

FIRST IN THE EPIC 7-PART SERIES

# A LIFE SINGULAR



Lorraine Pestell

A Life Singular  
Book 1

Lorraine Pestell

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Book 3 – A Life Entwined

Book 4 – A Life Lived

Book 5 – A Life Tested

Book 6 – A Life Loved

Book 7 – A Life After

For Jackie, Taryn and Ashleigh,  
my *three amazing iTrack mentees*

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## *Twenty Years On*

‘Y’know what I like about coming here, angel?’

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

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

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

Heavy electric gates rolled aside as soon as the sensor identified the vehicle. Its driver, as ever, couldn’t resist a well-timed rev of the engine. The extra momentum slewed the lumbering beast around the corner to arrive at the barrier, which barely escaped a helping hand from the roo-bar.

‘Well, that’s changed for a start!’ the beauty countered. ‘Before, you’d have tried to run me over while I punched in the code.’

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

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

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

The eighteen-year-old sportsman had received a sympathetic hearing from his dad, who then undoubtedly passed on the juicy snippets of information to his mother, judging by the knowing smile she dealt him later in the day. Jet didn’t

mind. He was pleased to be back *en famille*, even if it did mean his kid sister was on hand to give him a hard time.

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

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

‘Aren’t you tired?’ Marianna asked. ‘You mustn’t know what time it is, dear.’

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

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

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

‘Definitely not. Feels like forty.’

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

The father twisted round and grinned at his daughter. ‘I mean I wish it were forty,’ he quipped.

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

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

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

‘I have no idea,’ his wife answered, her hands rubbing his chest and stomach on their way to his belt.

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

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

‘Good,’ he agreed. ‘Go on then.’

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

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

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

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

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

His wife laughed. ‘OK. Sorry I mentioned it.’

‘Why? Is there something special going on this weekend?’

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

‘Can you believe it’s twenty years?’ she asked between moans of feverish delight.

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

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

‘Scream so your mum and dad can hear,’ Jeff urged, his breath hot on her face. ‘Scream loud enough for them to know how much I love you.’

‘Oh, I do love you,’ Lynn swore. ‘I’ve loved you forever.’

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

‘Two,’ the rock star announced, breaking the silence.

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

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

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

Jeff rolled his eyes in ecstasy and squeezed the champion's tight obliques. 'Would I like it? Ah, *lemme* think on that a second...'

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

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

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

Downstairs, Kierney had gone in search of her cousin. She soon found Jazz by the pool, along with the younger of her two brothers, Bruce. Having spent time together over Christmas, there was little news to catch up on, except that Jet had arrived home. They lapped up the tall tales Kierney told about her brother's many romantic escapades.

Known to all by this apt nickname, true to the family tradition, Ryan Diamond was Bart and Marianna's eldest grandchild, followed by Sonny, Bart Dyson Junior's eldest son. Bruce was next in line after Kierney, leaving Jarradie as the youngest, who had only recently turned the corner into her teens.

The prodigious blonde tennis player lived vicariously through the exploits of the willowy, sixteen-year-old gipsy. A sixth was expected next year, the first baby for Lynn's much younger sister, Anna. It was exciting to think of a new arrival after so long, and the two girls swapped name suggestions, hoping it would buck the trend of male firstborns.

By the time the anniversary couple had changed and reached the pool, almost the whole clan was assembled. The only missing person was Bart, the head of the dynasty and the man largely responsible for putting Australia at the top of the sporting world. Even now, at sixty-three years of age, his dedication to the Olympic movement and his determination for the national team to succeed meant his family hardly ever saw him, even during the holiday season.

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

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

Lynn's elder brother sat himself next to the billionaire singer-songwriter and extended his hand. 'A day early, I know, but happy anniversary, mate.'

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

The shoal of frolicking teenagers turned as one, erupting into raucous laughter, before continuing to lark about in the water. Lynn came over to greet her brother with a kiss and to receive her share of the congratulations. Sitting

between Junior and her husband, she opened her book and feigned ignorance of the major milestone.

‘Come on, sis’... Tell us what it feels like to be an old married woman!’ the footballer teased.

‘It’s great, thanks,’ the stunning athlete smiled, surveying the happy scene. ‘Where’s Jetto?’

‘Oh, I expect he’s fallen asleep upstairs,’ Marianna suggested. ‘We’ll wake him before lunch.’

Jeff and his daughter exchanged furtive glances. There could be any number of reasons for the young man’s temporary absence, virtually none of which were suitable for sharing with his grandmother.

‘He’ll be checking his e-mail,’ Lynn replied, which was code for arranging one or more hot dates for the remaining nights of his Australian visit.

That evening, the Dyson family hosted a New Year’s Eve party in the courtyard behind the grand neo-Georgian mansion. Although the event had become a regular fixture in the family’s calendar after the forever couple tied the knot, the Diamonds had vetoed the customary extravagance this time, preferring a simple, subdued celebration where they didn’t need to be the centre of attention. Nineteen-ninety-five had been an outstanding year for the superstars, and they had attended enough swanky parties the world over to be thoroughly bored with dressing up to the nines and having to revel in sycophantic praise.

