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Opening extract from **The Hit**

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CHAPTER 1

THE VERY PUBLIC DEATH OF JIMMY EARLE

With Jimmy, it was all about the fans. People often say a performer gave everything, but no one ever promised more for a show than he had tonight.

Adam didn't believe it, but he still felt part of something special. Jimmy Earle had been the big thing for years, his shows were legendary, but nothing before had ever been like this. People had flown from California and Beijing to be here. This was going to be the concert to end all concerts, the one experience no one could ever repeat.

'Like human sacrifice,' said Adam. 'They should tear his heart out, like the Aztecs. Now that would be cool.'

'You won't be making jokes if he really does it,' Lizzie said.

Adam shook his head. It would never happen. Jimmy had everything – wealth, youth, good looks, talent. You could understand the losers and lowlifes on the big estates taking the drug called Death. They had nothing and never would. Why not go for that one crazy week in the blazing light? But Jimmy Earle? No way.

‘He wants to join the 27 Club,’ said, Lizzie, excitedly. ‘Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, Amy Winehouse – and Jimmy Earle. All twenty-seven years old. That’s what they’re all so scared about it. Look at ’em!’

It was true, Adam thought, as they filed into the arena. There were security guards everywhere, big men standing in the aisles. They all looked on edge.

‘He’ll be remembered for ever if he dies tonight,’ Lizzie said.

Adam grinned. ‘Yeah. And we’ll remember this concert for ever.’

‘Gosh, buying tickets – something else you’re good at!’ she teased. Lizzie never let him get away with a thing, but he couldn’t help boasting. The glory that was Jimmy Earle was Adam’s glory, too, tonight.

‘Where were you the night Jimmy Earle died?’ he said, acting it out. ‘I was there. I saw it.’ He grabbed her hand. She smiled back and squeezed. Adam felt his head go. He fancied her that bad.

Lizzie was out of his league, really. They used to know one another years ago at primary school. They’d been good friends – hung out, gone to the same parties. Then his dad had to leave his job, Adam had to change schools,

and they'd lost touch until they bumped into each other again in town just a couple of months ago. It was like magic – they'd got on in a flash, as if they'd never been apart all those years.

He'd been delighted and amazed when she let him kiss her a week later. In a world where there were so many people and so few jobs, it was serious stuff for someone rich to go out with someone poor. Families hoarded their wealth like dragons. So look at him now! He felt like the King of the World with her at his side. He'd bet not one of her rich friends could have got her a ticket for Jimmy Earle like he had tonight.

Actually, it was his brother Jess who had got the tickets for him. God knows how – Jess never went anywhere or did anything. No need for Lizzie to know that, though ...

They made their way towards their seats. The noise was already deafening. People were shouting at the stage, even though there was no one there to hear them.

'Jimmy, I love you!'

'Don't do it, Jimmy.'

'No, do it! Top yourself. Save me the price of your next crap album,' yelled a bloke near them. He sniggered at his mates, who laughed uncomfortably. A tearful girl yelled at him to shut up. A couple of rows down, a man offered to punch his lights out if he spoke up again.

The whole place was too hot, too edgy. Lizzie slipped her hand out of Adam's as they pushed through to their seats. She sat down and stared around her, trying to take it all in.

'Do you think anyone here's taken it?' she asked.

‘Bound to,’ said Adam.

Lizzie laughed nervously. She’s scared, he thought, and realised that he was scared, too. Deathers were dangerous. They had nothing to lose. That was the whole point.

Death had started out as a euthanasia drug, to give the terminally ill one week of great quality life and a clean way out. No one ever imagined that the young would take it, too; but then, no one imagined what it would give the young – super youth. On Death you were better – mentally, physically, sexually, any way you cared to look at it. It was the biggest high there was.

So they said. And of course, at a price. Death cost thousands per tab.

And there was no going back. No one had found an antidote and most scientists didn’t expect one to emerge. Jimmy Earle was a big star – the biggest – but in this respect he was the same as everyone else. If he’d taken Death, he was as good as dead. He’d been on about it for ages, in the press, on his website. The concert had been cancelled twice since he had announced that he’d finally gone and done it. The authorities were terrified. Death had already caused the biggest wave of suicides ever recorded among the under-twenty-fives. Only when he’d withdrawn his statement and sworn it was all just a publicity stunt had they allowed the concert to go ahead.

The question was, who was Jimmy fooling? The authorities, or the fans? Was he or wasn’t he on Death? And if he was – why?

‘The bucket list,’ said Adam. ‘Oh, yeah!’

‘Not the point!’ exclaimed Lizzie. ‘It’s not what you do,

it's how you experience it. Everything is for the last time. Every little thing matters. That's the point. When you enter the Death phase, life becomes so intense. Most people wait till they're old and tired. Jimmy decided to do it while he's still young ...'

Adam snorted. 'That's such a girl thing to say. Did you read his list? I mean – come on!'

Jimmy Earle's bucket list was a thing of legend. It had cost over twenty million pounds. He had slept with a hundred girls in one week; at least twenty of them had come out of it pregnant. He had travelled round the world, eaten two kilos of caviar at a sitting, drunk thirty gallons of champagne, snorted a pound of cocaine, been into space, killed a man, hunted snow leopards, climbed Everest ... the list went on.

