet didn't equate turning thirteen with becoming a man. If his empathetic powers were reading his son right, his current manly ideals were defined more as driving fast cars or motorcycles, neither of which were legal until much further into his second decade. The lad was surrounded by strong role models, and hence he also recognised working hard and playing even harder as vital measures on life's scorecard. His grandfather and uncle lived this way, clinically and empirically. And so did his father, although with virtues far less puritan.

It wasn't until the songwriter was behind the Aston Martin's steering wheel, heading home on the Nepean Highway, that the breakthrough came. With an R.E.M. compact disc turned up loud and an autumn fog sticking to the windscreen, the black sports car cut a swathe through the south-eastern suburbs, spiriting its *incognito* occupant to his beloved family. A plan for a boys' weekend away was now brewing, the supreme proportions of which he couldn't wait to test on his dream girl.

Lynn was tucked up in bed by the time her husband turned the key in the courtyard door. Janey had given him a soaking wet welcome home, requiring him to shed his outer clothing in the laundry before climbing the stairs in his boxer shorts.

Stopping first to check on Kierney, whose sound sleep floated in dreamy imagery above her head, fenced in by a stockpile of paperbacks and notebooks containing her mysterious compositions, he then paused in his son's bedroom doorway and smiled. Even though the night was chilly, there lay Jet, out cold and stark naked atop the bedclothes, one hand casually behind his head and the other defending an erect, pre-teen penis.

Yes! the proud *lothario* hissed under his breath. Like father, like son... Some things in life were non-negotiable, and the confluence of Diamonds and sex was

one such unassailable truth. He crawled into bed beside his wife, revelling in the warmth of her resplendent body.

‘Hey,’ she whispered, the contrary sensations of warm breath on her neck and cold skin on her back penetrating her subconscious. ‘What time is it?’

‘Late,’ his lips purred, close to her ear. ‘*Je t’adore*. Sorry to wake you.’

‘No, you’re not,’ the Olympian grinned, twisting around and cupping a roasting hand against the new arrival’s face.

Jeff sniffed. ‘Yeah, no. OK. You may be right. I’m not sorry. But to compensate, I’ve had a bloody good idea.’

‘Really? I can tell,’ Lynn replied, her fingers gripping round his taut shaft as it pressed against her abdomen.

The world’s greatest lover kissed the most beautiful woman on Earth with all the passion he could muster. His saviour would at some point wise up to the overindulgence she lavished on him. Hearing her breath quicken, he begged his day of reckoning to hold off until tomorrow at the soonest.

His left hand loitered in the small of her back, urging her ever closer, and the deft fingers of his right hand slipped along the walls of her vagina. ‘I didn’t mean sex, by the way,’ the poet answered, eliciting an enticing whimper of submission. ‘I meant I had a good idea about Jetto’s *bar mitzvah*.’

‘Oh,’ the singer moaned. ‘Do we have to talk about this now?’

‘Yep. We do,’ her tormenter chuckled. ‘I can’t wait to make you come and I can’t wait to tell you my idea, so they’ll just have to cohabit for a while. I’ve been waiting for this moment all fucking day, angel. And I love you so much for planting the seed. You’re the absolute best, Lynn Dyson Diamond.’

Jeff rolled his lover over without missing a stroke. She inhaled sharply as he entered her, and an orgasm broke free right on cue. She kissed her husband’s chest, covering his “JL” tattoo.

‘Oh, wow! That was so amazing,’ she sighed, staring into a pair of demanding brown eyes. ‘Will you do that again?’

‘You bet!’ the master responded in mock arrogance. ‘How many would you like, madam? Ten? Twenty?’

Another wave of pleasure engulfed them, making the writhing woman cry out. Putting his hand over her mouth, her husband warned her about waking the children.

‘So what’s this bloody good idea that can’t wait?’

‘Bathurst,’ Jeff gasped, rising above her and sinking further inside with each drive. ‘With Don and Dawson.’

‘Bathurst? Motor-racing, you mean? When?’

‘October. It’ll be his rite of passage. I’m going to teach him everything I know.’

Lynn moved faster to match his pace with her own undulations, bringing him ever closer to climax. 'That'll take way longer than one race,' she whispered, her teeth nipping his wrist while loving fingers stroked her face.

'Christ Almighty,' the songwriter growled. 'See what happens when you feed my ego?'

Holding each other close, the forever couple lay in the dark and willed the ecstatic sensations to take their sweet time in subsiding. Although she had no real idea what a boys' weekend at Bathurst might entail, the notion of the fathers and sons being together for such an event appealed to the blonde musician. She imagined the foursome surrounded by roaring engines and myriad acrid odours of petrol, burning tyres and mechanics toiling away. This particular manly image suited their new teenager down to the ground, with or without the sex education syllabus appended to the weekend's itinerary.

'Oh, I love you so much, Jeff. So much... It sounds like a fantastic idea. He'll really love it. Are you going to tell him in advance or leave it as a surprise?'

'We should tell him on his birthday, I reckon. And I'll sound Don out over the next few days.'

'OK. Do you plan to teach Dawson everything you know too?' the impish woman grinned. 'Don and Sue might not be so keen on that part.'

Rolling over and sliding out of bed, the former tearaway smirked. 'Yeah. Most likely more Sue's reservations than his. I'll speak to him next week. This October might see a changing of the guard, teams-wise, which'd be great to witness in close-up.'

Enjoying her husband's newfound animation, Lynn let him head into the bathroom without requesting clarification of this last, cryptic sentence. Motor-racing was far from her favourite sport, and she was too sleepy to be fussed about finding out why the guards were changing. The metaphor seemed apt regardless, and its mystique added extra intrigue.

'They've signed the agreement, angel.'

Pouring two cups of coffee from the *cafetière*, adding milk into both and a liberal dose of sugar for himself, Jeff sat down at the breakfast table where his beautiful best friend was engrossed in a newspaper article. She glanced up, her eyes meeting a wide smile that was still a rare commodity for this early in the day. She assumed he had been checking inbound faxes in the office for the last half-hour, anxious for word on one of DCF's notable projects.

'Thanks,' his wife replied, still a little distracted by an opinion piece in the sports section. 'Signed? Which agreement?'

Was her vibrant news-hound referring to another product acquisition which Paragon Holdings would take from garage to consumer with its venture capital program? Or was this a new Non-Government Organisation hitching its wagon to their unstoppable philanthropic locomotive?

Noting the apparent lack of concern, the handsome man opted to keep the industrious woman guessing, planting a kiss on her head and squeezing her shoulder. At thirty-four years old, Lynn Dyson Diamond remained the hottest property known to man, and no amount of inattention could diminish his love for her.

‘They’re on the last straight. Letters are being drafted as we speak; heads are nodding, and hands are shaking. All hell’s about to break loose, I reckon.’

‘Oh. Merehtu, you mean?’ Lynn whispered as her lips were drawn into a meaningful kiss.

‘The very same. Toast?’

The athlete slipped off the breakfast bar stool until her feet touched the flagstone floor of *Escondido*’s kitchen. She followed her magic-man’s muscular, bare-chested frame across to the refrigerator, lacing her arms around his waist and kissing his tattoo, the shape of their shared “JL” symbol hard to decipher through a damp mass of greying hair.

‘We ought to,’ she grinned. ‘Congratulations. That’s huge.’

‘Why, thank you,’ the comic responded, pressing his crotch against her hip and stealing gratuitous access to her breasts through her bikini top. ‘You’re not so small yourself.’

Lynn groaned, powerless to resist her husband’s charms. ‘Oh, for God’s sake. Shut up, you sex-mad brute! Leave me alone for one second. I thought this was serious... Can’t you concentrate on something else for a bit? Will there be a change of government too?’

‘Looks like it. It is serious, and I am serious. And get this...’

A stern index finger traced a line from his wife’s pouting lips, over the curve of her chin and down her neck until it came to rest on her sternum. His right hand curled behind the base of her skull, encouraging their faces closer together.

‘What?’

‘It might even happen on Kizzy’s birthday. Wouldn’t that be amazing? Freedom on Freedom’s birthday. Serendipity, *regala mía*.’

‘Wow! I’m so happy for you,’ the Diamond double-act’s supreme organisational powerhouse told her passionate front-man. ‘For the whole team. Does everyone know already? You guys’ve worked so hard for this. It’d be perfect if the dates coincide. And I hope you’re going to take some credit somewhere along the way.’

The peacemaker sighed. ‘Thanks, gorgeous. I’m not sure who knows yet. My name’ll be up in lights at some point, I don’t doubt, but it’s really not important right now. Harnessing the momentum when they make the official

announcement's what matters. Africa'll be front and centre on the global stage for a month or two. We can't afford to sit back and smoke cigars while all that's going on.'

'No, I suppose not. Wouldn't be a good look to gloat before anything positive comes out of it.'

'And I wouldn't be surprised if violence were to escalate if the transition's not managed properly,' Jeff leaned over and kissed his wife's cheek. 'You OK if I go over there again?'

Lynn raised her hands, butter knife readied for their toast. 'Not particularly. But how can I say no?'

Her opponent backed away, eyes wide in mock fear. 'I don't know. 'Cause you're the one with the weapon?' he offered.

The clown's foolish banter never failed to melt his dream girl's heart, even after nearly fifteen years of marriage. He dared to make another approach, kissing the sensitive hub of nerves at the corner of her mouth.

Using the lightning reflexes honed over years of athletic excellence, the Olympian sidestepped her opponent's mounting advances and managed to smear butter down his cheek with one deft flick of her wrist. 'Violence may escalate,' she threatened, watching his fingers whip across his jaw in wonder, 'so you'd better manage it properly, Mister Diamond.'

'Whoa! *Gotcha*, loud and clear!' the pacifist laughed, ripping a sheet of kitchen paper from the roll to clean a greasy mixture of butter and marmalade out of his overnight beard. 'Loud and clear, Ms Double- D. Anything you say.'

Despite the campaigners' long-awaited good fortune, the mood in the apartment that day turned fraught with unexpressed angst once news of the Derg's capitulation had been sufficiently sliced and diced. They made a decision the previous night to shelve a project on which they had collaborated for almost six months; a screenplay with the working title of "When You're Gone" and inspired by their Ethiopian hostage experience.

The movie's theme explored the fears and uncertainties of being left to carry on alone without the ability to say goodbye, told from a grieving partner's point of view. In fact, this was the second time its development had been deferred. Earlier suppositions that the couple had expunged enough of their own disquietude to allow a return to the screenplay's dark plot proved misguided. The emotions it stirred up were no less raw and controversial than before, rendering it a bridge too far for public consumption at this time.

The lovers admitted a temporary defeat, unable to understand why their individual instincts were so at odds. Although shared memories of the tense few days spent in an information drought drew them ever closer, the subject matter engendered an esoteric fissure which frightened them both. Anxious to protect their precious family's happiness at all costs, they threw in the final towel after an argument about the story's *dénouement* turned vicious.

If one of them were to die, how might life unfold for the other left behind as truly singular? With no prospect of being together for the rest of this lifetime, would the remaining human embodiment move on or would he or she grieve until the bitter end? Even once the script had been dusted off to resume the creative process, the screenwriting pair soon acknowledged that another two years of maturity had done little to answer these questions with a clear conscience.

In broad daylight, and after a restless night, it was as if the mournful cloud had been lifted from above the pair's heads. Lynn had mixed feelings on sealing the package a courier would deliver to the family's safe deposit box later this morning. These heretofore unarticulated ambitions were set to join the vast array of copyrighted materials already in the bank's custody. Ethereal memes speaking of undying and unquantifiable love took the screenplay's place, infusing the kitchen with a comforting optimism to complement the aromas of toast and fresh coffee to perfection.

Jeff's instincts had been right on the money concerning the many interwoven political schemes across Africa. Missing Kierney's birthday by one day, a reversal of the ban on the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front and other anti-Derg organisations promised repercussions across the whole continent. Within a fortnight, President de Klerk announced Nelson Mandela's release from prison after serving twenty-seven years behind bars for violent activism against *Apartheid*.

A shiver ran down the negotiator's spine as he watched his peacemaking colleague, Jemal Merehtu, addressing the international media contingent beside the much taller South African. The influential, grey-haired lawyer described an era only too familiar to the thirty-seven-year-old, when the military wing known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party had been formed as a defensive action against the ruling force's iron fist. He and his loyal team had trodden the narrowest of paths between right and wrong for longer than he cared to remember.

The former Robben Island prisoner stopped short of issuing a direct threat, instead choosing to stress to their attentive audience that the grounds for initiating combat insurgencies in the nineteen-sixties were no less rampant today. Despite the fact that they had all grown into reasonable men, the celebrity philosopher remained suspicious that his role in future peace talks would become no less challenging as long as Mandela and his cronies held the ascendancy.

The newly-installed leaders were conciliatory however, expressing their desire for a climate conducive to lasting settlement, sharing the world's hope for an end to armed struggles. Digesting their televised speeches sentence by sentence, the delegation's inner circle maintained a respectful silence from their hideaway in the south of France. Upon reflection, the only rock star at the table felt relief that the innocence of his gorgeous gipsy girl's eleventh birthday had not been sullied by this postulating nonsense.

‘Good call,’ Jeff muttered to the Zimbabwean mediator to his right, pushing back his chair and accepting a handshake. ‘That’ll do, gents, eh? Mission accomplished for now.’

Despite the party atmosphere, the billionaire still harboured an underlying unease. After hours of serious deliberation with their insurers and security advisers, he managed to persuade Lynn to be present for the auspicious occasion. She had accepted the invitation amid equal reservation but replete with enthusiastic pride. The couple arranged to fly out of Melbourne late the following night, with the children safely in their bedrooms after Kierney’s birthday dinner.

Arriving at Tullamarine at one o’clock on Sunday morning, the concourse was mostly deserted when the Diamonds strode through the check-in area and were whisked away through Passport Control by three uniformed security guards. And less than a day later, the Diamonds and the Engelbrechts feasted on rare *Chateaubriands* and savoured aged *liqueurs*, making good on the commitment the former university colleagues had made four years prior. The years peeled away with each unearthed memory, their partners a study in contrasts who enjoyed renewing acquaintances and celebrating their husbands’ astonishing achievement until the bohemian retrospective decanted into mellow equilibrium.

Jeff held his wine glass aloft, preparing to toast his professorial buddy. ‘To you, mate! I’ll never forget the time I looked out the window of *la grande maison provençale* to see you and Mehretu meandering across the lawn with your hands in your pockets. The two of you talking in the grounds like you’d been friends for years. That’s as close as a heathen like me gets to a miracle.’

Pieter nodded to the pretentious court jester whom he had come to respect with the utmost humility. ‘Indeed, sir. I had the sense that we’d make headway that day too. I *carped* the *diem*, as a certain drunken Aussie used to say.’

‘Ha! I always was a dumb fuck. It was the beginnings of trust,’ the younger man explained to the brace of radiant smiles across the table. ‘It was an amazing sight. And then the moment when Jemal signalled they were ready to sign a new constitution... Jesus Christ! That’s got to be my proudest moment in the whole damned campaign, even though I really hadn’t done anything to make it happen.’

‘What? Yeah, right,’ Lynn shrugged at the others. ‘You never do anything to make things happen. Just light the blue touch paper and retire. Take responsibility for something for once in your life, why don’t you?’

The dark knight’s eyes drilled into hers as he angled down for a kiss, their hands clasped together under the table. ‘Harsh words, angel, *comme d’habitude*. But seriously... I just forced some mutual understanding. That’s all it took.’

‘You make it sound so simple,’ Mathilde Engelbrecht swooned.