The forever couple was also conscious of Junior’s recent divorce. Despite an amicable separation from Julie, his sister and brother-in-law were sensitive to the fact that he was only beginning to adjust to sole parenthood. He had admitted to Jeff only the previous week that he was annoyed with himself for failing to make his marriage last.

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

‘Happy anniversary, mate,’ he wished the bloke in the mirror, dipping his razor into the hot water.

Off to Coldwater Creek this morning, the celebrity’s fuzzy mind reminded itself. *¡Excelente!*

This secluded setting on the Dyson family’s Victorian farm had always been the couple’s special place. They had passed many happy hours there, writing songs together, waxing lyrical about the meaning of life and worshipping each other’s bodies in splendid isolation. Hangover notwithstanding, the vision of his dream girl lying naked on a picnic rug beside the deep dam aroused him in an instant.

Lynn frowned and shook her head at his obvious excitement when the superstar returned to the bedroom. 'Part of you's already left for the dam, I see.'

'Maybe,' he grinned, throwing on a T-shirt and some shorts. 'I s'pose we have to get through breakfast first, yet again. You're always so damned mean to me, making me wait like this...'

His wife finished tying her hair up, flicking her ponytail as she crossed the room. They met halfway between the dressing table and the bed and kissed, but she snatched her fingers away as he grabbed her hand and pressed it against his predicament.

'The suspense is killing you. I know and I'm sorry. It'll be worth the wait, I promise.'

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

'And if it's not?' the blonde temptress asked.

The world-changer shook his head, knowing full well that sex between them could never be anything but good. 'Yeah, well... That's where my argument sort of collapses.'

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Breakfast over and heads clearing, Lynn and Jeff piled their stuff into a ute and picked their way over the ruts. They followed the paddocks' fence-lines until they reached Coldwater Creek, as they had in all weathers since they had first met. An extensive catalogue of hit records had germinated here, and many a grandiose scheme hatched under the blazing summer sun. Moreover, they were fairly sure their son was conceived in this idyllic spot, or at least they chose to think so.

Twenty years of marriage was a long stint, they agreed in the crisp country air. Twenty years with the same partner, never once wanting anyone else, was no mean feat, particularly in the showbusiness world. In all this time, they had never grown tired of the songs one wrote for the other, nor the hare-brained ideas their partnership spawned. They had no doubt that sharing special moments in their private oasis had helped the hardworking celebrities shoulder the endless pressure of staying on top of their games.

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

And for her husband's gift, Lynn's theme was also nostalgia, with heartfelt messages and a simple melody. She produced the song in their studio while Jeff

had been away in Europe in the weeks prior to the hectic holiday season. While his gorgeous lover sang, picking out a lean accompaniment on the acoustic guitar, the happiest man on Earth lay back in the sun and listened with his eyes closed and his heart wide open.

Making love in the fresh air, with always the faint possibility of being discovered by a farm worker or some local Daundwurrung or Woirurrung people looking for a cooling swim, the pair of Diamonds immersed themselves in their secret commemoration. Ahead was another mammoth twelve months that would see the family dispersed still further across the globe. Regardless, they were looking forward to the new year with great excitement for the challenges upon which all four were embarking.

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

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

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

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

'Sex is as good as a rest,' the larrikin quipped, keeping his eyes closed and relishing the undivided attention. 'Old Italian proverb.'

The patient woman sniffed. 'Of course. Attributed to?' she asked, only too aware that she was massaging his ego as much as his skin. 'Rudolf Valentino? Or Casanova?'

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

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

Lynn's smile ignited his passions again. 'So I suppose you were Casanova in a former life too?'

'Xpect so,' Jeff shrugged with a hint of macho conceit. 'If you say so, angel.'

The forever couple dressed and gathered up the rug and water bottles, ready to throw everything into the ute's sun-baked tray. Lynn slotted the old guitar into its case, where it would stay until their next visit, while her husband turned the car round. Time to return to the present tense and their precious offspring. No matter how many times they came to this place, it never lost its ability to nourish their souls.

'I am getting tired now,' the billionaire philanthropist confided, bumping the tyres over dry and crumbling furrows until they reached the lane that led to the Dyson homestead. 'I feel like I've been around for three hundred years already. I reckon I'm turning into a self-satisfied fat cat at last.'

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

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

'Oh, is that how it is now, after twenty years?' Jeff returned the favour, swinging the vehicle into the garage. 'Easy fixed! I'll hang around someone else's house instead.'

The corners of his wife's mouth drooped. 'Oh, alright then. You win, Felix.'

Hand-in-hand, the devoted pair trudged across the gravel path and entered the luxurious farmhouse through the rear door, preparing to reunite with the rest of the clan.

## *A Life Shattered*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Grey and wrinkly,' Kierney countered, eager to examine the detail on her father's licence and comparing its format to her up-to-date version.

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

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

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

'Yep,' Jeff nodded, scowling at a rare unhappy memory. 'That was in our blue period. We were so damned short-tempered with each other... And then your first licence was your Californian one, after all that.'

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

'Wow! Was that it?' Kierney queried, astonished. 'Were you driving before you got your licence too, Papá?'

