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Opening extract from
The Truth About My Success

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Since Maria has taken the uneaten breakfast away and is cleaning the egg from the wall and the floor, Paloma throws the salt shaker this time. It sails past her mother and over the housekeeper's head. Neither Leone nor Maria looks as it crashes to the floor.

"And that's another thing. We can't have any more of this behaviour, either."

"Blahblahblahblah..." chants Paloma. "And anyway you're the only person I throw things at."

This isn't quite true, but it's true enough to cause her mother another sigh. "I meant your mouth, sweetheart. People are getting really fed up with you and your rudeness."

"Well isn't that too freakin' bad? Oh look, Mommy, look! You're making me cry!"

"I suggest you spend the rest of the day studying your lines. Rehearsals start soon. You want to be ready."

"No, I don't."

Leone hooks her bag over her arm. "We'll finish this conversation when I get back." And she steps around the kneeling figure of the housekeeper and marches down the hall.

Followed by the pepper.

While the mother and personal manager of the teen star Paloma Rose has her lunch, Jack Silk, the agent of the

teen star Paloma Rose, sits in his vintage Jaguar, talking on the phone to Maria Trudenco. Or, more accurately, listening in a there-really-isn't-anything-else-to-do way to the housekeeper's tale of recent events at Paradise Lodge. The staying out all night. The tantrum. The screaming. The egg.

Jack is only half listening, his mind on other things. The static clog of traffic like a blood clot in an artery. How late he'll be for his meeting. What he's wearing to the party he'll be going to tonight. The egg, however, catches his attention. Only Paloma would throw a fried egg. He bets she wiped her hands on the table. "I'm not really sure why you're telling me all this," says Jack.

And whom else would she tell?

"Because I am worried about Miss Paloma," says Maria. "I think that maybe she is going crazy."

Jack chuckles. Soothingly. "She's a prima donna. She always acts like she's going crazy."

Although he can't see her, Maria shakes her head. "No, she is worse. And now she is going out again." There is no doubt in Maria's mind who will be blamed for this. "Mrs Minnick said she has to stay in the house, but she isn't."

Of course she isn't. Jack closes his eyes. "And where exactly is Mrs Minnick?"

"She went to lunch."

Of course she did. Flying eggs aren't going to keep Leone Minnick from one of her see-and-be-seen lunches.

"You hear that music?" demands Maria. In the background Jack can hear very unattractive music playing, very loudly. "That music means she is going out and she only just came home. There are clothes all over her room."

Jack yawns. He's pretty sure that there are always clothes all over Paloma's room. "She has nowhere to go, Maria." She has no friends. Not now that he put the fear of God into Drachman – or at least the fear of failure. "What's she going to do, go shopping?"

"She has friends," says Maria. "She meets them on the Internet."

"Yeah, but you don't go out with those friends. You email them. Or tweet them. Or send them a message on Facebook." Thousands of friends, not one of which you'd recognize if she were sitting next to you on a plane.

Maria repeats that Paloma is getting ready to leave the house. "She has friends," Maria insists. "She has real friends."

"She's just saying that to wind you up," says Jack. "You know what a drama queen she is. She's just pretending she's meeting someone."

Jack Silk should know Paloma better than that, if anyone should. He's been her agent for most of her life.

He's watched her grow from a baby you'd want to bounce on your knee to a brat you'd like to push in the pool. She's a girl who believes in getting her own way as firmly as Louis XIV of France believed in the Divine Right of Kings; nothing Leone can say or do – much less anything Maria can say or do – is going to keep her at Paradise Lodge if she doesn't want to be there.

“No.” Maria is shaking her head again, but all Jack sees, of course, is the sun glinting off the polished bumper of his car. “She is meeting someone. I don't know who. And I don't know where. But she is going. And Mrs Minnick sa—”

“Maria—” Most of Jack's patience has been exhausted by sitting on the road instead of moving over it. “Maria, I'm very sorry, but I'm on my way to a meeting. An important meeting. And even if I weren't, I've been stuck in traffic for the last twenty minutes. Hear the horns?” He turns the mouthpiece of his headset so she can hear the horns. “I don't know what you expect me to do.”

“Maybe if you talk to her...”

“Talk to her? Maria, I'm Paloma's agent, not her mother.”

“But that is why you should talk to her,” says Maria. “She won't listen to her mother. If Mrs Minnick says go left, Miss Paloma will go right. Miss Paloma listens to you.”

“Well what about Mr Minnick?” In theory, if nothing else, as well as being Paloma’s father and business manager, Arthur Minnick is supposed to be a responsible adult. “Where’s he at? Why can’t he stop Paloma?”

“He went for dinner,” says Maria.

She means last night, of course. Arthur Minnick is pretty much an absentee husband and parent even though he lives with his wife and child.

“Well what about Vassily? Isn’t he supposed to keep tabs on her?” Protect Paloma; protect the rest of humanity from Paloma.

“Mr Vassilovitch quit after Mrs Minnick yelled at him for losing Miss Paloma again,” Maria informs him. “He said he’s a soldier, not a babysitter.”