‘Perseverance and patience,’ Jeff smiled at the homely South African. ‘And those, I believe, are qualities I learned from my exquisite guardian angel. But Jeez, Piet! I remember standing at the empty table after it was all over and taking

stock of the enormity of reaching an agreement. That was an effing trip too. Vital vindication of all the hours spent on the 'phone and on 'planes, thumping tables and tearing up drafts, *et cetera*. Preaching the bleeding obvious and banging my aching head against a brick wall.'

Later the same week, an ecstatic and vociferous crowd gathered outside London's Houses of Parliament to watch Jeff Diamond taking overdue credit with his *regala* by his side. Britain's Prime Minister had invited both halves of the peacemaking pantomime horse to address a roomful of society figures at a state dinner given in their honour. An apprentice television journalist, who managed to find himself on the steps leading to the hotel lobby at the same time as the idols' car drew up, jumped at the chance to scoop a spontaneous interview.

The magnetic entertainers, as gracious as ever, obliged with a selection of priceless sound-bytes summarising the Diamond Celebration Foundation's progress towards stamping out sickness in the aftermath of the North African famine, and how Teachers for Peace projects were empowering displaced communities through education and economic grants in the region. Good, bad or ugly, all were related from a highly personal standpoint, albeit without fanfare, sending the reporter's credibility rating skyward on the evening's prime-time news broadcasts.

When asked about his part in Nelson Mandela's release, the great man became far more circumspect. 'I was one cog in a gigantic wheel, Derek. I can't claim much credit for what's happening in South Africa. All I can tell you is it took five years of endless hounding: meetings, 'phone calls, letters and hours and hours of lost sleep. Regardless though, it was still amazing when it happened, wasn't it, angel?'

The blonde Olympian flashed her photogenic smile into the camera's lens. 'Certainly was! To see Mister Mandela walking away from that prison was a special moment, for sure. But for me, watching the expressions on these guys' faces when the Ethiopian treaty was signed tops everything. This was the culmination of some heavy-duty blood, sweat and tears.'

'Professor Engelbrecht,' Derek Wilson interrupted, 'as I understand, paid you the ultimate tribute, Mister Diamond.'

'He was very generous,' the reluctant hero acknowledged.

The young man continued, reading from a crumpled sheet of paper pulled from his jacket pocket. 'I cut out a quote from an article in The Guardian from a few days ago: "Pieter Engelbrecht, who counts himself as neutral politically but who clearly represents the white establishment, has gone on record to say that Africa as a whole owes a huge debt of gratitude to Jeff Diamond. Without his focus on replacing war with peace and wrong with right, I doubt we would have moved forward much at all."'

Sensing her husband retreat from the overt self-aggrandisement necessary to respond to this excerpt, Lynn answered on his behalf. 'Yes. Thanks! Pieter also said these kind words to us directly,' she confirmed. 'He had been reluctant to get involved to begin with. He didn't think peace was possible in the region,

and no-one wants to be associated with a failed operation. Afterwards however, he told me privately that being part of the Ethiopian delegation was the highlight of his career.'

'And the highlight of yours too, Jeff?'

'Well, yeah. Of course. One of so many,' the songwriter chuckled, stuffing his hands deep in his pockets as embarrassment prevailed. 'My life's turned out to be one long highlights package. I'm not going to put this ahead of the pack, but it's up there. No question.'

'So what now?' the interviewer quipped. 'How do you top this? "Addis Ababa, the Musical"?''

Lynn laughed. 'Hmm... Could work! Not a bad idea, Derek.'

The humble showman shook his head, reaching long arms across to block his wife's ears. 'Please, no! Don't put such thoughts into her head,' he warned with a sexy half-smile designed to send female audience members into raptures. 'I don't anticipate there'll be any quick fix in negotiations for the foreseeable future. This stunning taskmaster won't let me ease up, for one thing.'

'And they're already preparing for elections in Ethiopia, and a planned referendum aimed at forming an autonomous nation for the South Sudanese. I expect this crusade'll trudge along for another few years at least, and we have to divide our time across plenty of domestic issues too. The world's not yet perfect, but it's crawling in the right direction. Our immediate goal is just to keep the momentum going.'

That night, after kicking back in the corner of a Neal Street restaurant to share the best in food, wine and conversation with the production team from a rival television station, Jeff and Lynn finally locked themselves into their hotel room and left their game-faces on the chest of drawers next to the key. Exhausted from being the centre of attention, they tumbled onto the bed, wrapped in each other's arms and exhaling in unison.

'Who was it who said, "Stop the world. I want to get off"?' Lynn asked. 'Wasn't that from a Broadway show?'

'Hmm... Think so,' came a half-hearted reply. 'Sounds appealing right about now. What d'you reckon to that Eleanor woman tonight?'

'She was OK. So serious.'

Her husband chuckled. 'You're not wrong. She forgot to bring her personality. I don't think she'd even have cracked a smile if we'd engaged in foreplay at the dinner table.'

The tennis champion began to undo her man's shirt buttons one by one, tickling the hairy skin covering his tattoo. 'Like this, you mean?'

'No,' he growled, pushing her backwards until he straddled her slim hips. 'More like this.'

Giant, caring hands made their way from the beauty's waist, past her breasts until they cradled her tired head. She curled her mouth sideways to kiss the

knuckle of his thumb, moaning quietly as his mass smothered her entire body. This man was passion personified, no matter how many hours he had worked or which of his many and varied duties he had discharged during those hours.

‘You’re gorgeous,’ she whispered. ‘I need you so much. You were magnificent tonight, my noble warrior.’

‘Noble warrior?’ Jeff repeated, sitting up to unfasten his pants and allowing his lover to undress in front of covetous eyes. ‘*Gracias, mi amor*. You inspire me, as always. Next time, I shan’t hold back in front of frigid stage assistants if this is what it does to you! I need you too. And without a second to spare...’

Lynn giggled, being gathered up into strong arms and turned over to face the headboard. ‘Hey! Steady with all the inspiration! How come you were never a supporter of Lech Wałęsa, given your Polish background?’

‘Lech Wałęsa? Jesus, woman! What made you bring him up at this precise moment?’

‘Just wondering, after Harry commented on your wide coverage of world affairs. You still steer clear of Eastern Europe, don’t you?’

‘Who says I didn’t support him?’ the dark-haired man slapped her bare behind and brushed the tip of his penis across her pale buttocks.

‘Did you?’ the woman reeled back, catching his hand and hauling him down onto the mattress. ‘You never spoke about it.’

‘Not openly, no.’

‘But does that mean you did?’

The enigmatic star cocked his head, his saviour’s undivided attention recharging his flagging batteries as usual. ‘I might’ve. I didn’t like him, but I sympathised with what he was doing. That’s all I’ll say.’

Feeling the force of his erection begin to fill her, his Number One fan changed the subject. Her instincts told her to mind her own business and trust his reasons would become clear in good time. Given the Sydneysider’s experiences as a youth with the Polish gangs menacing the western suburbs with their bloodthirsty stand-over tactics, perhaps endorsing a product of the same culture was simply a bridge too far. As his warmth engulfed her, moving her to tears with its intensity, she chose to remind him instead of their recent exploration of souls and reincarnation with the children.

To the breathless singer’s delight, Jeff’s eyes lit up, confirming she had saved the lost boy’s complex mind from a date with Gravity the troll. Once they reached the dizzy heights of orgasm and started on the floating journey back to Earth, he prised himself free of her grip, slipped off the bed and fetched a bottle of *Shiraz* and two glasses from the dressing table.

The long-limbed nymph rolled off the bed too, threading her arms into a silk robe to take the chill off her tingling skin. Her spent companion didn’t make a sound. She returned from the bathroom a few minutes later to find him in the

same position, still erect and with his eyes firmly shut. Today had been a momentous day, and tonight was clearly more than a one-climax night!

The adoring wife began to caress his muscular legs, watching the fibres of his quadriceps twitch and tremble with each circle. A move towards his upper arms elicited a similar reaction, this time accompanied by a smirk and a slow, satisfied exhalation. Although his straight penis flinched as she swallowed its head and began to suck in purposeful strokes, there was no sign of life from the rest of his bulk.

‘Are you still with us?’

‘Nope,’ her husband muttered out of the corner of his mouth. ‘It’s just you and him tonight, baby. No need to wake me up when you’re done. I’ll see you in the morning.’

‘Oh, OK. That’s fine,’ Lynn laughed. ‘Nice and easy. I was about to tell you how sexy you were tonight, and how much you turned me on in the restaurant when you were running your hand down my back while attempting a sensible conversation. Shall we arrange for a late check-out in the morning?’

‘Hmm... *Une idée excellente, mon amie,*’ the intellectual broke his silence. ‘These last few days’ve been a welcome oasis for our souls, *n’est-ce pas?*’

‘*Mais oui,*’ the nubile nude replied, batting his errant hand from her backside. ‘*Bien sûr.* How is your soul tonight, mate?’

‘*La Lutte* is proceeding to plan. *Santé,* you most wonderful of wonders. Y’know... I was thinking about the whole two-dimensional souls thing while you were in the bathroom.’

‘The essence and the ego? Was I that long?’

‘Yeah,’ the rocker chuckled. ‘Whether it’s our kids or African stuff, or even making a record or performing on stage, good only comes about when there’s balance between the two.’

‘Really? That’s an interesting observation. Please explain, prof’, while I do my best to distract you.’

The intellectual grimaced, not fancying his chances. ‘Jeez! Game on, lady, if I must. Anyway... The essence is outward-looking, concerned with everything being connected properly. The ego focusses inwards, making sure we each have what it takes to play our part in the interconnected world. Does that make sense?’

Lynn giggled, herself unable to concentrate on the soft tissue massage she had deployed as her treatment of choice. ‘Maybe. Not sure where you’re going with this, but it makes sense so far.’

‘*Bueno.* So as we live through the various episodes in our life, our attention waxes and wanes between these two aspects. Much like yours is now...’

‘Shut up and get on with the story,’ the athlete sighed, renewing her efforts.

‘It’s what leads us to strive further; to test ourselves and recalibrate our direction. Universal concerns and personal concerns always compete when we

take account of stuff happening around us. Deciding how we need to react to everything, y'know... We should always be mindful of the journey other people are on and that it might affect the way they behave too. There's usually a perfectly good reason for doing what they do or say, if only we're open to accepting it.'

'So that's *La Lutte*, in a nutshell?' his muse crooned, now having given up her attempts to derail the vehement orator. 'Realising everyone's course is motivated by their own essence and ego, and there's stuff-all we can do about it unless we put pressure on them to question their motives.'

Her husband's heart soared. '*Exactement, Regala*. Bloody well said! I love you so much,' he shouted, lunging for her waist and locking their lips in a deep kiss for several seconds. 'The eternal struggle that manifests within us at each moment of truth also endures throughout time, lazing on the back porch until it's needed again.'

'It's a combination of old learnings we carried forward from the past and new ones we'll take with us into the future. There was a great quote from Rabbi Harold Kushner I read not so long ago: "The mirror never changes, but everybody who looks at it sees something different."'

Lynn caught her breath. 'Looks at it or looks in it? That's what you mean, isn't it?'

'Aha! *Bravo*, gorgeous,' Jeff cried out again, swooping his arm over in a wide arc to reach his wine glass. 'Exactly my point. If you understand the difference between looking at the surface of something and seeing the complexities inside it, you're ninety-nine percent of the way there.'

'The way where?'

'Wherever you want to go. Rabbi Kushner's mirror was a metaphor for God. But I prefer to think of it as the soul, which means maybe, therefore, they're the same thing after all. Who knows, but I'm keeping my soul well separate from a God of the masses.'

The fading princess smiled, nestling her face against his mass of soft chest hair. 'Oh, I love you so much, you wise, old man. I can't believe we've been talking about this for so long and it's still such a mystery. A mystery that binds us together.'

'Wait a minute! Less of the old man, if you don't mind,' the songwriter begged, relishing his penis hardening again in his dream girl's hand. 'The evolution of language has misled us.'

'Has it?' she couldn't hide a sigh. 'What do you mean?'

'Christ, that feels so good. Don't stop. I mean when theologians talk about religiosity and saving souls, they often attribute masculine or feminine to behaviours, like languages that make objects or even abstract things either masc' or fem'.'

'Which varies between languages anyway,' his student interjected.

‘Sure does,’ Jeff inhaled as a surge of desire welled up from his nether regions. ‘Listen, you minx... That’s precisely what I mean. For example, a chair’s female in France but male in Germany, so how can a trait designated as one or the other be used to explain ethereal stuff? Utter crap, I tell you!’

Issued a temporary reprieve once more, the red-blooded lover stretched himself on top of the mattress while his partner switched spots to focus on his satisfaction again. He grinned when he spied a pair of raised eyebrows begging him to carry on.

‘Therefore, in my presently violated opinion...’

‘Pleasantly violated, I hope,’ she countered.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake! You are the absolute fucking best, Lynn. Let me finish, and then I’ll finish you off once and for all.’

Feeling sorry for this intrepid explorer so torn between feeding their brains and assuaging their carnal needs, the thirty-four-year-old desisted. She flopped down onto the sheet and propped her head on her hand to concentrate on his latest essential lesson.

‘Go on, please. Enlighten me.’

The orator chuckled. ‘Thank you, you disobedient temptress! I’ll enlighten you alright... What I’m trying to say is that it’s totally unhelpful to use the words “essence” and “ego” to describe the two sides of a soul. I’m going to write about it when we get home. “*Yin*” and “*yang*” might be better? They don’t divide us down gender lines and unleash some of those negative responses Jetto mentioned from the girls in his class.’

His wife nodded. ‘Oh, yes. I know what you mean. Girls can be so cruel sometimes. They’re the first to get upset when a boy insults them, but then they’re bitchy to everyone behind their backs.’

‘Yeah. Works both ways, I assure you. And this game of picking sides based on pre-conceived biases sets us in unhealthy competition with each other, hence all the violence in the world... Competition, as you Dysons understand so well, is a team sport. It’s using both *yin* and *yang* capabilities in all people to their best advantage, rather than denigrating particular behaviour.

‘We need to stop labelling everything like we’re running wild with a supermarket price-gun. This has to be our new message, angel. Can we? Like, think about what you want to achieve, then look around you to see who and what’s at your disposal without focussing on the labels they have stuck on them. And use everything wisely.’

Lynn sat back on her haunches beside her fervent but inanimate bedfellow, taking hold of his last remaining moving part and working its entire length with urgency. With his eyes closed, Jeff could sense her vagina so close to his face. The need to partake in the awaiting nectar overpowered any further cranial cogitation, particularly when combined with her hand’s rapid stimulation.

‘Resistance proving utterly impossible,’ he admitted defeat, turning his head leftwards and tugging her hips in close.

‘Oh, thank God!’ the kind woman groaned, squirming as his tongue set her clitoris on edge in an instant. ‘I was beginning to wonder if you’d forgotten I’m here.’

The adoring husband roared at the top of his lungs, flipping them both over with crazed eyes and pinning the glistening woman down. Shaking his arms free of his open shirt, it twirled in a few rhythmic circles in the air above his head before he tossed it across the room like a *matador*’s cape. Lynn arched her back and reclined on the bed, with her head at its foot, and admired the tanned, lithe form of her beautiful black stallion.

‘Forgotten you’re here?’ Jeff repeated. ‘Angel, I cannot possibly forget you’re here. Even when you’re not here, I imagine you here. You don’t have to touch me to drive me to absolute distraction. Are you going to let me make you scream?’

Aquamarine eyes flashed their assent, and Olympic-strength hands reached up to grab her man’s waist, spinning round to a kneeling position on the edge of the bed. With her hands caressing his genitals, his mouth engaged hers, the kiss’ force tipping them both over.