Coughing and gazing around to check no-one could overhear, the comic answered. 'Um, yes. I bought an old wreck of a car when I was sixteen, but I didn't drive it much. Couldn't afford the petrol. Still an amazing feeling to finally get my licence though. Proof that I was a *bona fide* citizen, I guess.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lynn grinned as she waited for the youngster to come up with a suitable response, knowing how alike the two dark-haired Diamonds' brains worked. It

was proving more and more difficult to embarrass the children these days, given their rapidly increasing levels of experience with the opposite sex.

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

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

‘Oh, whatever, Papá,’ Kierney pouted. ‘I don’t meddle in you guys’ sex life, so I’ll thank you not to meddle in mine.’

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

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

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

‘Oh, why? Is he ill?’

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

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

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

Kierney laughed aloud. ‘Jeez! Neither of those options sounds very appealing. Somewhere in the middle perhaps? Please give Uncle Gerald my best wishes.’

‘We shall. That’s kind, darling. Everything in moderation,’ the forty-year-old offered, mimicking her own mother. ‘For all these new fad diets and ideas for healthy living, that old adage still works the best.’

‘Christ!’ Jeff exclaimed. ‘Enough of this sensible talk, Grandma. We sound like the Grim Reaper, between us, warning everyone to steer clear of danger. It’s old man Blake’s choice, as long as he makes it knowing the likely effects on everyone and not just himself.’

The teenager’s mobile telephone rang from inside her handbag.

‘That’ll be Jet,’ her mum assumed.

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

The handset was passed around each family member in turn. Luckily, by this time, there were no other patrons around whom they could disturb. The Trinity

College undergraduate was envious of the summer weather and sorry to be missing out on their celebratory dinner. The new university term having started in earnest, his workload was already mounting, already almost halfway through his degree.

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

Kierney slipped the telephone back into her bag. ‘So he bought that bike in the end. I knew he would.’

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

The songwriter nodded, leaning back in his chair and savouring the small amount of wine left in his glass. Their son had been eyeing up a Triumph motorcycle since before the end of the previous term. If the bike were to break down, it would serve as a useful lesson in resourcefulness for a young buck unpractised in the art of *caveat emptor*, but he wasn’t game to voice this opinion right now. Lynn preferred less punitive learning devices, and all records indicated she was right. Both children were fully automated these days, self-sufficient and confident. Not a bad job done, he thought.

The handsome musician winked at his guardian angel. ‘We have no purpose now,’ he rued. ‘Parental pasture looms. Where shall we retire to, angel?’

‘No!’ the pretty, raven-haired teenager cried out. ‘Don’t retire! I still need you.’

‘Total crap!’ her father objected. ‘Kizzy, you haven’t needed us since you were out of nappies. Get *outta* here!’

‘I have needed you. Don’t go too far away then. Driving distance only.’

With dusk descending on Port Phillip Bay, the tennis champion paid their bill, and the threesome left the restaurant, crossed the road and walked hand-in-hand along the promenade towards Station Pier. The “Spirit of Tasmania” had docked in the last hour, disgorging its stomach contents onto the local roads. Another, much larger ocean liner was moored alongside it, dwarfing the ferry that ran daily between Melbourne and Devonport on the apple-shaped island state to the south. Passers-by waved and shouted cheerfully to the famous family, receiving smiles and waves of acknowledgement in return.

‘Hey!’ Kierney piped up. ‘You guys remember Youssouf Elhadji, don’t you?’

Her father turned and nodded. ‘Ah, yeah? Did he reply to your message?’

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

‘Wow! That’s amazing. Well done!’ Lynn praised. ‘When are you going to fit that in?’

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

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

‘Thanks. I’m more interested in talking to him about the United Nations,’ their ambitious daughter explained, ‘so New York would be perfect. He could show me what he does, if that’s allowed. I might even marry him.’

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

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

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

The parents drove off before their daughter pulled out of her parking space up ahead, not wishing to put any pressure on her early driving career. Jeff couldn’t stop himself from checking his rear-view mirror every few seconds, making sure the little silver hatchback was still following them. His dream girl caught his eye and scolded him gently. Letting Kierney spread her wings was truly the hardest thing for her husband.

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

‘What goes around comes around,’ the empathetic superstar sighed, stroking the tight sinews stretching along her husband’s left forearm as his hand shifted gear in the sleek, black sports car. ‘My mum tried to tell me you’d behave just like Dad if you ever had your own daughter.’

‘Did she? When you were sick that day in our apartment? While I duelled with your father for your hand on the balcony?’

‘Yes. That fateful day,’ the beautiful woman confirmed with fondness. ‘I remember not being so convinced and saying that at least you’d ask your daughter what she wanted first.’

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

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

The songwriter nodded, turning his head to the left and grinning at the wise woman. ‘I would so! Awesome!’

Lynn chuckled at his impersonation of their exuberant girl-child. After a few more minutes winding through Melbourne’s sparse evening traffic, the couple turned into the car park of their city apartment building. Before the gates had

fully opened, Kierney had pulled up behind them in her pride and joy, her silver Volkswagen independence machine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘But why d’you want to know so much about that seedy life?’ her father enquired, keen to lighten the mood before his departure. ‘United Nations lost its appeal?’

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

The musician rested an affectionate hand on top of his daughter’s untidy mop of long curls and shook her head until her whole body wobbled. Laughing at the oldest trick in the book, she reached both arms around his waist for a hug. A few years ago, he would have held her at arm’s length while she tried in vain to punch his ribs with flailing fists, but she chose to cuddle into him these days. Kierney Diamond loved her *papá* best of all.