Of course, it was a fantasy. No one person could have done all those things in a single week. Or could they? Death didn't just kill you – it loved you up better than ecstasy and boosted you at the same time. With strength, fitness and belief on your side, you could do anything.

Maybe, just maybe, it was all true.

Nah, though Adam. Publicity, that's all it is. But how great would it be if someone, somewhere, really had done all that stuff in just one week? And how much greater if that person was him ...

Lizzie fixed him with a look. 'Would you do it, Adam? If you could have his bucket list? Really?'

Adam tensed up. He hated being put on the spot. If it was true, Jimmy Earle had done more in a single week than he would in his entire life. More girls. More fun.

More everything. That was an amazing thought. But what Lizzie really wanted to know was if he'd jump up and start shagging all the girls he could find. It was her he wanted ... But if you only had one week to live – well. You would, wouldn't you?

'Dunno. What's your bucket list?' he asked her.

Lizzie smiled. 'I'd have sex with as many attractive people as I could find,' she said. And Adam, to his surprise, felt hurt.

She snorted with amusement. Winding him up. She got him every time.

It was all right for her. Her dad had a good job, she had it made. All Adam could see ahead was hard work, never earning enough to do what he wanted. It would have been different if he'd done better at the football trials he'd had a few weeks ago. He was a brilliant player, but now he was having to come to terms with the fact that there were too many others more brilliant than him.

But he wasn't beaten yet. Practise, practise, practise – that's what he had to do. He could still make it if he tried hard enough.

The arena filled. Everyone was so wound up. A few fights broke out, but they were quickly put down, often by other people in the crowd. Even now, with every seat sold, the concert could be called off at any second.

When Earle came on the stage, the noise welled up like a climax before a single note had been played. He held out his hands and waited for the uproar to subside.

'We're going to play you a few songs,' he said. 'And it's

going to be the performance of a lifetime.'

He turned round, lashed out with his arm, and the band burst into the first number. The crowd roared.

'He's great! He's so great!' screamed Lizzie.

'He's fantastic!' yelled Adam.

The people, the adrenalin, the noise. He'd never seen anything like it. He wondered if anyone ever had. Around them the crowd surged to its feet, and they jumped up with it, everyone laughing, weeping, yelling, dancing. And this was only the first song.

The concert was brilliant. Jimmy seemed to be singing his whole life up there in the space of a couple of hours. The noise got louder and louder as they neared the magic time – ten-thirty – when he was supposed to die. Death was accurate; you could work out when you were going to go pretty much to the minute. Was he mad enough – committed enough – to have really taken Death?

With Jimmy, you could never tell.

As the last few minutes ticked by, the band launched into their current single, 'Something to Live For'. Jimmy howled and strutted his way through the song. Ten-thirty came and he sang on. It was all publicity – of course!

But just when everyone was certain, the song died in his throat. He staggered. There was a gasp from the crowd. Jimmy almost fell, but then drew himself erect, and clamped the mike to his chest. The band petered out. Out of the speakers came a rapid beat.

Babangbangbangbabangbabababang bang.

Jimmy's heart. It sounded as if it was trying to hammer its way out of his chest.

BANGBABANGBANGBABANGBANGBANGBANGBANG.

The band started a countdown. 10 – 9 – 8 – 7... The crowd went crazy.

‘Don’t do it, Jimmy! Don’t leave us!’ someone yelled.

... 4 – 3 – 2 – 1.

Nothing.

Jimmy Earle looked up at the crowd and grinned. He spread his arms as if to say, *Fooled ya!* Then he tipped forward and fell flat on his face.

There was a moment of stunned silence. People stood at their seats, waiting for him to get up. Was it another trick? It had to be another trick. A beefy first-aider rushed on to the stage, flipped Earle over on to his back and started chest compressions. They could see it all up there on the big screens, a hundred times larger than life. The guy was pounding on Earle’s chest like he meant to break his ribs.

The crowd started up again, a different noise this time – a deep, nervous buzz, punctured with shouts and screams, building quickly. Onstage, one of the guitarists crossed himself, unplugged his guitar and walked off. The drummer climbed down from his seat, came to the front and said something into the mike. They couldn’t quite make it out, but it sounded like, ‘Congratulations.’ The crowd was getting louder by the second. Someone nearby yelled, ‘I love you, Jimmy, I love you!’ A girl just in front of them screamed, ‘Take me with you, Jimmy! I want to go too!’

Some Red Cross people came running up the aisles but they didn’t make it to the stage. Chaos broke out. The

crowd surged forward and up towards the stage, trying to get to Jimmy. People were begging him to get up, begging him to live, demanding their money back. Security reacted furiously, lashing out, throwing people down.

In the middle of it all, flat on the floor, eyes wide open, beyond any excitement or fun or sadness or pleasure or pain, Jimmy Earle lay, his chest violently pounded by the big first-aider. The air was going in and out of his lungs, the blood pumping in all directions in and out of his shattered heart. Not one drop of it was ever going to do him any good again.