Lust overrode their exhaustion, and the long-time lovers pleased each other until his climax could no longer be restrained. Emitting a long moan, the commanding rock star seized control with a heart-stopping kiss until his orgasm reached its peak.

‘Good?’ the athlete enquired, seeing contentment creep across his face and hearing a desperate play for oxygen, her hand massaging his neck while he rode out the powerful sensation.

‘Oh, yeah. About as good as it gets,’ the poet confirmed. ‘You are the best. That was truly amazing.’

The bedroom had darkened during the romantic lesson, and the couple had barely regained their composure when the telephone rang on Jeff’s bedside table. Groaning now for a quite different reason, he unwrapped himself from their drowsy tangle and rolled over to deal with the brutal assault on their blissful seclusion.

Who dared to disturb them well after midnight? It had better be worth it. Both parents’ thoughts sprang to concern for Jet and Kierney at home in Melbourne. Their eyes met, exchanging worried looks as the father’s hand lifted the receiver.

‘Hello?’

Lynn could hear a man’s voice, though unable to discern individual words. Her husband paused while the caller identified himself. The longer the silence, the more apprehensive she became.

‘Yeah. Hi. This is Jeff Diamond. OK, Oliver. I’m well, thanks. Right,’ the head of the family waved a reassuring hand while endeavouring to interpret the other man’s tone. ‘Sure. I guess so. That’s very cool. Sure. Please go ahead.’

Winding his hand in circles in the air, he smiled at the quizzical expression from the other pillow. 'On and on and on and on...' he mouthed.

'Who is it?'

Jeff held his hand up, indicating that he would put her out of her misery as soon as the conversation concluded. The inquisitive woman nodded, running to the bathroom to freshen up after their recent romp, relieved no harm had come to their children.

The billionaire carried on listening to the rambling messenger. From what he could make out, he was calling from a public relations firm in Boston, Massachusetts. It appeared there had been an announcement that nine divisions within the Paragon Holdings group had won awards in a prestigious technology and innovation competition.

'Sorry? Yeah. Very good news, thanks,' the Chief Executive Officer answered, following every move as his saviour returned and slid under the crisp white sheet. 'It's just that it's pretty late, and I'm here trying to enjoy the rare and sublime company of my wife.'

Lynn frowned and pointed at the clock. Jeff nodded, complaining again under his breath at the ability of this nervous employee to waffle on. She cuddled into his side to warm up, and he placed an affectionate arm around her frame.

'No, Oliver,' the celebrity scoffed, losing patience. 'You've dialled a hotel in London. Forty-four's the UK. Yes. It would indeed be Thursday in Australia if we were in Australia. No worries. I don't have working hours, to be honest, so it's my fault. Tell you what... Would you mind sending me the list through on a fax? I need to think about a response. Don't want to give you something off the cuff, mate. You'll have it in a couple of hours. No, I don't have the number. Sorry. If you ring the hotel back on whichever number you dialled, I'm sure someone'll be able to give you one for their fax machine. Ask them to slip the fax under our door, and I'll get onto it as soon as it arrives. Cheers, mate.'

The comedian moved the receiver away from his ear and scanned it over his naked body, as if to reinforce the need to terminate the call. The sleepy blonde giggled, lifting the sheet so he could do the same with her exposed flesh. The possessive husband shook his head. There was no way on Earth he would give this timezone-challenged PR guy a glimpse of her stunning physique.

'Yeah. Sure thing,' Jeff laughed when he had to pull out of a kiss at the last minute. 'Sorry, mate. I have to go. Get back to Gerry Blake or Matt Newcastle if you need any stats about the company. I don't have that kind of info' with me here. Thanks heaps, Oliver. G'night. Yeah, thanks. *Adiós.*'

The receiver rocked as it settled back onto its cradle. The rock star let out a long sigh and extinguished the bedside light.

'Who was that?' his wife asked, lifting the sheet to cover his shoulders. 'Oliver who?'

‘Oliver from Masters in Communications in the North End,’ the frustrated man responded in a passable New England accent. ‘MIT’s media guy.’

‘Did he think he was ringing Australia? How weird! How did he even get this number?’

‘Hannah,’ the billionaire sighed. ‘Gerry told him to ’phone Cath, who wasn’t there, so he spoke to Hannah. She gave him this number ’cause she was sure I’d want to hear the good news.’

‘Oh, OK. She meant well. Anyway, what good news? And at this time of night?’

‘Jesus, angel!’ her bedfellow yelped. ‘Gimme a break! I’ve answered enough questions tonight, without you peppering me with more. You know what it’s like over there. Americans don’t consider anywhere to be outside their range of timezones. He thought he was ringing Australia anyway.’

Lynn ran an elegant index finger along the line of her man’s pursed lips to calm him down. ‘Let’s get some sleep. You can tell me all about the good news in the morning.’

‘Sounds perfect, if only I didn’t have to prepare a statement for their imminent media release. He’s sending a good news fax, which is likely about to be slid under the door any minute now. I told him I’d work on it and shoot it straight back.’

‘But why do you need to turn it round so quickly?’ the project manager *extraordinaire* persisted. ‘Tomorrow US time or London time?’

The showman shrugged, exposed again. ‘You’re right. I don’t have to do it, but I’m compelled to do it ’cause it boosts my *ego*.’

‘Even though your essence needs a rest?’

‘Yeah, yeah, yeah,’ her imperfect stranger sneered. ‘I’m gagging to find out the details now. You know damned well I can’t resist a dose of compulsion every now and again.’

As always, Lynn understood his impulses only too well. She kissed him goodnight, urging him to hurry back to stock up on some sleep. The couple was flying back to Sydney the following morning, after one more press conference. Their children would be waiting at the airport as a surprise for their father, before he and Jet set off for Bathurst and the boy’s elaborate *bar mitzvah*.

Jeff groped around in the dark for his clothes and dressed in the bathroom. Slipping on his shoes and picking up one of the keys, he let himself out of their room and descended in the lift to the ground floor. Heads turned in the busy *foyer* as he waited his turn at the *concièrge*’s desk, signing autographs and posing for photographs in his dishevelled state.

Oliver's fax arrived in the time it took for the superstar to explain himself to a pretty, young receptionist. He then signed yet another scrap of paper which was immediately folded over several times and slotted into her pocket. Once in possession of the ten-page document, he made his way to a quiet corner of the hotel bar to review the analysis, starting with the list of patents and resulting solutions his company had developed. He ordered a whisky on ice and an *espresso* before settling in to compose a suitable Chief Executive's response.

The "information superhighway", the invention credited to Tim Berners-Lee, had been the catalyst which had unleashed untold potential. Several technological advances designed by companies funded through Paragon Holdings over the last ten years were now on the cusp of mainstream supply. The celebrities' vast incomes had been turned into seed funding for a whole host of winning enterprises on the MIT innovation hit parade.

A grateful sense of pride coursed through the rock star's veins as he scanned down the list of achievements, all attributed to entrepreneurs who profited from songwriting and performing royalties. Humble in triumph, he spent a few moments dreaming of how he and Lynn were making a difference to the world in so many indirect ways, quite independent from the influence they exerted as public figures.

Wrestling with a reinvigorated Gravity, these feelings of accomplishment were tempered with a deep-seated and somewhat disconcerting sense of charlatanism. Was it right that his brainchild, built entirely from showbusiness royalties, should receive the recognition of its peers on the back of other people's inventiveness? Jeff Diamond was nothing more than a catchy brand name made available to these visionaries for realising their dreams.

Yet what was so wrong in this? The lost boy who had recently celebrated his thirty-eighth birthday did his best to convince himself it was only right and proper that his easy money and elevated profile should open doors, allowing himself to count this as a skill in and of itself. The nobody from New South Wales had brought masterminds together to achieve great things. He could hear his beautiful best friend's voice scolding his negativity. He had nothing to be ashamed of. As they had written in Sarah Friedman's latest volume of psychiatric research, celebrating success was fundamental to sound mental health.

The renowned wordsmith scrawled a few lines of commentary about his draft press release on a blank piece of hotel notepaper. Not dissimilar to writing the bridge in a song lyric, once he found the hook, the rest flowed with minimal effort. He downed what remained of his tepid coffee, content with the night's work, and chased the bitterness away with a mouthful of whisky.

Returning to to the young staff member on the reception desk, the celebrity made another request. 'Hi, again. Is there somewhere I could go to make a private 'phone call, please?'

'Certainly. I can find you a room, sir,' the shy woman replied, flustered by a second visitation from her handsome idol.

‘I already have a room, thanks,’ Jeff made her blush. ‘My wife’s sleeping in it.’

‘Oh, I see,’ she smiled. ‘So sorry. Of course, sir. Let me ask one of my colleagues.’

‘Thank you.’

The hotel employee vanished behind a wooden panel, leaving her famous client to survey the establishment’s comings and goings. His fingers played with the lid of his cigarette packet, craving a shot of nicotine to counteract the turmoil generated by his cerebral washing machine as it churned with new ideas.

A porter arrived after a few moments to usher him backstage to a small office equipped with a telephone. Jeff tipped him, and the door closed with a resounding click.

‘Gez,’ he said, hearing his manager’s voice on the other end of the line. ‘How’re *ya* going, mate? Yeah. Thanks. You too. Still in London. Too right. Can’t wait actually! Tomorrow morning. One o’clock or so, I guess. Hey, look... Can you ring me back on this number, please?’

Chief Officers Executive and Financial of one of Australia’s largest private corporations sat twelve thousand kilometres apart and discussed the statement they wished to enter into the annals of time. The two close friends then moved on to other matters, some business and some personal, before the celebrity resolved to sign off and make the most of the remaining night-time hours.

His beautiful best friend slept on undisturbed in their ninth-floor suite. He stood in the bedroom doorway, gazing at the heavenly creature who had made this phenomenal level of success possible in the first place. He had a fair idea where his life might have gone if she hadn’t risked everything and chosen him over her father. Where would he be without his two greatest allies? Would Gerry have taken their burgeoning empire to such heights without him? And would Lynn have faced into another future with as much commitment and determination as she had shown in the last fifteen years?

Fifteen years! In another six months’ time, the couple with the matching tattoos were to notch up yet another milestone. Disrobing at the end of the bed, the Sydneysider doubted his ability to slide in under the covers without waking his Melbourne aristocrat, picture-perfect from every perspective. What a life singular the soul-mates had spun from their endless golden thread! And how complete had she and the children made him!

As expected, Lynn stirred when a hundred kilograms of after-hours philosophy sank onto the mattress. The preoccupied world-changer lay on his back and stared at the ceiling, rolling his various thoughts over and over.

As if the judicious gymnastics taking place on the other side of the bed was permeating her own brain, she turned over and opened her eyes. ‘Still awake?’

‘Hey, angel,’ Jeff replied. ‘Yeah. Can’t relax. I started to get sleepier when the music stopped. But as usual, as soon as my head hit the pillow, the symphony fired up again, back with a vengeance. Sorry. I was trying not to wake you.’

‘That’s alright. Can I help?’

‘You already did.’

‘Not enough obviously,’ the caring woman suggested, propping her head up on her elbow.

Beckoning her face towards his, the songwriter hugged his muse in closer, a heartfelt kiss pressed into her forehead. She rested her cheek on his sternum and listened to his thumping heartbeat. Never had someone exuded such genuine gratitude as this man, she was sure. Despite conquering the worst of his fears, her lost boy remained cursed by his hyperactive, overanalytical mind; for the most part his greatest asset, and yet on occasion, also his most burdensome liability.

‘It’s my fault. I can’t find the “Pause” button,’ he rued. ‘There’s a million things running round my head, all jockeying for pole position.’

‘Open the door and let ’em run out. That’s what you’d tell the kids.’

The intellectual chuckled. ‘Yeah. Probably would! They’d never run out of their own accord.’

‘Won’t they?’ Lynn’s wry smile tunnelled into his brain.

‘Oh, I get it. Have I ever opened the door?’

‘Well, have you?’

‘Nope. I’m scared we’re going to get so caught up in all this high-tech’ crap and the aftermath of Ethiopia that we’re in danger of losing what we have. Losing each other, I mean.’

‘Really? Why? I’m not going anywhere,’ the singer teased. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Nowhere,’ her husband groaned. ‘This life of ours is just a little teeny bit, slightly, totally overwhelming at the moment. Things aren’t going to slow down, angel. I want us all to take advantage of every opportunity, but I also don’t want to neglect you or the kids.’

A sigh of pure dismay blew a gossamer stream of air through the hairs covering his tattoos, making Jeff shudder.

‘Since when’ve you done that?’ the sportswoman asked.

‘Cheers,’ he sniffed, smiling at her shocked expression. ‘Yeah, I know. I love you so much. I already feel calmer, so thanks.’

‘All good,’ the drowsy woman replied. ‘You’re welcome, and I love you too. You’re like one of those plastic handheld games you get in Christmas crackers... You know, the ones with all the little metal bearings, where you have to tilt and rock and shake it until you get the balls in the right indentations.’

Happy to hear her enervated partner chuckle at the analogy, Lynn continued. ‘When you’re all strung out like this, you just need nudging back into place.’

‘What’ya talkin’ about? My balls are already in the right indentations, baby. You saw to that earlier,’ Jeff claimed, hugging her tightly. ‘It’s the rest of me that’s not so shit-hot.’

The rear-end of the Diamond pantomime horse heaved herself up to a sitting position and pointed to the telephone. It was lunchtime in Melbourne, and the children were on school holidays. She remembered their son would be in town, at cricket training until late afternoon, but their daughter would most likely be at home under the housekeepers’ watchful eye.

‘Why don’t you ring Kizzy? She’ll be at *Escondido*.’

Her partner’s sombre outlook dispersed a little, his chameleon instincts kicking in. He dialled the number and waited for the call to connect, picturing a string of idyllic scenes from their custom-built Mexican *hacienda*.

‘Hello?’

‘June, hi. It’s Jeff. How’re you going? We’re great, thanks. Is Kierney there, please?’

The traveller heard the elderly woman’s sensible shoes scurrying across the hallway’s marble tiles, imagining the eleven-year-old having run down the stairs at the sound of the main telephone. Sure enough, her sweet voice called out in answer to the summons, and more footsteps, lighter this time, tripped closer and closer. He also heard something not meant for his ears...

‘*¡Olá, Papá!*’ the breathless youngster greeted him, hopping onto one of the armchairs against the staircase wall and tucking her feet underneath her. ‘Where are you? *¿Está la mamá allí?*’

‘*Sí,*’ her dad replied, overjoyed to hear such impetuous affection in her voice. ‘London still. We’re in our hotel, in bed. It’s two in the morning, and I couldn’t sleep. Are you having fun, gorgeous?’

‘*Sí, gracias. Mucho, mucho,*’ the girl affirmed. ‘Did you hear what June said just now?’

The energy had deserted Kierney’s voice, suddenly hushed and hesitant. Jeff smiled at a quizzical look from his wife. Secrets were being given away too readily, treating each to a different piece of the puzzle at the same time; a delectable situation the empath vowed to relish while he could.

‘June? No. *¿Por qué? ¿Qué te dijo?*’

‘*¡Papá!*’ his daughter squealed. ‘You *did* hear her. You must have. I can’t tell you what she said ’cause it’s meant to be a surprise.’

By now, Lynn had cottoned on to what had happened and let out an exasperated sigh. She had hoped to avert the usual deep depression her favourite man encountered every time he returned from an overseas trip by organising a special homecoming. The accolades bestowed upon their organisations were bound to deliver an extra shot of darkness into the mix, and now it appeared their therapeutic subterfuge had been blown wide open.