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

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

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

‘Oh, no-one in particular. Maybe Michelle? She said that women who get married to rich men so they can have kids and nannies and never work again were selling sex just as much as prostitutes do, and I see her point. Is that mean?’

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

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

‘I do.’

‘I know you do. And generally, for the record, I agree with you,’ the philosopher added. ‘It is a really fine line, as your song says. I suppose people can get addicted to jewellery shopping and being presented with a new car every year every bit as easily as they can get addicted to drugs and drink. Jacinta might fall into that category, and she’d certainly think we were being mean to say so. Tammy too, for that matter. They’re both pretty much ladies of leisure these days, courtesy of their husbands’ big, fat portfolios.’

The seventeen-year-old laughed. Her dad was referring to his long-suffering manager’s sisters, whom he had known since he was a boy. Michelle was her mother’s best friend from school, and she and the feisty Madalena had been bridesmaids at Lynn and Jeff’s wedding twenty years ago.

‘But Michelle’s not part of the “thin line” brigade,’ the celebrity continued. ‘You shouldn’t discount unpaid work. Mish serves on a few non-profit boards, like Mamá does, and she takes care of heaps of our legal stuff pro bono. She actually works pretty hard. Auntie Lena wouldn’t understand that sort of work though. You have to dig up roads or stand up all day as a supermarket checkout chick before Lena thinks you’re working.’

The student looked ashamed, causing her charitable father to sympathise with her flourishing conscience. He didn’t need to labour the point. The pair walked into the kitchen where Lynn was clearing away their breakfast.

‘*Buenos días*, Mamá,’ Kierney chanted, kissing her mother. ‘When’re you back?’

‘*Buenos días, darling*. Tuesday, mid-morning. We’re planning to go straight to the house. What are you doing?’

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

Jeff scoffed. ‘What? Question too hard? Come along, for Christ’s sake! Get with the programme. Don’t you know the ins and outs of your diary off by heart by now?’

It was a running joke between father and daughter that her mum’s planning standards required much more rigour in comparison with theirs. Somehow, she was able to retain her every appointment in her head, along with those of the rest of the family and some of her friends too. Dark-haired Diamonds didn’t do detail, which was always a source of intense frustration for the super-organised, blonde beauty.

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

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

‘I will and I won’t,’ the teenager responded, taking a swift scan of the kitchen. ‘What about here? Is there anything I need to do?’

‘Nope,’ Jeff shook his head. ‘Everything’s under control. Just drive carefully and don’t go getting married ’til we get back, OK?’

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

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The commuter flight to Sydney was uneventful but crowded, and the Diamonds had been forced to hang back to avoid the throng at baggage collection. It took them nearly an hour to reach the rental car counter. Cathy Lane, their trusty administration wizard, had arranged an energetic Mercedes

AMG sports car for the couple's brief stop in Sydney, and it was husband versus wife to be the first to drive it.

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

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

The stocky young man gave a tentative snigger and opened a door to one side of the revolving entry to let the sportswoman pass through into the lobby. As she approached the reception desk, she was greeted by a row of waiting smiles. The staff were eager to see their special guests again.

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

'Very well, thank you. A bit stressed. It took ages to get here from the airport this morning. Jeff's bringing the luggage around from the car park. How are you all?'

Miriam swooned. 'We're good, thanks. And thank you so much for choosing to stay with us today, Ms Diamond,' she added, dripping with sincerity. 'It's lovely to see you and your husband again.'

One half of the hotel's VIP contingent was handed their keys and a pair of envelopes which had been delivered for the couple's attention. She turned to watch the same doorman wheeling a trolley towards her, ready to transport their luggage up to the room. A telephone rang on the counter, and one of the other receptionists answered it.

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

'Oh, OK. I'll take it,' Lynn replied, turning back. 'Thanks very much.'

Miriam instructed her more junior colleague to transfer the call to a courtesy telephone in the lounge area, next to a comfortable leather couch. The reception staff watched their guest closely as she walked across the tiled flooring, self-assured in a tailored suit and high heels. It was the first time the younger employee had seen Australia's favourite lady in the flesh, and she understood the others' jealous awe at once. To think the Olympian was now forty years old! It was hard to believe the nineteen-sixties child-star had children already in their late teens.

Lynn Dyson Diamond was everything most women wanted to be: tall and slim, with shining blonde locks and a tanned, radiant complexion. In whispered

tones, the receptionists remarked to each other that they had seen photographs of Anna Dyson's wedding two years earlier, at which today's guest had been the Matron of Honour. Despite their eleven-year difference in age, one could scarcely tell who was the younger sister.

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

The celebrity did as she was told, mouthing an inaudible thank-you. Lifting the receiver to her ear, she sank into the sumptuous cushion and crossed her long legs, at once stately and relaxed.

'Hello? This is Lynn Diamond.'

A gruff, nervous voice snuffled at the other end of the line, asking again to speak to Jeff Diamond.

'No, I'm sorry. Jeff's not available. This is Lynn Diamond. Can I help you instead?'