And I am? But that isn’t what Jack says. What Jack says is, “Look, Maria, I think maybe you’re overreacting here.” It’s the Latin temperament; more emotion than logic. “Paloma’s car doesn’t work, right? The Minnicks’ cars are with the Minnicks. The limo’s programmed so it won’t let Paloma drive. And she sure as hell isn’t going to walk to town. Which means she has to take a cab. So all you have to do is wait by the front door and send the cab away when it comes.”

“He’s here.” Maria’s voice is sharp with urgency. “He’s here.”

“Who’s here? The cab?”

“No, not the cab. A man.”

“A man? What man? Maria, what man?”

“A young man. I don’t know. I never see him before. He has a beard.”

“A beard?” At least it’s not Drachman. But it could be someone else from the show. He thinks there may have been beards in the cast at some time.

“And a ponytail.”

Ponytails are the kind of thing that appears among the crew. Ponytails. Earrings. Tattoos. Good God, now she’s dating workmen.

“And a ring in his nose like a bull.”

“A what?”

But Maria is no longer talking to him.

“Miss Paloma!” yells Maria. “Miss Paloma, you must stay here. Your mother—”

Paloma bellows back, telling Maria what she can do with Leone Minnick in words clear enough to crash through any language barrier.

“But Mr Silk he is on the phone. Mr Silk he wants to talk to you,” calls Maria.

Paloma comes close enough to Maria to tell Jack what he can do with his talk herself.

“So long suckers,” shouts Paloma. “See ya later!”

Too late, perhaps, Jack realizes that, just maybe, he should have taken the housekeeper's concern more seriously. Should have paid more attention. He suspects that there are things he hasn't been told. Possibly a lot of things. He knows how rude and unlikeable Paloma Rose can be – it's not a secret, it's a legend – but he's never known her to throw things before. He knows about the car – he should, its distributor cap is in his office – but he was told Paloma wasn't allowed to drive because of the speeding and the time she smashed through a fence and ended up on somebody's lawn. And of course there were the pictures and a couple of other unfortunate incidents and, most unfortunate of all, Seth Drachman. But he thought all that was behind them. Paloma had seen the error of her ways and had straightened out. Isn't that what Leone said? Now he wonders why he believed her. Leone Minnick didn't get where she is today by always telling the truth. Certain words of Maria's echo in his ears. *Losing Miss Paloma again... Staying out all night... She has friends... Real friends... Crazy... Worse... If Mrs Minnick says go left, Miss Paloma will go right...*

“For God's sake, do something!” orders Jack. “Stop her!”

“Mr Silk,” says Maria, “I am the housekeeper, not one of your football tacklers.”

Jack hasn't been having a good couple of years, and it doesn't look as if things are going to get better any time soon. He leans his head on the steering wheel. Why doesn't God just have him run over by some crazed, disgruntled actor while he's crossing the street one day and send him straight to hell? Why play with him like this?

A new volley of honking sounds behind him. Traffic has finally started to move.

His phone goes dead.

Bad moods here and bad moods there - bad moods happen everywhere

Like many of us, *El Paraiso* started out life with high hopes. A simple, two-storey complex, it was never intended to define luxury, but it did offer efficient, modern apartments with good views, parking and a swimming pool at reasonable rents to people who also had high hopes. It shone with newness, and everything worked. The tiles surrounding the pool were squash-blossom yellow and the water was clear and blue as a tropical lagoon. But that, of course, was a long time ago. These days *El Paraiso* is cheerless and rundown, and what does work doesn't work well. Where they aren't missing, the tiles surrounding the pool are broken, and the only thing that fills it are weeds. A wire screen stretches over the top to stop garbage, rodents, birds and drunks from falling in. The views are only good if you like strip malls and traffic. You park at your own risk. The first time Oona Guinness saw it

her immediate thought was: *If this is Paradise, I really don't want to go to Hell.* She had to carry Harriet into the apartment because Harriet, who is sensitive to atmosphere, didn't like it either. Oona's father wouldn't get out of bed for two days.

But now, on a day as bright and full of promise as El Paraíso is dilapidated and defeated, Oona whistles and Harriet wags her tail as they cross the ruined pool area, both of them looking completely at home. Which, of course, they are. El Paraíso may not be much, but it is a home. For their bodies if not their hearts. It's a lot better than sleeping in the truck. As Oona herself would say, if you can't change something then you have to learn to live with it. That's her motto. You do the best you can.

Mrs Figueroa is waiting for her, peering through the curtain of her living room window. Mrs Figueroa is always on guard. She starts talking even before she opens the door. "I'm so sorry to ask you. I know it's not really the super's job." And Oona, of course, is not really the super. "I know it's Saturday and you have to get to work, but I really can't do it myself. Not with my arthritis." The wonder is not that Mrs Figueroa can't change a light bulb, but that she manages to do anything – dress or eat or shop or turn on a tap or sweep the floor – with her crimped and crippled hands and her dissolving bones.