The peacemaker held out his right hand, inviting his saviour to cuddle in. ‘*Mamá’s* disappointed too, gorgeous,’ he relayed. ‘Are you guys meeting us in Sydney on Friday?’

‘Yes,’ Kierney whined. ‘I can’t believe we gave it away. Sorry, *Papá.*’

‘You don’t have to be sorry?’ her dad insisted. ‘It was a slip of the tongue. *Mamá’s* sorry, you’re sorry, and I’m sorry. The only one who’s not sorry is June, and that’s only because she doesn’t know.’

The child laughed. ‘June does know. As soon as she said it, she slapped her hand over her mouth and stared at me like a cornered possum.’

‘A cornered possum? *¡Muy buen!*’ That’s so cool. Clever simile, *pequeñita.* Well, I’m looking forward to seeing you anyway. You still gave me a nice surprise. Just a couple of days early. And now I’ve got the whole flight to dream about how good it’ll be. Please tell June it doesn’t matter.’

Jeff gave his dream girl a tender kiss, knowing the plan had been spoiled for her most of all since she would have taken equal pleasure from his reaction. Their grown-up little girl wouldn’t understand the significance of bringing the family together in Sydney prior to Jet’s *bar mitzvah*, but her dad certainly did.

‘Listen, angel. Speak to your *mamá* for a minute,’ he invited, searching the beauty’s eyes. ‘We’ll see you and Jetto on Friday. Have a good time ’til then.’

‘OK, *Papá,*’ Kierney reverted to her previous, carefree tone. ‘Have a fun time there too. *Te amo.*’

‘*Te amo también, KLF. Adiós.*’

Her father handed the receiver over, opting to make himself appropriately scarce. He ducked into the *en suite* to allow his leading ladies to lament the loose-lipped Scotswoman’s unfortunate disclosure.

The musician stared at his reflection, his eyes taking some time to adjust to the unnecessary brilliance delivered by the two banks of lighting, one on each side of the mirror. So the lyric for “Roads of Stones” was about to be played out for real. He and Lynn had discussed it from time to time, but no definite plans had been made before.

The pleasing concept also filled him with a huge sense of foreboding. How might he cope with returning to the Canley Vale flat with his thirteen-year-old son, bringing the second verse of the nineteen-seventies’ hit to life? And to cap it all, his gorgeous gipsy girl would see his childhood home too. She hadn’t made an appearance in the song, yet her presence to share in the experience was appropriate.

Lynn had finished the telephone call by the time her husband opened the bathroom door. Laying her head down onto the pillow, she turned to greet him with a glint in her enquiring eyes, dying to gauge his reaction.

‘It’s an amazing surprise,’ Jeff assured her, climbing back into bed and switching off the light. ‘I’m sorry it was messed up. It doesn’t matter at all.’

‘It does matter,’ the Olympian contradicted. ‘Now you definitely won’t sleep, and I’m scared you might even have a nightmare.’

‘Yeah. It’s possible, you’re right,’ the songwriter agreed, realising the room was too dark to communicate via nods and shakes of the head. ‘But it’s all good. An awesome idea to line it up with our motor-racing trip. And I meant what I said to Kizzy about it being a good thing to look forward to with twenty-two hours in the air. We’re booked into Business Class, aren’t we, this leg? So we’ll get there quicker anyway.’

His wife laughed out loud. ‘Will we? How do you make such ridiculous statements sound so logical? I’m glad you’re not derailed further. I didn’t know how you’d feel about having the visit sprung on you. You’re definitely worried about it. You wouldn’t be telling these awful jokes otherwise.’

‘Oh, shut the fuck up, wench! Me, worried? Now it’s you who’s making ridiculous statements. Go to sleep, OK?’

The new Jeff Diamond reached for the remote control, and the television sprang into action, crackling and spitting until the display settled down. Reliving memories of the early nineteen-seventies, his old self tapped the arrowed button until the volume was as low as it would go. This well-worn *scenario* came straight from their pre-London days and served to warm both hearts.

Lynn kissed her perfectly imperfect stranger goodnight and rolled over, shielding her eyes from the picture’s dancing lights. She fell fast asleep within a few minutes, leaving him to distract himself with late-night programmes. Or not, as it turned out.

Testing Times

‘Hey, *Papá!* Did you read this one?’

Kierney’s voice punctured the widower’s thought-bubble. While she leafed through Lynn’s diary entries for nineteen-ninety, his mind had drifted off on a pleasant time-warp. He languished with great fondness in the era when pop music was a global currency, when a handheld telephone weighed more than a pint of beer, and when they were still the Four of Diamonds.

‘This one,’ the seventeen-year-old flapped the black, leather-bound volume, index finger keeping her page as she crossed from the couch to the desk. ‘Sorry. Were you asleep?’

Rubbing the unyielding muscles on the back of his neck, Jeff coughed and twisted his chair round to face his smiling daughter. ‘Yeah. Must’ve been. What’ve you found now?’

The passage in question was written a week before his beautiful best friend’s thirty-fifth birthday and a week after she had won an eleventh US Open tennis championship. The globe-trotting couple had met up for a weekend in London, mid-way between the European and US legs of the rock star’s latest world tour. At the pinnacle of their performing careers, they were allocated top billing at the season’s Royal Variety Performance, playing to an adoring crowd of the city’s A-list and tugging their forelocks to the House of Windsor.

“‘Today I was gazzumped by Miss Piggy!’” the dark-haired gipsy girl had tears in her eyes as she read aloud. ‘Do we still have that on video? I’d love to see it again.’

Jeff’s mouth broke into a smile, having no trouble remembering the act which had brought the curtain down before the show’s intermission. He had stumbled upon the self-same memory only a few days earlier while poring over old newspaper cuttings and magazine articles with Cathy and two members of the Stonebridge Music team, preparing collateral for his autobiography’s latest chapter.

‘Whoa! Let’s have a look, please?’ he replied, so keen to capture more of his wife’s innermost thoughts that he almost snatched the journal from his daughter’s hands. ‘It was such a pain in the arse to do, that stunt. I reckon your *mamá*’s account of the pink pig and the pyromaniacs’d pull no punches. She got burned; nearly set her dress on fire.’

‘On fire?’ Kierney yelped. ‘Shit! How come?’

Her father’s eyes scanned down the page of leisurely, handwritten prose, accepting a cigarette purloined from his own packet. He chuckled as his carbon-copy next snaffled his lighter and held it in front of his nose.

‘Cheers, *pequeñita*. Don’t mind if you do? Please go right ahead. No worries, *Papá*. Plenty more where these came from.’

‘Oh, shut up. You pinch mine too,’ the young woman defended herself. ‘What happened? How did *Mamá* get burned?’

The songwriter filled his lungs with smoke and rested the cigarette on the side of the ashtray while he reached an arm around his loyal housemate. ‘Here, look...

“‘I’m relieved the tennis season’s already over because I sustained an injury to my wrist after Jeff left me for a stuffed puppet. I knew it would happen sooner or later, but a stuffed puppet? Poets, pyrotechnics and pork clearly don’t mix!’”

‘See what I mean?’

The classic snippet of television footage had captivated fans across the globe and even earned a slot on the Australian evening news at the time, and the Diamond children had seen it replayed many times in the intervening years. The scene started with the handsome rock star at the keyboard, serenading Lynn with one of their platinum-selling hits from the late nineteen-seventies, “Reborn”.

The superstars’ sizzling stage presence translated equally well to the small screen, sweeping the audience away on their romantic melody until a booming explosion unleashed fiery flashes and a large quantity of dry ice. Jeff was left sitting at the piano, singing to the Muppets’ Miss Piggy when the smoke cleared. The more his puppet princess swooned, the more he had hammed it up, leaning in to steal kisses and having his hair messed up by amorous trotters.

Recounting the story from the present day was more difficult than the widower expected, given what had befallen the love of his life some five years later. ‘I knew things hadn’t gone quite according to plan, ’cause I could hear people frantically asking if *Mamá* was alright. But the show must go on, and all that, so Miss Piggy and I had to carry on getting down and dirty like we had in rehearsals.’

Kierney’s face was a picture of concern, both for the backstage accident and for her father’s painful recollection. The fact of their mother almost going up in flames had never been made public before, even to her or her brother. Lynn had been patched up during the interval, ready for their two remaining appearances of the night.

‘But didn’t I do “These Boots Are Meant For Walking” with *Mamá* afterwards?’ the teenager asked. ‘I don’t remember her having burns on her arm.’

‘The wonders of make-up, I’m guessing,’ her father smiled. ‘You guys were too far away to see anything, thank Christ. It would’ve been hard to keep singing if you’d been freaked out. Whatever... It wasn’t that serious, except the show’s producers were shitting themselves that we’d sue for damages. They offered to pay for our hotel accommodation, dinners, *et cetera*. Got all out of proportion at that point. *C’est dommage, mais c’est la vie*.’

His daughter frowned. ‘Yeah. Guess so. Was that the same night we all did “Mack The Knife” too, with the “Crocodile Dundee” moment?’

‘Sure was. That was a good skit, I have to admit. You guys did well to keep straight faces.’

To cap off a unique evening of entertainment, the Diamonds had delivered a choreographed rendition of the Bobby Darin favourite, dividing the verses between family members. Jet had taken great pleasure acting out the body “just oozing life”, much to everyone’s amusement. The spellbound crowd had laughed again when Lynn pulled out a Stanley knife and the kids countered with packets of white plastic airline cutlery.

Jeff produced an enormous *machete* blade from nowhere, bringing the number to a fitting close. With the background music edited to a tee, the

opportunity to reprise Paul Hogan's immortal line was too perfect to cut from rehearsals.

'Now this...' the swashbuckling showman brandished his weapon until it glinted into the camera, reenacting the memorable Hollywood gem. '*This is a knife.*'

'Look out, Old Mack, he is back!' father and daughter brought the piece to its conclusion in unison, their *staccato* enunciation timed to professional perfection.

The *duo* chuckled to one another, a little awkward at how easily they slipped back into the old routine. Skipping fifty or so of the diary's pages, in search of other beautiful secrets she had unearthed, Kierney settled down to read more of her mother's *memoires*. Her legs crumpled underneath her, depositing her in a tidy heap on the rug at the writer's feet, eager to share more magical passages of text.

'Did you see what *Mamá* wrote about you ringing her with your first mobile?'

The author paused, distracted by an e-mail arriving in his Inbox. 'What? First mobile 'phone?'

'Yes,' his daughter answered. 'It's very romantic. You need to read it, if you haven't already. Here...'

The entry in question was from the tail-end of May. A rare break in Jeff Diamond's tour had bisected the tennis calendar, finding both parents in the same country at the same time. Thinking her husband was still away on a business trip, Lynn had answered the telephone at their city apartment, overjoyed to hear his voice.

The seventeen-year-old impersonated her mother's voice with an eerie likeness. 'Listen, *Papá*:

"Jeff asked me if the kids were asleep, which they were. 'Good. More 'phone sex? Which room are you in?' I said I was in the office and let him whisk me away to paradise as he always could. He asked, 'Are you thinking of me while you work?' I told him I hadn't been able to think about anything else, especially since he'd started down this path!

'Let's do it some more then,' he said, using his sexiest tone. 'I'd rather have you here,' I said in reply. 'It's so much better when you're here.'

To my surprise, his next words were, 'Come into the bedroom then. I'm waiting for you.'

I love this man. I really love this man. I will always love this man."

'Had you seen that before? It's so amazing. I love how she's so honest.'

The grieving man's face had twisted into an expression not quite resembling a smile but which had struggled to advance much further than a frown. Rivulets traced down his cheeks from eyes squeezed shut, and the fingers of his right hand scratched the front of his shirt; out of habit, out of blind faith or out of genuine irritation?

'Jesus! I remember that night like it was yesterday. Fuck, I wish it were yesterday, and we could go to the apartment and find you in the office, angel. Happy to meet you there anytime. Just say when.'

Kierney scrambled to her feet and into her father's waiting embrace. Words were superfluous between them, both missing their dearly departed relative's steadfast guiding hand and limitless capacity for love.

Their grief was less raw these days, now five months after García had taken Lynn from their perfectly imperfect family. The tears were no less meaningful for the teenager's determination to move on to bigger and better achievements, and no less agonising for her parasitic front-man in his quest to put their life singular in order in time to meet her for their next adventure.

Jeff groaned, slamming the driver's door and taking an accentuated deep breath. Passers-by could hardly believe their eyes as, one by one, Australia's most famous family climbed out of a nondescript Holden and blinked in the shimmering sunrise. Such a contrast to the last time he had stood in this spot, when he and his dream girl had braved the Boxing Day barbarians lurking behind the front door of this lowly abode, intent on tormenting the world-changer during his protracted apprenticeship.

'Ah, Canley-Vale-on-Sea. So good to be back.'

Lynn rolled her eyes at the blatant lie, her husband's fake smile and imperious *persona* not fooling her for one second. She and the children had a pretty good idea how many challenges this morning would throw up, trusting the closure he was to experience at its end would do more than cancel them out. All four had practised visualisation techniques in the airline lounge, waiting to be called for their flight, until the sight of the Stones Road disappearing in a rear-view mirror was etched on their collective psyche.

Politely deflecting a snatch of joyous whoops of recognition from residents whose community facilities received regular facelifts and injections of cash for redevelopment courtesy of the district's most prodigious son, Jet, Kierney and their mother stood on the footpath beside the anonymous rented sedan they had collected that morning from Sydney's Kingsford Smith Airport.

The Diamond family stalled for a few minutes, gazing up at the three-storey tenement building which spanned a whole block of the downtrodden neighbourhood. With her arm firmly around the lost boy's waist, inside the

leather jacket he so seldom left behind, the blonde stalwart studied the lines on his face. What was he thinking?

Was the fear of whatever lay behind Door Number Four as great at thirty-eight as it had been at twenty-two? She hoped not but expected otherwise. After all their research into trauma's stubborn legacy, she doubted this impressive man, whose all-encompassing career had turned him into such a phenomenal role model for young and old, would ever be free of his childhood scars.

'Wonder where that delightful gent', Joe, is now...' Jeff smiled at his wife's concern. 'In the ground, with any luck. That'd have to be a bloody big mother of a coffin.'

Joe Cafici was the proprietor of the hardware store next to the stairwell entry; a local businessman with links to the western suburbs' gangs. It had also been rumoured that he acted as a police informant from time to time, leading to most adolescents in the area despising him. For Jeff, this hatred was amplified yet further by the portly Italian's habit of preying on his desperate mother and under-aged sister for sexual favours. He never had managed to discover how significant a part this scandal-merchant played in Paul Diamond's conviction, only certain of the rewards which flowed thereafter.

Although the old man had retired a decade ago, the shop still traded under his name. Business looked to be booming, which made the homecoming boy feel sick. Sharing a joke with his son about the lengths of *salami* hanging in the window of the delicatessen on the other side of the alley, he shunted the children forwards with sudden hostile resolve. Several customers were forced into double-takes as the celebrity quartet marched in lockstep towards the glass door that would take them upstairs to the scene of these and countless other atrocities.

Lynn took her man's trembling hand, eagerly clasped as four pairs of feet covered the short stretch of littered footpath. Searching his eyes for clues as to his mental state, she received a playful wink. The telepathic throwback to nineteen-seventy-four made them both glow inside; remembering the last time they had lingered in this same spot. The recently reconnected lovers had been full of trepidation that morning too, pausing while he smoked an extra cigarette and hoping it would deliver the stamina required to climb six flights of stairs and confront his darkest demons.

The youngsters were several paces closer to the entrance than their parents, necks crooked upwards to the top floor. Despite being spared the most graphic of details, they understood the terrible memories their father had lived with for so long.