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

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

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

'Everyone please keep calm,' the hotel manager's authoritative voice commanded, looking from one side of the lobby to the other with wild eyes. 'No-one leave the building, please.'

Just when the handsome musician picked up the luggage to make his way through the grand entrance, a small, middle-aged man began to push the revolving doors from the inside. The natural leader stepped out again and met the other man as he was ejected into the open air, ending up facing each other on the pavement.

'Did you hear the instructions, mate? We'd better stay inside. What's going on? D'you know?'

Quite clearly agitated, the swarthy individual spat a few curt words at the well-known songwriter. Confused for a moment, he had trouble recognising the language as Spanish.

‘¿*Qué dices, hombre?*’ Jeff asked, towering over him.

‘*Quería matarlo Usted, pero es mejor así,*’ the terrified foreigner muttered under his breath.

The billionaire’s height and strength were too much for the shorter man to contend with, and he found himself being directed back through the revolving doors towards the commotion. A member of staff wearing a security guard’s uniform had been watching the pair and stepped in to take control of the fugitive from their impressive guest.

The linguist replayed the incoherent sentence in his head. What had this angry jerk said to him? Something about killing him but that it was better this way... What did he mean? And did “*Usted*” refer to an anonymous person inside the hotel or had this statement been directed to its intended object?

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

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

The hotel’s famous patron looked from the short, southern European man and the security guard to the smartly attired manager whom he knew fairly well. He began to feel dizzy and nauseated. No, surely not...

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

The noise inside the foyer was frenetic and urgent, and the area had taken on a surreal ambience that reminded the celebrity a little of a film set. But no-one was making a movie here. Something serious had clearly occurred, the prospect of which filled him with foreboding. He had the feeling he would not be playing the role of innocent bystander for much longer.

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

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

His eyes desperate to find the woman he adored, Jeff noticed the concierge team had erected a type of barrier at the far end of the lounge area. He tried to remember the normal layout, yet his muddled, swirling thoughts drew a blank.

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

In the absence of any answers, the forty-three-year-old’s anxious mind strung the circumstances together itself and came to the worst possible conclusion. Pushing past Nichols, he strode towards the small crowd now gathered around the temporary screen.

The doorman tried to prevent him from going any further, but Jeff Diamond wasn't the type of man who took no for an answer. He sidestepped everyone's valiant efforts to prevent him from seeing what he knew by now he didn't want to see.

Reaching the screen, the superstar's head swam. The sight which met his eyes after one more stride confirmed his worst fear; the one he had been dreading for so many years. His legs buckled underneath him, struggling to maintain his equilibrium, and his stomach churned wildly. Thirty pairs of eyes drilled into him, and the weight of thirty-one heavy hearts charged the atmosphere. Deliberately avoiding any interaction, the tall, good-looking Australian stepped forwards to where the love of his life sat, the telephone receiver still resting in her lap.

People all around were crying; some wailing out loud. Their shock at finding the nation's favourite celebrity mother with a gunshot wound to her head was quickly mixing with the distress of watching her husband of twenty years come to terms with the heinous tableau. The situation was too much for several people, who collapsed and fainted in their neighbours' arms.

'Lynn,' Jeff whispered, crouching down beside his wife's crossed long legs and placing his left hand on her knee. 'Angel, what happened?'

The distraught songwriter took a few seconds to survey the frozen body as thoroughly as his emotions would allow, willing with all his might for it to move. A flick of an eyelid, a twitch of a finger... Now would be a very good time for his dream girl to wake him up from this nightmare, as she had done so many hundreds of times before.

Instead, his saviour sat mute and motionless. To a collection of sighs and sobs from the throng behind him, he picked up her hands and stared at the bullet hole in her forehead that had extinguished her life. Time stood still, and the cries and murmurs of the onlookers rang in his ears. He lifted Lynn's hands to his mouth before laying them back down into her lap.

Not enough, he concluded. The performer leaned forwards and kissed inanimate, red lips, which were already much colder than he remembered.

Nichols and his crew were doing their utmost to steer the crowd away, but no-one was interested in moving. Jeff became aware of sirens in the distance above the incessant whispering, which even on a good day followed him wherever he went. Tears had started to flow from his eyes and down his cheeks as the reckoning finally hit home. Lynn's side of the story would forever be lost to those who cared.

A hysterical woman rushed forward and threw her arms around the much-loved idol's shoulders, bawling and screaming. Instinctively, the empathetic man stood up and span around, embracing this grief-stricken stranger and staring into glazed, bloodshot eyes which undoubtedly reflected his own.

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

The doorman led the woman away, leaving Jeff to turn back and catch hold of his wife's vacant, blue pools of boundless love. He perched on the edge of the couch next to her, being careful not to leave fingerprints anywhere. He knew enough about ballistics to assume that trying to revive her was futile.

He went to pass his hand over Lynn's eyes, intending to close them. At the last minute however, he decided he preferred them the way they were and diverted his fingers to stroke the side of her face instead. By leaving her eyes open, he could delude himself she was still with him. He planted another soft kiss on her brow, to the right of the fatal wound. The smell of blood on the wall behind caused his stomach to heave, but his beautiful best friend seemed at peace, with the faintest of smiles on her paling face.

'I'll love you forever, *mon amie*. Together, forever, wherever, OK?'

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

'Mister Diamond,' a plain-clothed detective addressed the rock star. 'I'm Detective Inspector Robert Fisher.'

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

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

The great man sighed. He did mind, but what was the point? Taking one last look at his only true love, he followed the inspector and a second detective into a room behind the reception desk. A few stunned employees were trying their best to serve complimentary beverages, answer questions and pacify distressed guests all at the same time. All eyes tracked the washed-out celebrity as he slipped into the sanctuary of the back office. For the first time in many years, he felt completely helpless and totally alone.

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

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

The veteran investigator studied the well-known visage as its owner struggled to utter the phrase he and his partner had agreed together, hoping they would never have cause to articulate it.

'Lynn planned to donate her organs,' he muttered. 'I think we can safely assume she's not coming back, so at what stage do you guys take her wishes into account?'

'That's a very good question,' the senior detective replied. 'It's good of you to think about such a thing at this time, sir. The paramedic team'll need to be told when they get here. They'll be able to advise you.'

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

Fisher stood up and left the room, reassuring the impressive celebrity that he would relay the information straightaway. He figured the Coroner would require the body to remain intact, especially in what would inevitably turn into a high-profile case. Another set of vital organs lost to the ever-lengthening waiting list of worthy recipients.

From out in the lobby, Jeff’s attention was drawn to the familiar ring-tone of his wife’s mobile telephone. The distinctive tune brought with it a renewed wave of grief, along with the sudden realisation that he should let his management company know that lunch was off. His own handset was also in Lynn’s handbag.

He turned to the red-haired receptionist who was hovering in the doorway. ‘I need to make a ’phone call, if that’s OK?’

Miriam nodded, tears spilling down her cheeks again. ‘Yes, of course, sir. There’s a ’phone over there. Dial zero for an outside line.’

She pointed to a desk on the other side of the office, shuddering with a sickening feeling of *déjà-vu*. Jeff crossed the floor and dialled the number of his public relations manager. After a few rings, a woman’s voice answered.

‘Cath, hi. It’s me,’ he announced, sounding much calmer than he felt. ‘Yeah. In Sydney. Listen, I need a huge favour. No. Actually, nothing’s OK. Is there someone there with you? Good.’

Assembling the facts he now had to put into words made the billionaire cry again too. The more junior detective slipped out of the room while the bereaved man made his call, only to linger awkwardly behind the reception desk. Desperate to stifle his emotions, Jeff continued, anticipating this to be one of the hardest messages he would ever have to deliver, and a trial run for the even more gruelling version he must shortly need impart to his children.

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

‘Pardon? No easy way to tell me what?’ he heard from the other end of the line. ‘What’s wrong?’

Her boss took a deep breath, swapping the receiver to the other ear while he wiped tears from his eyes. ‘Lynn’s dead, Cathy.’

‘Dead? No! She can’t be. How? When?’

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

‘Fuck, I don’t know,’ he cried. ‘About half an hour ago maybe? We’re in The Pensione. She was shot in the head.’

By now, his marketing manager was weeping too. ‘No! Oh, my God, Jeff. It can’t be true. That’s terrible, Jeff. What about you? Are you alright?’

‘No,’ the morose songwriter replied. ‘Can’t say I am. Listen... Please could you let the Childlight Sydney people know to make our excuses at lunch today?’

Don't tell them anything specific. Just say something like "unavoidably detained".'

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Yeah. Thanks. Coffee. That'd be great. What happens now?'

'Please sit down. And please call me Bob. This is Detective Sergeant Andy Waters, and we're from the Surry Hills major crimes squad. I'll get the coffee on the go.'

Jeff nodded to Waters, who had the demeanour of a man completely out of his depth. The two sat down in silence and waited for the superior officer to return.

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

'Cheers. I know,' the civilian raised his hand. 'And it's Jeff.'

It was a long time since the former Sydneysider had found himself this close to a police operation, yet the terminology was indelibly etched into his brain. He wondered whether the older detective might remember his father's case but chose not to bother to find out today.

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

'Thanks,' the celebrity said, watching her scurry away. 'It's tough on these guys. Do they all have to stay here?'

'For the moment, yes,' Bob affirmed. 'We need to at least have a brief chat with each potential witness, and then we'll call everyone into HQ to provide a statement over the next few days.'

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

The musician broke down again. It was difficult to come to terms with the probability of having apprehended his own wife's killer. He who was descended

from one murderer had fallen victim to another. Miss Irony, his old flame, seized his heart with both imaginary hands, keen to declare her finest hour had come.

'Jeez. Sorry,' the dejected man sniffed, taking a deep breath and running his hands through his hair. 'Was he the bloke who shot her?'

'Yes. Certainly a suspect,' Bob nodded. 'We have him in custody already.'

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

'Not at this stage,' the stone-faced detective answered. 'From what we can gather, your wife was asked to take a 'phone call a minute or so before the gun was fired. It's too early to draw any conclusions. It appears the two events may be linked, but we don't have any information as to who made this call.'

A trap, the intellectual thought; premeditated. He kept quiet, deep in contemplation as he sipped the hot, sweet coffee. Abruptly, he lifted his head and addressed the two policemen again.

'Christ! I have to 'phone my daughter. D'you mind, gents?'