'Is that your room?' Jet asked, spinning round and pointing to the leftmost of the dual-paned windows. 'The one with the guitar sign in the bottom corner? Did you put that there?'

'Yep. That's it, mate,' his dad confirmed, his own finger directing their eyes a little further to the right. 'The guitar's nothing to do with me. Must've been stuck there well after I left. They've got flyscreens these days. Flash, eh? Never had those when we lived here. And that one was our lounge room.'

‘So, kids,’ his wife added, referring to the first window again. ‘That’s where you have to stand and look out, in order to make the story come true.’

The youngsters sang the pertinent verse on cue, seldom embarrassed to break into song. Customers clutching plastic bags of shopping stopped to tune in, searching the pavement for television cameras.

‘Press the doorbell, please, Jetto,’ Lynn requested, drawing their attention to a brass *plaque* screwed into the brickwork. ‘“Sing and Play”. Is that the name of their school? Cute!’

Jeff shrugged, his complexion becoming greyer with each step. Since serving its primary purpose of exorcising ghosts from his nightmares, he had had as little as possible to do with this property. It had been leased back to the council for the past ten years, on the *proviso* its anointed landmark status would be used for the benefit of present-day Stones Road natives.

The Diamonds had been pleased to hear that a modest music school now operated out of the apartment where The Australian Elvis lived as a boy. Once the plans for Jet’s Bathurst *Bar Mitzvah* solidified, Lynn had approached the teachers to arrange a time for the family to drop by before the day’s classes began.

No sound came from the entry-phone when Jet pressed it, and his mother quickly whisked his hand away before he had a chance to repeat his action with more boisterous ambition. After a second or two, a red light flashed twice and the crackly tones of a female voice burst through the tiny speaker, so faint that the visitors could scarcely make it out.

The teenager announced their arrival with his customary self-possession, and the door into the stairwell released with a buzz from upstairs. Jet pulled it open, inviting the rest of his clan to file past. Signalling approval of a job well done, the proud dad ruffled his son’s hair in thanks for a gesture befitting a young man on the cusp of his coming-of-age weekend.

‘You OK?’ his *regala* whispered.

A nervous Kierney turned round, hoping the answer would be positive. Slipping her fingers into her *papá*’s free hand, she saw his face had tarnished to a deathly white. She had no idea what to expect inside the modest dwelling which had been the subject of many mysterious conversations, only knowing that event descriptions were becoming far less sanitised with each birthday she and her brother celebrated.

Their mother smiled in encouragement, then tutted as the athletic lad sprinted ahead and bounded up four flights of stairs, no doubt trying to produce as much noise from his flat-footed strides as possible in the tall, narrow echo-chamber.

‘Wait for us, Jet,’ she shouted up to the landing between the first and second levels. ‘Take it slowly, please.’

She oughtn’t to have been surprised when her husband released their hands without a word and gave chase, rocketing up the steps two at a time. He soon caught up with his son, who was now leaning over the railing at the very top.

Out of breath, the impetuous pair watched on as their womenfolk climbed the remaining flights in a much more decorous fashion.

‘I said, “Take it slowly,”’ the distinguished woman frowned, wagging an index finger at the leather-clad overgrown child. ‘Especially you.’

Exactly as he had done in the same spot sixteen years before, Jeff merely smiled and lit himself a cigarette. ‘Sorry, angel. All good.’

Lynn was sure that all was not good but let his comment slide with the children in earshot. Too easily identified were the tell-tale signs of mental torment: the sweat on his brow, the tension in his jaw and the dark, sunken eyes no doubt dreading the re-appearance of phantom enemies from his past. Moreover, racked with sympathy, she recognised his need to remain strong for Jet and Kierney, not only as a classic competitive statement in front of his son and heir, but also to signal that this former den of ill-repute held no danger for them.

A slight man in his mid-thirties, not much taller than the budding cricketer, opened the door before the family unit had a chance to re-assemble itself. He stepped out onto the landing, closely followed by a woman who dwarfed him in all dimensions.

‘Welcome, welcome!’ the teacher cried out, casting his arms in dramatic arcs. ‘It’s such a pleasure to meet you, and we’re so privileged to have you on the premises. Come on in! I’m Tristan, and this is my partner, Leanne.’

Jeff hung back, apprehension shielded in his usual chivalry, ensuring his wife’s hand was the first to be shaken. ‘Thanks, Tristan. This is Lynn, as you well know. And these are our daughter, Kierney, and our son, Jet.’

The veins on the extrovert music teacher’s forehead looked like they were about to burst. ‘Hello, one and all! Wonderful to meet you at last. Please come inside. We’ve got some tea and coffee ready. Have you already had breakfast?’

The tall, slender Olympian ushered her offspring through the door before inviting their hosts to lead the way. Apart from being the well-mannered thing to do, her main objective was to give the apartment’s former occupant plenty of space to cross the threshold in his own time.

True enough, she felt a sticky hand slide into hers. The songwriter had requested she make no reference to their previous visit or to the nasty memories held therein. On no account were Tristan and Leanne to know of the difficulties he faced in returning to his childhood home.

‘Fuck!’ Jeff mouthed to his beautiful best friend, managing at the last minute to pluck a neutral disguise from somewhere.

Enquiring blue eyes allowed the lost boy a short interval to absorb his new situation and beat an orderly retreat if the panic rose to unbearable levels. To her delight, he transmitted a nervous message to carry on, and she wasted no time in yanking his hand forward and propel him inside until all six bodies stood huddled in the cramped kitchen area.

‘So, Jet and Kierney! Would you like tea or coffee, or would you prefer a juice?’ their Amazonian host asked, her bulk having trouble navigating the small space without bumping into everyone else.

‘Oh, yes. I’ll have juice, please, Leanne,’ the youngest Diamond answered, stealing a glance past her brother and in the direction of the door.

The girl’s expression changed from one of curiosity to abject dismay, anxious to interpret the distress on her father’s face. She was witnessing firsthand the meticulous sketch of blind fear which her mother had often provided; the outer manifestation of the oppressive clouds under which her hero had grown up. She tried to imagine him as a young adult, standing welded to the doormat and unable to summon the courage to open the front door. Authenticity notwithstanding, this reality check was still a shock to behold in person.

Her brother, on the other hand, remained oblivious to his dad’s internal suffering and the others’ tender responses. ‘I’ll have a juice too, please, Leanne,’ he replied, diverting momentarily from his path into the lounge room.

‘No worries,’ the bubbly woman smiled. ‘And for Mum and Dad?’

‘Coffee, please, Leanne,’ Lynn chimed in, ‘for both of us. White, and two sugars for Jeff. Just milk for me, thanks.’

The only response the billionaire could muster was a moronic nod, thankful that he had been relieved of his duties as head of the family while he pulled himself together. His head swam with a frenzy of wayward thoughts, the magnolia-coloured walls closing in around him and daring him to take a step in any direction. Looking behind, he noticed Tristan had closed the front door, leaving the struggling man feeling trapped and confused.

‘OK! Thank you,’ the esteemed record producer began, letting her man’s hand drop while she accepted two mugs of steaming coffee. ‘You’d better give us the tour, or your students’ll arrive before we’re finished.’

Knowing it was unsafe to give Jeff responsibility for his drink yet, the elegant sportswoman walked into the longer side of the L-shaped space which had been the Diamond family’s lounge room. A collection of musical instruments lay strewn over two trestle tables against the wall, alongside an upright piano. Another table on the opposite side was piled high with a variety of books, well-worn scores and manuscript paper, next to a tray of pencils and erasers.

‘Old habits die hard,’ she laughed, attracting Kierney’s gaze. ‘Reusing the sheets by rubbing your dots out at the end of the class. Do you still do that at school, Kizzy?’

Distracted from her examination of a motley assortment of electric and acoustic guitars, some on stands and some leaning at precarious angles, the young girl skipped over to her mother’s side. ‘Yes!’ she answered in happy familiarity. ‘Do you do that too, Leanne?’

Tristan took the lead, offering a potted history of the couple’s private music school: who taught which instruments; the types of students currently enrolled;

and a few autobiographical details of their individual, decidedly non-stellar careers. The Melbourne Academy starlets were at their attentive best, smiling and chuckling at each appropriate moment and fielding the many questions posed of their own musical predilections.

Gradually, Jeff's reverberating nerves ceased to dominate his consciousness. Hoping their hosts hadn't construed his uncharacteristic social reticence as rudeness, he held a hand out for his coffee, which was transferred into his keeping with a furtive kiss. He winked at his daughter, who grinned back in relief.

An obsessive need planted by his trollish nemesis wanted so much to launch into a tirade of past afflictions. The tortured soul fought back a compelling desire that his offspring confide in his private recollections; how this meagre home had been furnished, the uses it had been put to, and the awful sights and sounds its walls had kept secret before its conversion into a wholesome place of learning. He gave thanks, as Lynn would later, that his tongue was not yet ready to play.

His guardian angel, as always, displayed far more patience with these situations than the former tearaway ever could. She sauntered across to the front window, beckoning the children to follow her and look out. Realising something was amiss, Jet span round to check on his father, guilt and shame splattered all over his face.

The rock star cleared his throat. 'That's where we used to sit, guys,' he explained, sweeping his left arm from one end of the room to the other, 'surrounded by boxes of all kinds of stuff, stretching all the way back to this window.'

'What sort of stuff?' Tristan asked, fascinated to hear the celebrity's account of living here.

'Stuff to sell,' the songwriter remained as cryptic as the situation demanded. 'You name it, my dad sold it. There was a small table here where Auntie Lena... my sister, Madalena... and I used to eat.'

'Dining table?' Leanne prompted.

Jeff sniffed. 'No. Not really. Nothing that organised.'

Figuring out the reason the music teachers weren't being fed the whole story, Kierney broke away from the rest to accompany her father back into the kitchenette. She leaned into his side as he propped himself up against a breakfast bar which had been added since his time, and he put a loving arm around her shoulders. She did her best to transfer positive energy to her beloved *papá*, predicting their passage into the remaining two rooms would only inflate his dread.

Tristan joined the dark-haired pair and lifted a selection of muffins and *croissants* out of a box onto waiting platters. He held them up as an offering to their godlike visitors, beaming as the eleven-year-old helped herself before her brother had time to claim the lion's share.

‘Mmm...’ the girl said. ‘*Pain au chocolat*. My favourite. Thank you very much.’

Jeff declined, nausea bubbling on the brink of restraint. He watched his son deliberating over which sugar-filled item he might tackle first. Ever predictable, the boy picked a gooey chocolate muffin and began to peel the corners of greaseproof paper away so he could minimise the mess when breaking it apart. Filled with gratitude that their children were far removed from the ratbags of Sydney’s outer west, he caught his wife’s gaze and allowed himself to gloat for a second or two.

‘Thanks, Tristan,’ the thirteen-year-old grinned, making eye contact with their host as if he were aware his gentility rating was being judged. ‘Too many goodies here! May I come back for seconds, please?’

The short man burst out laughing in theatrical volume, nodding in an exaggerated motion. In comparison to his partner, his personality more than made up for his lack of stature.

‘Of course you may, young sir. And thirds, if you’re lucky.’

‘Thanks, mate. This one’s always starving,’ Jeff reported. ‘Who’ve you got coming this morning? Must be pretty quiet on weekdays.’

The other half of the teaching cohort invited Lynn to partake in the breakfast fare, begging forgiveness for her slow reaction. The tennis champion dismissed the apology as unnecessary and helped herself to something she could share with her son, who accepted a generous portion of a *croissant* without hesitation.

‘Indeed. We’re thinking of asking the local primary schools if their curriculum could include off-site music lessons to fill a few gaps during term-time. We usually have some keen beans in the school holidays, but mostly mums and uni’ students during the week,’ Leanne told their guests. ‘A clarinet, a singer and two guitarists today, if I remember correctly. And a barber’s shop choir rehearsal this evening. They’re coming along nicely actually. It’s a shame you’re not going to be able to watch any of them.’

Preparing yet another white lie, Jeff smiled at the quaint expressions which continued to roll off their hosts’ tongues. ‘Sorry, guys. We’d have loved to stay longer, but Jet and I’ve got to get across to Bathurst this afternoon.’

‘Oh, really? Mount Panorama? How excellent!’ Tristan gushed in false excitement. ‘That’ll be heaps of fun, won’t it, young man?’

As “The Boy Who Would Be King” nodded without cracking a smile, the Diamond parents’ locked eyes once more to share a covert aside. One white lie deserved another! It was clear this delicate musician was totally unimpressed by anything to do with thrumming engines and smoking tyres.

Accepting a refill of coffee, Jeff again rested a hand on his daughter’s shoulder, steering her towards the other end of the apartment. ‘Come this way, guys, please,’ he requested, inviting her brother to join them. ‘We came here so you could see my old bedroom, so let’s do it. Yeah?’

The superstar felt his blood pressure take an immediate skyward hike in spite of a supportive smile from his dream girl. Both children, anxious to make the morning easier for their dad, fell into line beside him with commensurate unease. Lynn stayed seated in the classroom with teachers large and small, tasked with holding their attention until the dastardly deed was done.

All three doors at the end of the short corridor were propped open, to the great man's relief, and he steeled himself to enter each in turn. 'Go left,' he instructed the children, fixing his eyes on the streams of daylight entering into the passageway from the front window. 'This was Auntie Lena's and my room.'

It took only the most transitory of glances at the cluttered studio on the street side of the apartment for the lost boy to zoom back through time. Now firmly grounded inside his childhood refuge, his older self noticed both youngsters appeared somewhat mesmerised by the door opposite; the one leading to the rear-facing room. They knew the bare bones of what had taken place therein, although it would be many more years before they were deemed ready to hear the whole truth.

Having his precious gems in close proximity had an unexpected calming effect on the tormented soul, feeling controlled and almost pleased to discharge this ill-fated but obligatory chore. Mental agitation prevailed as expected, along with the abiding physical symptoms of cramping legs and a consistent, blinding throb behind his temples. Unlike the previous time he and Lynn had stood in this room, no visual onslaught threatened to knock him to his knees, and Gravity and his demonic mates had so far failed to wield their furious force.

'I have to say I expected you to make a lot more noise than you do,' Leanne stuttered, left alone with one of the world's most prominent stars. 'Much more gregarious... Somehow we tend to think all showbusiness people are attention-seeking. You're just like a normal family really.'

Lynn chuckled. 'Thanks! We try to be a normal family as far as we can, whatever that really means... We do have our noisy moments too. Probably a bit jet-lagged today. Jeff and I've just got off a 'plane from London, and to tell you the truth, this place doesn't hold happy memories for him. He wants to show it to the kids now they're old enough to appreciate it, and then basically forget it.'

The other woman nodded in sympathy. 'I see. Of course I've read about your husband's mental problems, and the work you both do to help sufferers is truly inspiring. That explains the pained look on his face. I wondered if he was hung-over, and now I feel embarrassed that I stereotyped him.'

The guest sat her empty coffee mug on the table, idly leafing through the score of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. 'That's fine. He is often hung-over,' she laughed. 'We have this odd need to give Jet and Kierney the experience of hardship without them actually having to go through it. Does that make sense?'

'I suppose so,' Leanne agreed. 'It's still a rough neighbourhood round here, but we like it. Most people are friendly enough, and the Stones Road's so well-

known because of Jeff Diamond. Our link with you certainly generates a lot of interest.'

Meanwhile, in the second music studio otherwise known as Jeff Diamond's boyhood bedroom, Jet and Kierney took great pleasure in examining the collection of posters of their family which had been framed and hung on the wall. It was odd to see their own faces adorning someone else's place of work and gratifying to know their parents' generosity was valued so highly.