DI Fisher shook his head, and the pair left the room for a second time. Jeff struggled to remember if Kierney had told him where she was going this morning. It was now that he realised the benefit of knowing the detail of everyone's schedule, yet the person who would undoubtedly have this information to-hand could no longer tell him. Dialling the number for the family's city apartment, he hung up before the answering machine message began, unable to bear the thought of hearing his wife's voice.

With panic setting in, the songwriter couldn't recall the number for his gipsy girl's mobile telephone either. It was programmed directly into his, which languished in Lynn's handbag and was now police property. He walked out of the office and found Fisher talking to the hotel manager.

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

'Yes. I'm sure that'd be fine,' the inspector answered with a sympathetic smile. 'I'll ask one of the constables to bring your wife's bag over here. Is that where it is?'

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

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

'None of us'll remember anyone's 'phone number soon,' the middle-aged policeman consoled the wretched man, 'once everything's at the press of a button or two. You're largely to blame for all that, sir.'

The venture capitalist scoffed. 'True enough,' he sighed. 'Every silver lining has its cloud.'

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

‘Don’t be sorry,’ the friendly superstar dismissed the momentary lapse. ‘I use that expression all the time. It’s a tired, old friend in our house.’

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

‘Thanks for that,’ he mumbled, holding the bag out to the inspector. ‘D’you need this back?’

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

The uniformed officer departed, nodding fiercely at his superior. The rock star wondered how often a front-line policeman was called to attend this type of crime scene. And how many of them quit as a result, never rising through the ranks far enough to wear his own clothes. Seeing the victim’s husband searching his telephone for Kierney’s number, Fisher left the room once more.

‘Hi, Papá!’ his daughter’s voice sounded delighted to hear from him. ‘What’s up? Good flight?’

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

‘Kizzo, where are you?’

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

‘Hey, are you OK?’ Kierney replied, hearing a strained tone in her father’s voice. ‘You sound weird.’

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

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

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

‘What, Papá?’ Kierney asked, frightened. ‘¿*Qué ha pasado?*’

‘Christ Almighty! I can’t believe I’m having this conversation with you. *La mamá está muerta.* She’s dead, baby.’

There was silence from the other end of the telephone line. Several seconds passed when neither father nor daughter made a sound, yet they understood each

other perfectly. Jeff waited for a response, feeling a little more stable now that the news had been shared.

‘How?’

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

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

‘¿Papá?’

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

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

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

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

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

‘No. *Nada, nada.* Just you, angel,’ Jeff sniffed. ‘Just you. *Gracias, pequeñita.* Te amo.’

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

‘Fuck,’ he cursed under his breath.

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

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

‘Yes, mate,’ his most important client replied. ‘Mobiles still work outside Victoria, you idiot.’

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

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

‘What? Why? Is she OK?’

‘No, mate,’ Jeff replied, tears flowing again. ‘None of us is OK.’

‘Why? What do you mean? What the hell’s happened?’ Gerry demanded, sensing this was not the usual hiccough in proceedings for his long-time buddy.

‘She’s dead, mate,’ the songwriter answered, dispensing with any fancy euphemisms or decoration.

How many more times would he have to say these words? Jeff felt his heart pounding in his chest.

‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph,’ the accountant murmured. ‘Who’s dead? Lynn? Tell me this is some practical joke you’re inflicting on me.’

The successful Melbourne executive didn’t believe what he was hearing could possibly be true. He and his new lady had only met the forever couple for dinner earlier in the week, and now it appeared that tragedy had struck.

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

‘Holy shit! How did it happen?’ his manager asked, his voice muffled now. ‘Oh, my God. No way...’

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

‘A clean shot to the head,’ the celebrity recounted with surprising cool. ‘Sitting in the hotel lobby, answering a bloody ’phone call.’

‘Christ, mate. That’s fucked. How are you going? Are you OK?’

‘No. Not the best,’ the younger man sniffed, grateful for his friend’s innocent question. ‘Can you go to the airport, please, mate? I spoke to Kizzy about five minutes ago. She said she’d go straight there. I need you to go fast ’cause I don’t want her to be on her own for too long. I’ve got to contact old man Dyson too, if I can get hold of him.’

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

‘No need,’ Jeff told him, forcing a smile. ‘She got her licence. Yesterday.’

Gerry allowed himself a chuckle too. ‘Wow! Did she? Already? That makes me feel very old.’

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

‘Right. We’ll see you as soon as we can. Hang on in there, mate. Does Cath know?’

‘Yeah. We had to cancel our lunch thing, and I told those guys to go home. It’d be good if you can ring her too, at some point. Cheers, Gez,’ the seasoned campaigner rambled, slipping into autopilot. ‘Thanks heaps.’

The call crackled and then fell quiet. Jeff leaned forward, elbows on knees, and his shoulders began to shake violently as delayed shock set in. His mind flashed back to the other evening, when his forty-six-year-old buddy had introduced Fiona in person for the first time. All four had been in high spirits, he and Lynn keen to share in their fun-loving friend’s new joy. They were also just back from New York, where the chart-topping performers had received yet another recording industry award for the “Live On Earth” album.