The children took their places at the window, re-enacting one of the many lyrics they had been able to recite more-or-less from the moment they could speak. Their father brought the verses to life as they stared out over the infamous suburb, finally understanding his motivation to rise above his unfortunate circumstances and forge a path to Lynn Dyson's door. Neither was convinced by the concept of soul-mates, yet both celebrated being the product of unending love.

The songwriter filmed the amusing *cameo* performances for posterity, sensing the same disassociation as last time ridding his body of tension. He couldn't wait to share the home video footage with his saviour, knowing she had been the architect of this edifying diversion. Almost jealous that she would run through these mini-memories without him, while he and their *bar mitzvah* boy were having their eardrums assaulted by Fords and Holdens, it was wholly appropriate that she be rewarded for the healing they dispensed.

Snapping the camera's screen back into its resting position, Jeff turned away from the window and pointed first to the right-hand wall. 'Over there was Lena's side, guys. Her bed was here, with a wardrobe in that corner. She had posters of anyone and everyone on her side. I'm not even sure if she even knew who half of them were. She wasn't fussy, as long as they looked hot.'

'And so that was yours,' Kierney continued the commentary, seeing his tentative gaze swap to the opposite side. 'Where was your bed?'

'Here,' her father pointed to the front corner. 'Y'see that square patch in the ceiling?'

Both children nodded, botched repairs visible in the plasterboard joints overhead.

'There must've been a tile missing on the roof, or a blocked gutter or something,' the nostalgic man went on, 'cause whenever it rained heavily, water would build up and then drip steadily through the ceiling and down the wall. The first time it happened, my bed was pushed right into the corner, and I came home to sleep in a bloody great puddle.'

Jet let out an unsympathetic snort, while his sister screwed up her face at the uncomfortable image.

'And then one day, obviously long after it should've been fixed, a whole section collapsed.'

'Oh, my God!' the lad screeched. 'Were you in bed?'

‘No!’ the indignant man snapped back. ‘Jeez, where did that come from, mate? I thought you teenagers had your voices broken in and under control by now. Anyway, give me some credit... I’d had the sense to move the bed by then, but it was still an almighty mess. That up there’s not the original patch-up though. I did a reasonable job, but it’s been done again since. And painted too, which I could never be arsed to do.’

‘Do you think I could fix a ceiling, Dad?’ his son asked, anxious to restore his manhood.

Jeff smirked. ‘Sure you could. No sweat. You’re a pretty good handyman. Not like Gerry... He wouldn’t have a clue.’

Both children laughed, having a fair idea how successful their parents’ indomitable manager might be at hands-on work. The small room’s atmosphere had been lifted by the *ad hoc* injection of humour, and it occurred to its former occupant that he was faring better than expected without his *regala*’s assistance.

Before the healing patriarch had a chance to reap the benefit of this illuminating fact, the young sportsman lunged at him, landing a punch squarely in his gut. Apparently none was immune to the portent of today’s engineered therapeutic fix. The tall, muscular man braced himself to retaliate, well accustomed to such ambushes. He flicked a foot behind his son’s left knee and almost sent him crashing into a ramshackle collection of music stands.

‘Hey!’ Jet whined, brushing dust off his new black jeans. ‘Your song doesn’t say anything about kids getting attacked in your room. Just wait ’til we get to Bathurst... Daws and I’ll have your guts for garters.’

The artist scoffed. ‘Oh, will you? We’ll see about that. But you’re right. Humble apologies, you *oik*. So what d’you think about coming here after all? Kiz?’

‘Weird, a bit,’ the eleven-year-old looked up from a piece of sheet music she had been examining. ‘It’s not like we had any photos to know what it was like when you lived here or anything, is it? Hard to see the “before” and “after”. Not like Benloch, with all the pictures of *Mamá* and Uncle Junior as kids.’

‘True enough,’ Jeff agreed.

‘Yeah, but it is good to be here,’ her brother’s voice became more subdued. ‘Just like I thought actually. Much brighter and far less grungy than you said. The view’s what I imagined too: rooftops and the street; loud with all the cars going by... Did you hear it all the time?’

‘Don’t remember,’ their father mused. ‘Must’ve.’

‘So where did you keep bikes and stuff?’ Jet continued. ‘If you didn’t have a garage or garden shed or whatever?’

The billionaire smiled at this innocent question, posed by a young man surrounded by the finer things in life. A *frisson* of satisfaction ran down his spine, recalling the many quiet resolutions made with his pregnant wife before their firstborn arrived, determined that any child of theirs should enjoy a much improved standard of living compared to the one he had known.

These maturing little gems had everything they needed, and no opportunity was out of reach as long as they strove for it. By no means did they have everything they wanted however, as he and his privileged better half were used to hearing; a complaint all four accepted as healthy and perfectly normal. What they lacked in material possessions was compensated through being spoiled for choice in terms of amazing experiences, having travelled to every corner of the globe as Lynn Dyson and Jeff Diamond's human baggage. A regulated upbringing kept their feet on the ground and their hearts open to life's inequalities.

'I never had a bike, mate,' Jeff responded after his moment of reflection. 'When I told my dad I wanted to get one, d'you know what he said to me?'

'No.'

'He said, "Just pick one up off the street. Find one you like and bring it 'ome. I've got cutters if it's got a chain.'"

The young man's mouth fell open. 'He told you to steal one?'

His father chuckled. 'Yep. We *are* talking about your granddad, remember? He didn't exactly respect the concept of personal property. In his world, if you wanted something that someone else had, just go and effin'-well nick it. No worries, mate!'

Not wishing to labour the point too far, the Sydney native focussed the youngsters' attention outside, telling them which aspects of the view had changed. Describing his regular commute to high school, they took an imaginary journey through the poorly lit streets and dangerous parks. Kierney sidled up beside the storyteller, staring into the distance towards Fairfield.

'*Qué pasa, pequeñita?*' the empath asked, disturbed by her glum demeanour. 'Don't want to be here?'

The youngest Diamond straightened herself up. 'Sorry, *Papá*. Yes, I do. Well, sort of... It's not that I don't want to be here. I just don't know *why* I'm here.'

Intrigued rather than disappointed, the philosopher slouched against the windowsill and fixed his daughter's gipsy eyes in his own. 'Why don't you know why? Because I said so! What d'you want to know?'

She giggled. 'Oh, *nada, nada. N'sais pas vraiment*. I mean, I know why we're all here, and I'm glad to have seen your flat. But I don't feel anything. Like my heart and soul don't know why they're here.'

'Ah, yeah? Interesting observation. And good, in a way,' Jeff reassured both children, hearing his son confess to a similar sentiment. 'You too, mate? Now you mention it, that makes me feel vindicated in a weird way. Bringing you here's not some kind of emotional blackmail to make you appreciate what you've got, or anything like that. You guys don't need to be saddled with my shit. You just need to know where you come from, to inform where you're going. Make sense?'

The young lady's bottom lip quivered as if she were about to cry, causing her dad to take a pace forward and hug her close. Anticipating the onset of girly waterworks, Jet decided to seek out extra breakfast and offered his excuses.

Kierney rested her head against her favourite *confidant's* solid chest, and the matching pair stood in silence to let the mood resolve itself. 'I wish our family started from you and *Mamá*,' she admitted. 'I don't need to know about your *mamá and papá*. I can't bring myself to miss them 'cause they were so horrible to you. Is that a mean thing to say?'

'Not if it's your honest opinion. You can choose not to think about them, but we shouldn't deny previous generations existed just because the memories aren't cool. You're happy to have "G" and "G" in your life, aren't you?'

'Yes,' the youngster hissed, her shoulders drooping. 'It *is* mean then. I'm sorry, *Papá*. I should get over it.'

Jeff smiled. 'It's fine, gorgeous. You're not alone with these unhelpful thoughts. I often used to wish my family'd started with me too. I could do without Auntie Lena still, half the time.'

His daughter grinned back, wiping tears from her eyes with the sleeve of her dress. 'Hmm... Maybe you shouldn't have told me that.'

'Maybe not. The truth is that our family didn't start from me and your *mamá*, as distasteful as it may seem,' the intellectual assured her. 'It's important for all of us to know whom we're descended from, even if they weren't people you can relate to or admire. No-one gets to choose their ancestors, but you can make sure you choose a future full of people you're proud to be associated with.'

The student nodded her head, this time with tears of pride brimming in her eyes. '*Gracias, Papá. Eso es excelente*. Sorry for being so nasty. I didn't mean to say what I said.'

'Oh, yeah? I hope you did,' Jeff raised a quizzical eyebrow, applying gentle pressure on her sagging shoulders. 'Now you're going to plead a split personality? You're entitled to your opinion, so stick to your guns. I won't be angry or upset. I hated my parents' guts when I was your age, and I still rarely want to think about them. What *Mamá* and I'd be heartbroken about is if you guys turn your backs on us.'

'What??' Kierney yelped. 'No way! We'll never turn our backs on you. Never, ever, ever!'

Jeff lifted his guard as a barrage of feeble blows were directed at his torso, gathering the fighter into his arms to save his bruises. 'Hey! Enough already. Let's leave *la abuela* and Granddad behind today then. Only speak about them when absolutely necessary. And to be honest, that's precisely the point of coming today. We'll be out of here in ten minutes' time, never to return if we play our cards right.'

Misgivings out of her system, the thoughtful girl relaxed. She stepped out of her father's embrace and twirled round to the window as if she were floating on a magic carpet of happiness, breathing on the clean pane of glass and drawing a

smiley face before rubbing it off with her coat-sleeve. Her co-conspirator dealt her a scolding glare on behalf of her mother, and she couldn't help but laugh.

'Sounds like a plan, Stan! So is that why you always use the Spanish word for grandmother when you talk to us about your *mamá*?' the trainee philosopher blurted out. 'Because we never met her?'

'Never thought about it. What d'you mean?'

'Well, "G" and "G" are Grandma and Grandpa. We called Granddad "Granddad" to his face, but didn't...'

'Yeah, we did, baby,' Jeff cut her short, realising she had lost a step somewhere along her brief timeline.

A pang of guilt coursed through his veins for having expected too much of one so untainted and accepting.

'We gave my *mamá* a name for you two. You must've been too young to remember. After Granddad died, we went to *Abuela*'s grave. Jetto read her name out, but you were too little. You've come quite a way since then, kiddo! And after that, we went to New York to scatter Granddad's ashes? Do you remember?'

Kierney shook her head. 'No. Did we?'

Her father nodded. 'Yep. Auntie Lena came with us. It was bloody awful! *No importa, pequeñita*. Let's all talk about it later on, away from here. Time to go? You've seen enough, methinks. Captain Marvellous is clearly only interested in the food, and I've definitely had a gutful. That only leaves *Mamá*, and I bet she's hanging out to be rescued from the theatrical thespians.'

Hand in hand, the pair of dark Diamonds left the remodelled bedroom and its obliterated horrors to join the others. The smaller of the two hesitated outside the remaining door, wondering if she ought to suggest looking inside. The songwriter kept going, without so much as a cursory glance in its direction.

Jet was playing the piano when the wanderers re-appeared in the main room. He had exceeded his sugar *quota*, banging out a boisterous tune with vigour. Above the twelve-bar chords, Australia's highest selling female recording artist held court with the spellbound teachers, furnishing highlights of a recent tour and giving away tips for musical arrangements.

Pleased to see her black knight in reasonably good spirits, Lynn rose to her feet and prepared the children for an orderly exit. Jeff's relief was palpable, and it took every ounce of her Dyson fortitude not to rush into his arms. Such public shows of affection were unwise in their current setting, both lovers having learned not to pander to his emotional frailty.

Nevertheless, the singer felt the tug of their invisible elastic connection as if it were trying to fell her to the floor, using its momentum instead to throw herself into enthusiastic hugs for their hosts. 'Thank you for your hospitality, Leanne. And you too, Tristan. Are we ready to go, people?'

‘Yes, ma’am. We should hit the road,’ her husband affirmed. ‘Thanks heaps for letting us trespass on your private property. Mission accomplished, eh, guys?’

The cricketer nodded, bringing his rock’n’roll massacre to its *coda* with a flourish before ending with a deliberate bum note. To a chorus of groans from his kith and kin, Tristan and Leanne clapped like true sycophants, a regular occurrence for the talented family.

The billionaire requested an all-important envelope from Lynn’s handbag, suddenly drained of all energy. ‘Well, thanks again,’ he began, shaking both their hands. ‘We’re stoked you guys’ve built this great little business up here. As I was just saying to Kizzy, our work here is done. We’d like to leave you with some paperwork our solicitors have drawn up to transfer the title into your names.’

The confused couple’s eyes travelled from the thick, white envelope to its statuesque postman. Jet and Kierney looked at each other, fascinated by the whole scene. Their mother urged the music teachers to open the package, which they did, as yet unsure what it contained.

‘It’s *kosher*, but you’re under no obligation,’ their landlord explained. ‘It’s yours if you want it. And if you don’t, we’ll sell it with you as sitting tenants with the same length of lease as remains on the existing one.’

‘Title? You’re giving us...’ Leanne stammered, sniffing back tears. ‘Have I got that right?’

‘No,’ her partner gushed. ‘You can’t possibly do that!’

‘You can try and stop him,’ the smiling blonde laughed, ‘but he’s deadly serious. Jeff doesn’t want to see this place again, and you’re doing so well here. Take it, please. It’s our pleasure.’

Grinning from ear to ear, Tristan wrapped his arms as far around his effusive partner’s waist as common decency would allow. The fateful documents tumbled out of the envelope and onto the floor, the children pouncing to retrieve them while their parents made sure they hadn’t left anything behind. Leanne then adjusted her course to engulf the celebrities, who had to catch her before she fell over.

‘Jeez! Careful!’ Jeff shouted. ‘Hope your insurance is up-to-date. Have a think about it anyway... You don’t have to decide now. The legals can be done whenever. Just let our office know. All the details are in there.’

Clutching the reconstructed packet, an awkward silence descended while the stunned couple thought of a suitable response.

Tristan took the rock star’s right hand in both of his. ‘Well, this is a huge shock. But a nice one, of course! I can’t believe you’d be this generous,’ he crooned. ‘We’d never dreamed of owning our own studios. I’m sure we’d love to take you up on it. Thank you so much, all of you.’

‘You’re welcome,’ Lynn replied, smiling at the sight of her handsome man towering over the featherweight. ‘Ask as many questions as you like.’

Everything's negotiable. Our staff can walk you through it, but it's not that complicated. Christian von Wehrden's the best person to talk to about the nitty gritty.'

'Nitty gritty,' Jet murmured in embarrassment, gritting his teeth. 'Mum! Can't you think of something cooler to say than nitty gritty?'

'Shhh,' his sister scolded, jabbing the thirteen-year-old in the ribs.

The world-changer shot his son a stern look. 'What was that? Mate, I hear Bathurst's nice this time of year,' he cocked his head towards the front window. 'Such a shame you won't get to see it. I'll have fun with Don and Dawson, don't you worry.'

The cheeky smile vanished from his son's face in a brief moment of self-doubt. Was his father serious? Leaving them all wondering for as long as he could bear, the comic's right hand winged its way past Lynn's ear to skim the scalp of the boy's curly, blond head.

'Alright! Please excuse us,' his wife begged their hosts' indulgence. 'You were saying something about not being gregarious, Leanne? I think things are about to change. Thanks very much for our breakfast and for showing us around. It's been fantastic to see inside after all this time.'

The flat's residents leaned in to give Lynn and Kierney farewell hugs. The raucous pair of holidaymakers were already heading for the door, only to reel back around in the opening to wave before rounding the corner into the chilly concrete passageway.

Steeling himself for any tenacious demons who might take the opportunity to rain on their parade, Jeff grabbed Tristan's hand to seal the deal. Once the deed was done, the strong teenager nudged him sideways into the railing. Almost toppling for a second time, the big kid righted himself only to fall into Leanne's parting embrace.

'Watch it, you idiot,' he snarled. 'Very nice to meet you, Leanne. Good luck. This world needs all the music teachers it can get, so thanks again. *Adiós.*'

'Thank you. And we will,' the beaming woman said. 'Thanks a million. We'll be in touch soon.'

The boy from Canley Vale stepped across the threshold of his childhood home and onto the landing for the final time. Having counted his lucky stars only a minute earlier, he cursed aloud when a panic attack seized his every sense. Had it been laying in wait since they had entered, held at bay by Gravity and Miss Irony for maximum impact?

The stairwell rose up to swallow his legs. He let forth a thunderous roar and launched himself down the six levels as soon as he heard Door Number Four click shut. Unaware of the crippling mental minefield his dad had encountered, Jet was quick off the mark in pursuit.

Kierney sighed and tutted with her mother as they watched unleashed male hormones propel the male cyclones down the stairs. With no thought for the neighbours, the demob'-happy ruffians shouted their heads off the entire way

down, attempting to knock each other into the wall at every turn. Evidently, the emotional release was more powerful when shared, and Lynn felt the young girl cuddle into her on their sedate descent to the carnage below.

‘Are you OK?’ she asked her daughter.

‘I’m fine, thank you,’ she answered. ‘A bit scared for *Papá*.’

‘Are you? Me too actually. He’ll be OK. That’s why we did this before they go off and do stupid boy things for the weekend. He’ll have forgotten the worst bits by the time they get home.’

The eleven-year-old nodded. ‘Yes. I know. It’s nice to see *Papá* clowning around. I am glad we came, but he shouldn’t come again.’

‘No,’ her mother chuckled at the wise words. ‘You’re not wrong there, *pequeñita*. We shan’t be coming here again. Did you go into the back bedroom?’

‘No. The door was open, but we just walked past. It looked like another music room. Nothing special. *Papá* didn’t even sneak a peek.’

Lynn was relieved. ‘Probably a good thing. He did pretty well, don’t you think?’

‘Oh, yes. Very well.’

When the girls reached the ground-floor exit, the boys were already waiting at their car, red-faced and out of breath. Jeff dipped his hand into his pants pocket and pulled out a set of keys, dangling them at arm’s length towards his wife. Knowing her husband rarely surrendered the steering wheel, Lynn accepted them without objection. Such an abdication of responsibility was understandable under the circumstances.

Accompanying his *chauffeuse* the short distance from kerb to driver’s door, the tortured soul tugged the beauty against his tired body and kissed her, paying no regard to the risk of having their privacy breached by a member of the public. ‘Whoa! Thanks, angel,’ he gasped. ‘That’s much better. I needed to taste you so badly. And thanks to you guys too. I’m bloody glad it’s over. Come along, keen beans. Let’s get going.’

With a car full of laughter, Lynn steered the Statesman’s nose away from the kerb and joined the Friday morning traffic. The foursome was lulled into silence after a few minutes, each processing their individual perspectives on the tiny apartment which had been surrendered not a moment too soon. Although the ordeal had been a breeze in comparison with the first time she had set foot inside, at least no-one had been any the wiser to untoward behaviour.

Taking her eyes off the road ahead to check her drowsy passenger, the caring woman noticed his facial muscles had relaxed somewhat. ‘Feel better? You didn’t go into the other room?’

‘Beginning to, yeah, thanks,’ he replied. ‘And no, I didn’t. No need.’

‘Sure?’

‘Yep. Coward’s answer, but so be it.’

‘Hey, Mum?’ Jet chimed in from the rear seat. ‘Can we stop somewhere for the toilet, please? I really need to go.’

‘Christ, mate!’ his father laughed. ‘So do I. That’s the best bloody idea you’ve had for weeks.’

‘Me three!’ Kierney registered her interest also. ‘Too much juice.’

With the cabin’s ambiance replaced by pressure of an entirely different nature, the former local directed Lynn to a park where he used to hang out as a boy. Within minutes, they were motoring back to the airport, whence the womenfolk would soon board a flight to Melbourne, crossing lofty paths with Don and Dawson Jenner, who were on their way north for their long-awaited boys’ weekend.

Driving the hundred and sixty kilometres from Sydney to Bathurst gave father and son ample opportunity to unwind from their frenetic morning, crammed into a rented car with their *bar mitzvah* companions. Their route took them close to the Canley Vale flat for a second time, but Jeff chose not to mention it. He had closed another chapter of his life for good, content with the way things had worked out. And now his duty was to help everyone make the most of his son’s celebratory *jamboree*.

The cross-country jaunt wound this way and that, speeding up once they were through the busy commercial centre of Penrith and soon finding the bitumen flanked by dense woodland on both sides. The afternoon traffic was light for a Friday, the absence of heavy vehicles enabling those bound for the Mount Panorama circuit to navigate without obstruction or delay.

After stopping for drinks at Blackheath, in the foothills of the Blue Mountains, the accomplished rally driver put his foot down along the Great Western Highway, with the boys counting off farms and yet more woodland all the way to Kelso. Cathy had booked them into a bed and breakfast in the small town, far enough away from the main event that the celebrities were unlikely to be followed home from the racing venue at the end of each day.

The staff at their accommodation were keen to meet their special guests, mollycoddling them with mandatory meets and greets. Soon done with the associated autographs and photographs, a necessary evil which the Jenners accepted without batting an eyelid since being admitted into the stars’ circle, the quartet unloaded the car into their respective twin rooms.

The teenagers grew more hyperactive the closer they got to their destination, eager to steal a march on the track and check out the teams and this year’s cars. No-one could deny that their elders were any less excited, though more circumspect by virtue of their role as responsible parents.

‘When were you last here?’ Don asked his famous neighbour.

‘Two years ago.’

‘Dad won the celebrity driver’s race,’ Jet interjected.

The architect nodded his approval. ‘Did you? Nice one. Congrats. Are you entering again this year?’

Jeff shook his head. ‘Hadn’t planned to. This is a private weekend.’

‘Right!’ his son sneered. ‘What’s that when it’s at home?’

‘What’s that when it’s at home?’ the superstar repeated. ‘Is that the most intelligent retort you can come back with? A private weekend’s one where no-one’s looking and I can finally maim you sufficiently that you’ll never hit the low notes again.’

The older boy cackled, crossing his legs at the thought of his friend’s vulnerable body parts being crushed by Uncle Jeff’s gargantuan strength. Don cringed in the passenger seat along with the youngsters, and the comedian checked out the queasy reflections in the mirror.

A series of strange pulsing sounds burst through the chatter, making them all jump out of their skins. The driver opened the sedan’s centre console to reveal a portable gadget which looked as if it had been stolen from a James Bond film set. Until then, no-one else had noticed the power cord strung from the cigarette lighter into the box between the two front seats.

‘Jetto, please could you answer that?’

‘Sure!’ the lad replied with glee, lifting out a brick-like, black base unit and stretching the tangled curls of its cable into the rear passenger area. ‘Hello? Oh, hi, Gerry! I mean Uncle Gerry. Sorry! How are you?’

‘Hey, Luke, my boy!’ they heard the Blake & Partners Chief Executive Officer’s familiar haughty accent booming through the handset’s loudspeaker. ‘Is Obi-wan there?’

Jet passed the telephone through the gap for his dad to take over. ‘Blake-san!’ he shouted over the commotion and engine noise. ‘*Wie gehts?*’

‘Wow! I didn’t know you guys had a car-phone,’ Don marvelled. ‘Amazing! Can you see this, Daws?’

The venture capitalist drove on at full speed with the bulky plastic receiver stuck to his left ear, his shoulder hunched to hold it in place whenever he needed to change gear. In truth, the ability to make telephone calls while on the move was still every bit as wondrous for the celebrity *entrepreneur*. He played it cool in front of their buddies, chatting away to his business manager in Melbourne until the line dropped out.

‘*Adiós*, mate,’ the comedian frowned at the sudden vacuum of dead air, blowing a kiss into the receiver and handing it back to his son for stowing on its cradle. ‘Still not too reliable, but they’re getting there. Twelve more months, I reckon, and everyone’ll have one.’

The car park at Mount Panorama was enormous, hectares of attended paddocks waiting for the hordes to arrive. The capacious, white Holden, an

updated model from the family's own luxury vehicle, prowled up and down a couple of rows before the passengers spied a vacant spot. All four enthusiastic patrons jumped out, stretching their legs and raising their arms above their heads to kick-start their dormant circulatory systems.

Friday afternoon's crowd was building up in preparation for the opening ceremony, and the group's passage to the concourse was impeded by the inevitable attention the Diamonds received. Jeff apologised to his guests, but there was nothing anyone could do about it.

'Beer?' he suggested.

'Yes!' came a reply from the teenagers.

'Ahem! Don, beer?'

'Oh,' Jet whined. 'That's not fair. I'm a man now.'

'You wish! Not according to the law, kiddo,' the doting dad lamented, putting an arm around his shoulder and hugging him into his side as they strode towards a beer tent. 'Sorry, mate. Not this weekend. If you're good, I'll let you snort a line of coke tonight back in the room.'

The Jenners gaped at the rock star in their midst, eventually exploding into laughter once they realised he was only joking. They never quite knew how literally to take the larger-than-life Mister Diamond, often bewildered by his flamboyant lifestyle.

The foursome chose a table overlooking the pit straight and settled down for a pre-dinner history lesson proffered by the knowledgeable rev-head. He had always been an ardent fan of the Bathurst tradition and the race that topped off the weekend, the One Thousand. He told them how the Ford Sierra had been dominant for the previous two years, admitting to a hunch that the Holden Racing Team might come up trumps this year.

The Melbourne Academy best friends were transfixed by stories of spectacular crashes and engines blowing up after fast starts, and the man with the photographic memory outlined the emergence of the Nissan team as worthy opponents to the perennial Ford-Holden rivalry. Jet had a particular fondness for the Skyline flagship of the Japanese stable, and grabbed every opportunity to ride co-driver with his Uncle Junior in his tamer, road-tuned model. He couldn't wait to see the R32 four-wheel drive version up close.

The crowd saw their first piece of action during the support car race, which gave enthusiasts a chance to select the best vantage points for the next couple of days. The teenagers fancied Conrod Straight, where car-shaped blurs flew past at speeds in excess of two hundred and fifty kilometres per hour. Eager to learn though, they changed their minds when the expert convinced them to contrast this with a stint at Forrest's Elbow, where the winding hill would sort the men from the boys in gear selection and positioning for the downhill section.

Washed out after their pre-dawn start and by the anticipation of a thrilling weekend, the friends drove back to their accommodation after a quiet dinner.

The adults were as tired as their sons, opting for an early night before the following day's fun unloaded in earnest.

Don had been working long hours on a construction project in Jakarta for the last few months, and the musician-turned-businessman did his best to maintain the inbound flow of information, lapping up the rarity of immersing himself in someone else's life. The unlikely pair, one nudging forty years old and the other on the other side by a similar margin, enjoyed a few quick stabbies on the verandah of their two-bedroomed cottage, swapping motoring escapades from their youth while their respective firstborns scored a head-start on sleep.

The architect decided to turn in when the clock struck ten. All too aware of his likely pattern at the end of a stressful day, Jeff knew there was no point in doing the same. He would only lie in the dark for hours, listening to his son snoring while his mind ruminated on the day's anxieties.

The songwriter grabbed his coat, cigarettes and wallet and let himself out of the cottage, leaving a note scribbled on the back of one of the leaflets they had picked up earlier. His fingers felt at home whenever they were in touch with the worn cowhide of "Dad's comfort blanket", as the trusty jacket had come to be known between Lynn and the kids. The first ever birthday gift the twenty-year-old nobody had received from a certain Miss Dyson had covered almost as many miles as he had in this crazy life of his. Summer or winter, it travelled with him as an essential link to those he loved.

While he worked his way through a litany of calls left in his message-bank, the fingers of the star's right hand fiddled with a worn spot in the lazy black fabric. It was as if they knew there was a cigarette packet in the pocket underneath, inaccessible within the confines of their cottage. Afer eighteen years as a lost boy's favourite thing on an endless, trailblazing odyssey, who knew what else had accumulated between leather and lining?

Jeff lit up, impatient for the nicotine to hit the spot. The rental car all but drove itself back to the racetrack, so preoccupied was its driver. He brought it to a full stop in a dark lay-by on the deserted, tree-lined road, wondering whether the car-phone would manage to latch onto a signal so far from civilisation. It felt almost shameful to be this keen to make contact with his women so soon into the male-oriented getaway.

Reception was stronger than usual, as it turned out, connecting the billionaire with his *pied-à-terre* in the city. The answering machine activated after four rings, triggering a vague memory that Lynn and Kierney had tickets for the ballet tonight. He cursed under his breath. Leaving a quick message, the bored intellectual levered his tall frame out of the car and began to meander along the highway under the stars.

Jeff was glad of his globetrotting coat after all, fastening it against the night wind. His mind's revolutions tipped regularly into the red zone as he decided what he should say to his son tomorrow evening at their official *bar mitzvah* dinner. Which pieces of advice did he wish someone had given him about growing up? Things he would rather not have learned the hard way...

One theme stuck out straightaway: not to let youthful arrogance assume he already knew all the answers. It had taken the so-called genius, who blitzed every examination and grasped every new concept within seconds, much too long to stop jumping to conclusions. Would Ryan Jeffrey Blake Dyson Diamond be street-wise enough to go it alone? Was he equipped with the wherewithal to make sound decisions? As the boy's most active mentor so far, he liked to think so, but was this merely vain paternal pride?

Leaning on a robust farm gate and ingesting a perfume of damp sheep and fertiliser, the philosopher lit another cigarette. He tried to remember the words to Rudyard Kipling's iconic poem, "If". Its power had inspired him as a wayward adolescent many a time, when his sense of purpose had been compromised by forces beyond his control. As he pieced together all four verses, New South Wales' most influential village idiot appreciated its beauty and simplicity even more as a weary traveller.

The erstwhile conflicted teenaged rebel fantasised, indeed as much now as then, that Kipling must have invaded his soul and composed these lines from the mess he found within. Yet as the red tip of ash crept ever nearer to his fingers, the metaphor mutated into crystal clear wisdom: Kipling had helped him see inside his own soul.

Despite the wealth of information Jeff had consumed in the intervening years, he was not a single step closer to determining who or what controlled one's destiny. Such universal truths were not up for debate, and no words the award-winning lyricist might string together to proclaim his son's future triumphs would sound half as eloquent as this timeless ode to majority. It was not possible to conquer uncertainty by projecting the same diffidence on an opponent, however noble the chosen cause may seem.

"If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools," the singer recited into the darkness. "If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue, or walk with kings, nor lose the common touch... Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it. And, which is more, you'll be a man, my son!"

"The Boy Who Would Be King" was now well on his way. He had been dubbed thus as a toddler by parents drunk on ambition and with a powerful sense of irony, since no impediment was likely to block the path of Bart Dyson's eldest grandchild. Barring serious injury, he was set to captain the Victorian state cricket team in the Sheffield Shield next year. Then by his sixteenth Dyson assessment day, if all went according to plan, he should be reporting his appointment to the country's test match squad.

The father smiled to himself, remembering a comical exchange he and Jet had recently shared. In sport and in every other field of endeavour, the young scholar excelled by dint of hard work and a keen intellect. A strong "IQ" would undoubtedly take him far, tagged with a corresponding "PQ" to afford him mastery of the practical skills about which the family's business manager could only dream.