The rock star’s numbed mind tried to picture his better half smiling at his drunken banter. He remembered how, drinking coffee back in Gerry’s luxurious bachelor pad after dinner, he had circled his arm behind her and squeezed her so close. She leaned into him, like she always did, because she knew how much he liked it. They had made love that night, as they always did, with the slow-burning passion of two people who had enjoyed each other’s body for a lifetime or more.

Dismissing these pleasant thoughts with great reluctance, the billionaire dragged himself back to the horrible reality which had befallen them. Time was ticking by, and there was no way he wanted Kierney to speak to Bart Dyson before he had. His heart raced, and the blood vessels throbbed in his head as he selected some choice words for his father-in-law to absorb. How would he react? Which important meeting was about to be disrupted? Where was he, even?

The widower stood tall and pulled the blue mobile telephone out of his pants pocket. It took a while to start up, and he was gripped with fear at the prospect of breaking the news to the imposing Olympian. Walking over to the door and closing it, he transcribed the switchboard number onto the keypad of his own handset.

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

‘Good morning,’ Jeff croaked, forcing his vocal cords to function normally. ‘It’s Jeff Diamond. Is Mister Dyson in the office?’

‘Oh, yes. Hello, Mister Diamond. I’ll put you through to his PA,’ the operator responded.

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

'Oh, Jeff. It's lovely to hear from you,' came another cheerful reply. 'Bart's in a meeting and has asked not to be disturbed. I can ask him to call you back as soon as he's free.'

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

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

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

'Very well. Of course. I'll see what I can do,' the well-spoken woman complied, picking up on an unusually insistent tone from the great man. 'Hold on, please.'

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

'Jeff, how are you?' the sportsman blustered. 'I gather you need to talk to me urgently. What's up?'

Momentarily tongue-tied, the younger man rocked back on his heels to stop himself from falling over. He, who was never lost for words, found himself struck dumb. As he pieced an opening sentence together, he felt his legs weaken under him.

'Bart, I have some terrible news.'

'Terrible news?'

'Yes, sir,' Jeff nodded, exhaling through pursed lips. 'Fraid so. Lynn and I flew to Sydney this morning for a charity function, and some bastard took a shot at her in the lobby of the hotel. I can't believe I'm telling you this, but Lynn passed away at the scene, sir.'

Bart Dyson didn't reply. The wait was terrifying, compelling the musician to continue. As he had told his daughter, this disagreeable task was his responsibility. He could hear his gorgeous wife clowning around with the children in one of her many lessons on good manners: when one's wife is shot while one is parking the car, one cannot shirk one's duty to inform her parents, no matter how much one might wish to stick one's head in the sand...

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

'Jeff... Are you... Oh, God,' a much frailer version of the usual ebullience eventually squeezed into the caller's brain. 'Oh, my God. Why? Why would anyone want to kill her?'

The bereaved superstar couldn't hold back the tears any longer. 'I have no idea, sir. I reckon he meant to get me. I caught the fucker trying to leave the

hotel. He was a bloody nobody. A runt carrying a gun. I don't know why he was there or what his motive was, but he told me he wanted to kill me. But he didn't, did he? He killed your perfect daughter instead.'

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

'I'm sorry, Bart. So, so sorry to have to tell you this.'

Having surmounted the worst of his initial shock, the Olympian's voice resumed its louder and more forceful timbre. 'Oh, for God's sake, Jeff. Don't apologise to me. She was your wife. Bloody hell. This is a day I've always feared. Where the hell do these lunatics come from? And why do they single out the people who do the most good? She's the mother of your children, Jeff. Oh...'

The songwriter rested his aching back against the couch and listened to his father-in-law crying. This was a day he had always feared too, and one for which they had put every conceivable contingency in place to avert. Every conceivable contingency except always allowing the valet to park the sports car...

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

'Excuse me?' Bart croaked. 'Sorry, Jeff? I missed that.'

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

'No, no. Of course not. I'll leave straightaway.'

'Thanks a lot, sir. Have you got Gerry Blake's number?'

'Yes. I'm sure we do somewhere. And I have Kierney's too.'

'She'll be ringing you about now,' his son-in-law added, his voice husky again as an image flashed into his mind of his little lady preparing to talk to her grandfather about a wholly grown-up topic. 'I'd appreciate it if you could call her first, if you can.'

'Definitely, Jeff. I'll organise to leave in the next ten minutes. Oh, my God. I have to speak to Marianna too. Two children gone now. Jesus fucking Christ.'

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

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

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

'Cheers, Bart. That's great. Safe flight.'

With his head once more in his hands, the celebrity terminated the call and wept with renewed anguish. He was not a good man, despite his father-in-law's endorsement. He had let someone's daughter die. In fact, over the course of his life he had let three people's daughters die. And here he was, waiting for his

own innocent girl to arrive and make him feel better; something he deserved even less than the compliment.

Forcing himself out of the depressive spiral he felt already taking hold, the modern-day philosopher wondered what this nameless gunman had hoped to accomplish by killing either of them. Who was he, this Spanish-speaking bloke who had appeared so ordinary and unassuming? Was he a lunatic, as Bart had suggested? Perhaps he was championing a cause. What had they done to push him to such an extreme measure?

Through the blur of memories and questions, Jeff slowly became aware of the two detectives loitering by his side, along with the hotel manager.