An adequate measure of emotional intelligence was the only remaining ingredient needed to turn Ryan Diamond into a great man. Kierney had been blessed with a high “EQ” from an early age, whereas her brother would require some coaching to acquire these sixty missing degrees.

Jet had learned the same famous poem during the previous school term, probably better able to recite it than his dad. But did the youngster understand its significance? Diamond Senior had been to hell and back a number of times before his own bizarre *bar mitzvah*, with a collection of invisible souvenirs to prove it. In his way, the cricketer had also accomplished plenty in his short life; he had enjoyed success and experienced some character-building personal failures. It was not beyond the realms of possibility that some of these subtle lessons had seeped into his sponge-like brain.

The world-changer and his stunning horse’s arse had long concluded that merely hearing or reading about life’s struggles second- or even third-hand could never be enough for their children to gain a true appreciation of how hard life could be, yet they had vetoed any ridiculous attempts to simulate an authentic gruesome event. Why subject their privileged loved ones to hardship on this basis? All the dedicated parents had to do was encourage the youthful, porous hearts and minds to digest all input and then test their ability to see things from other people’s perspectives.

Sending a plume of white smoke into the still air, Jeff sighed as tears welled over his lower eyelids. How swiftly a generation had passed! Reinforced by their trip back to his Stones Road flat this morning, his spirits were now galvanised to launch his son into manhood over the coming days.

And how damned clever was that guardian angel of his? The rock star approaching his forties steeled himself against any lurking demonic backlash and visualised his thirteen-year-old self standing at the street-facing bedroom window, staring up at a leaky ceiling and inventing a future far away with the girl of his dreams. This degree of mental clarity gave him immense confidence to stand in Jet’s shoes too.

Whichever path this fortunate son might take through life, it was entirely his own choice to make. All he need ask of his father were sage guidance for moving forwards and a friendly reception whenever he felt the urge for a retrospective.

The celebrity pressed the button on the side of his watch to illuminate its screen: after eleven o’clock. The girls should be back in the apartment by now, so he wandered round to the car and composed the number for a second time. This was perhaps the only weekend in the year when a telephone call from these woods would be possible, since a fair proportion of the eastern states’ communications technology had been trucked to Mount Panorama for the big race.

‘Hey, Lynn. It’s me,’ he said, a tide of relief soaking his mind. ‘Did you guys have a good night?’

‘Hello! Oh, yes, thanks. It was beautiful; sparkling and gloriously colourful, and our seats were up high enough to see the whole stage in one go. How about you two? Are you OK?’

Her husband sniffed. ‘Ah, yeah. We’re good. Not quite so sparkling, but fine, thanks. Jet and Dawson went to bed pretty early. They were knackered, and he’s a bit too Vladimir Chestikov for his own liking.’

The compassionate mother laughed at the lad’s cruel nickname, a recent head-cold having accentuated the unpredictability of his extending vocal cords. ‘Poor kid. Don’t tease him too much.’

‘I’m not. It’s cold here, which isn’t helping. Don’s asleep too.’

‘And you? Sleeping, I mean?’

‘Clearly not,’ Jeff sniggered. ‘Ten out of ten. But hey! Get this, angel... I’m calling you from the car, in the pitch blackness, miles from anywhere. Fuckin’ amazing, isn’t it?’

Despite the humorous banter and obvious geeky satisfaction, the Olympian detected a deep-seated melancholy in her man’s voice. She sensed he was none too keen to return to the accommodation and face the prospect of falling asleep within a stones throw of the Jenners.

‘Are you? It’s very clear. Certainly is amazing. Are you alright though? How are you feeling about this morning?’

‘Ah, y’know...’ the billionaire answered with one of the audible half-smiles he knew his dream girl appreciated. ‘Wish you were here. Want your sweet lovin’. All the same bullshit I deal you when I’m lonely. And you thought I was going to surprise you with something different.’

It was his wife’s turn to sigh. ‘No. Not really. You’re not doing well at all, are you? Cut the crap, JMD. Wake Jet up if you need some company. He can handle it.’

‘No, angel. I’m cool. Just wired about the next couple of days and in need of a release of pent-up energy, if you know what I mean. Ignore me. I’ll have you know I’ve been doing some outdoor planning for what I’m going to say to The Great Sorprendo tomorrow.’

‘Oh, great,’ Lynn perked up. ‘Birthday dinner? That’s better.’

‘Yep. I’ve got my speech pretty much figured out, tempered with the fact that I don’t want to embarrass him in front of his mate. My head’s in a good space, angel. Peaceful, considering...’

‘Honestly?’

The lost boy groaned in jest. ‘Honestly. Stop worrying about me, OK? How’s Kizzo?’

This latest batch of levelheaded, carefully chosen words brought tears to the tennis champion’s eyes. The pair were so well tuned in to each other’s emotions that her absent lover could almost taste the salt water. They sat nursing dead air

for a few seconds, with only love travelling up and down the virtual telephone line.

Finally, Lynn broke the spell. 'I love you, you know that? Kizzy's fine too, thanks. Full of questions on the flight home earlier. Some I could answer, and the rest you're the only one who can. So beware when you get back!'

Jeff chuckled. '*Bueno*. Thanks for the warning. I love you so much too. I really appreciate what you did for us today. Flawlessly planned, *genia*.'

'You're welcome, and I'm happy with how it went. You seemed to get through it pretty easily, but then I could sense you'd reached your limit towards the end too. At least you never have to think about that place again now. It's served its purpose. It was a good investment after all.'

'Indeed. *Sorta kinda*.'

'But as I said to Kierney on the 'plane, I wouldn't want to be learning the double bass; having to cart it up all those stairs every lesson,' the singer mused, hoping to steady the caller's nerves in case the call cut out. 'They'd have to rig up one of those pulleys you installed for your neighbour.'

'Whoa!' her lover called out, midway through a yawn. 'How d'you know about that? Did I tell you? I hardly remembered what you were talking about myself.'

'Yes! Of course you told me. How else would I know something like that, you idiot? You pointed out the ruts in the bannister when we were there on Boxing Day, while we were working up to turning the front door key. Don't you remember?'

'Yeah. I do now. Infallible memory, as usual,' the grateful man praised. 'And another positive thought for me to take to bed. You are too good to me, *Regala*. Remind me to bang you rigid when I return.'

'Okey dokey. I'll make a note of it. Are you likely to need reminding?'

'Who knows?' Jeff teased. 'Once I've passed on all my sexual secrets on to Jetto, I won't have a clue what I'm doing anymore. You'll have to teach me.'

The long-legged blonde giggled. 'Right! You may live to regret that. Chance to get my own back after all these years.'

'Oh, for fuck's sake! Get off the damned 'phone,' her husband ordered. 'I can't sit in the woods wanking all night. I'll catch my death. Time to drive these thoughts home and attempt to sleep in the same room as our son with your metaphysical fingers playing with my dick all night.'

'Shut up. Just recite "If" a few more times. That'll soon take your mind off sex.'

The songwriter sniggered. 'Not a chance, baby. Not a hope in hell. I need to be raging tomorrow anyway. I have an important message to pass on. My loins need to be stirring, or it won't come across well enough.'

'OK! I dread to think. *Buenas noches, Don Juan*,' Lynn mocked the horny poet. 'Have fun, whatever you end up doing. Say hi to the others from us.'

The Saturday before each year's Bathurst One Thousand presented fans with ample opportunity for observation, analysis and inhaling incendiary odours. All four red-blooded males woke in high spirits, with oil in their veins and anticipating the petrol fumes lining their nostrils while they cooked up a barbecued breakfast.

Bearing no resemblance whatsoever to the billionaire rock star who had stripped his assets the previous morning, Jeff flipped bacon with one hand and cracked eggs onto the griddle with the other. Cigarette pendulous over the spitting selection of food, he wore a fetching combination of leather jacket, boxer shorts and a pair of fashionable, brown Chelsea boots.

If his housemates even noticed, no-one thought to say anything. The boys boosted their appetite by wrestling all-out on the living room floor, sending the rug skimming from under their feet whenever they grappled for another shoulder throw. For a whole windfall weekend, they didn't have to worry about offending their female family members' more delicate sensibilities, free to dole out protracted bouts of raucous, slapstick comedy and douse each other with harmless profanities.

Here was Lesson Number One for Jet and Dawson, a slam dunk for the tong-wielding champion of diversity: understand your audience; and treat everyone with respect. To earn a place at the long-overdue plenary on gender equality, even when on the cusp of adulthood, it was essential for a real man to acknowledge the points of similarity and difference for each sex and to remedy his actions accordingly.

The two fathers conjured up scenario after ridiculous scenario as the day progressed, compelling their sons into snap decisions on how to behave in all circumstances, only interrupted by another noisy batch of V8s screaming round the bend and shattering their concentration.

Jeff was fascinated to discover his son was less of a spur-of-the-moment decisionmaker than his older friend and stood ready to apply extra encouragement for thinking on his feet. Lesson Number Two: real men didn't always have the time to deliberate.

The third lesson involved the celebrity removing Jet's wallet from his backpack and secreting it in Dawson's coat pocket. Jenner Senior was affronted at first, never having contemplated testing his children's integrity. It wasn't until quite a while later, when the young guest of honour was asked to pay for the next round of drinks, that the plot moved on, and with no objection to volunteering his own money, the elders observed the *bar mitzvah* boy digging around in his bag and checking his pockets.

Agitated and somewhat humiliated, the cricketer turned to his father. 'My wallet's not here. It was in my bag. I'm sure it was.'

‘Yeah? Sly way of skipping your shout. Are you sure you haven’t dropped it somewhere?’ the actor pressed. ‘Pretty careless, mate. When did you last have it?’

Jeff presumed Don to be unaware of an incident which had occurred at *Escondido* a couple of years earlier, when he and Lynn had caught the regular sleepover buddy stealing from their son’s room. The singer had confronted Dawson after their suspicions were aroused, a selection of toys and small amounts of cash going walkabout each time the lads spent the weekend together.

Sure enough, a collection of items at the bottom of the older boy’s schoolbag betrayed his guilt, and both teenagers had been treated to a spontaneous lecture on jealousy and theft. The issue had never arisen again, since the patient woman had threatened a mortified Dawson that his parents would be informed if anything else were to disappear.

The peacemaker was also bullish that the brief breach of trust imposed on their friendship had not slipped Jet’s mind either. Helping him work out what may have happened to his wallet, the foursome retraced their steps, forced to ignore the practice races which carried on booming and whizzing around the track. Ending up where their search had commenced, the missing artefact had failed to come to light.

‘Maybe someone stole it?’ Don suggested, tumbling into the orchestrator’s snare. ‘Did you leave your backpack anywhere where you couldn’t see it?’

‘No. How would people have known my wallet was in there? They’d have had to be quick.’

Jeff was satisfied with this initial response. The thirteen-year-old had not jumped to the obvious conclusion, even though he was sure the lad’s mind was processing the possibilities. How would he challenge his friend, if indeed he suspected him at all? Several more leading questions were posed to the increasingly enlightened sportsman, who never once considered his dad could have set the pair up.

‘Did you put it in yours, Daws?’ the boy asked out of the blue, framing his question with care. ‘After we paid for our chips?’

The student sneered. ‘No. I haven’t got it. See for yourself...’

The amateur psychologist would have rubbed his hands together in glee at this priceless *vignette*, except for the fact that it would have given the game away. The next lesson was revealing itself as planned, the older teenager becoming defensive. With any luck, both kids would get a chance to show their mettle in this exercise.

‘Are you going to search me too?’ the celebrity teased. ‘You haven’t thought to check *my* jacket.’

Laughing at first, Jet fell for the dummy and began to rummage through his father’s pants and jacket pockets. ‘It’s not here. What’s going on, Dad? Did you take it?’

His father shrugged. ‘You need to figure it out, mate. It’s your wallet; your responsibility to recover it. What would you do if I weren’t here?’

‘Have *you* got it, Don?’ the youngest holidaymaker became more circumspect. ‘Did Dad give it to you?’

‘No!’ the architect replied, shocked by the accusation. ‘What would I want with your wallet? You must’ve left it somewhere. I think it’s gone, Jet. Let’s forget about it, or we’ll miss everything. I’ll buy the drinks.’

‘Wait a minute. How much money did you have in there?’ Jeff asked, letting the test ride for a little longer.

‘Everything,’ the lad moaned. ‘All my cash. And my school pass, tram ticket and ’phone card. Everything.’

The superstar raised his hand. ‘OK. Don’t stress, mate. That stuff’s all replaceable. We’ll head down to the corner and see if it’s been handed in at the shop. Then we’ll check out the pit lane. Don’t let it ruin the weekend. I’ll sub’ *ya*.’

He peeled off a twenty-dollar note from his own wad of cash, passing it to his son. ‘Guys, go and buy us some coffees and hot chocolates. Whatever you want. It’ll all sort itself out.’

Accepting the money, two sets of eyes met, and all became clear. The new leader was being sent to have a heart-to-heart conversation with his comrade to establish his property’s whereabouts, knowing he shouldn’t spoil the rest of the weekend ahead.

The wise man noticed the boy’s Adam’s apple gulp. A protective urge rose up inside, wondering if he was asking too much, only to see him turn and slap Dawson on the shoulder. The pair tore off at full pelt, leaving their dads leaning on the fence.

Jeff lit a cigarette and made small-talk with Don and a couple of inquisitive fans who had been stalking them for half an hour. He checked his watch from time to time. Their sons stayed away for a long while, and he was itching to find out how the situation had been tackled.

Would Jet come back triumphant, either with the truth or with a concocted excuse to cover for his mate, or would he choose not to mention it at all?

And how might Dawson react? Would the older lad come running to his own father, ranting and raving about being framed? Or might he feel compelled to come clean about his prior indiscretions?

After fifteen minutes or so, the pair returned, armed with four full cups with ill-fitting lids and several packets of lollies. The younger of the two strode tall and proud, while the other was doing his best to emulate his friend.

Mission accomplished, the intellectual rejoiced.

‘Good man,’ he smiled, taking hold of a steaming cup of coffee and five sachets of sugar. ‘Cheers. You were a long time.’

Don detected some disquiet, judging by the insolent scowl on his son's face. 'What's the matter with you?'

'Nothing,' Dawson stared into the middle-distance, dunking marshmallows in his hot chocolate.

Meanwhile, Jet had squeezed up so close to his father that he was almost treading on his toes, laughing and pointing at the tidal waves of foamy milk cascading over the lip of his mate's takeaway cup. There was no malice in this act, the philosopher noticed. The lifelong friendship remained intact.

'So... All sorted?' Jeff asked.

Nodding, the younger teenager stepped aside and stood tall again.

With a public apology to the Jenners owing, to be dispensed over lunch, the blatant bond between the Diamond men compounded hour by hour as the day went on. Value judgements had passed from father to son like a dependable toolkit from master to apprentice.

Everyone's attention turned to the track when, as if on demand, the starter's gun fired to signal another practice race. The superstar directed his pride and joy toward the fence, where Dawson had laid claim to a decent view. Jet did as he was told, and it soon became clear that any awkwardness had been left behind. They were clowning around again, beyond of their fathers' earshot, picking out specific cars they liked the look of and sniggering at a group of scantily clad showgirls shivering in the pits.

Enough experimentation for one day, the intellectual concluded. He was itching to find out what had transpired between the two friends, wondering how he and Gerry would have fared in the same situation. The quartet sprinted to their car as soon as the day's timetable had finished, in an effort to escape from the packed car park before the rush. *Pizza* was voted the all-round favourite for dinner. Once inside the cottage, while their fathers showered and changed, the young men's respective maturities were given another, invisible and far less onerous nudge with task of choosing a restaurant and making a reservation.