**Dedication**

#### To a young prisoner

#### whose talent soared over the walls

## 1

It was our gig from hell and it was happening to us in the coolest of alternative pubs. Perhaps there might have been something to laugh about later if our drummer had tumbled into his kit, the amplifiers had caught fire or the speaker stacks had collapsed onto all five of us. But there was nothing so humorously slapstick about the depths of humiliation our band’s performance was plumbing. Especially as we had been playing this inner-city pub circuit for enough years to know better.

Like some deranged mime artist, I was trying to sing into a microphone that kept refusing to work. The guitarist’s wall of distorted noise was so loud it was probably inflicting permanent hearing damage. By contrast, the drum kit hadn’t been miked properly and was sounding like it was at the bottom of a mine shaft—a deep one. The bass player’s drunken but rhythmic thumpings were reduced to sporadic twangs. The keyboardist was starting to use her fists to try and punch out a sound, any sound.

It was only our second song for the Saturday night, yet we had cleared every punter from the back bar of this grungy pub. All except one older guy slumped in the corner who wasn’t clinically capable of escape (the hidden dangers of excess alcohol). Even the Goth barmaid had evacuated to the front bar and shut the adjoining door.

Only the geeky tech-guy operating the PA system and the bottle-blonde door-bitch consciously remained—he kept throwing his hands up and shaking his head; she looked ready to go into a full body spasm from the distress we were inflicting.

Despite fast-disappearing hopes of the tech-guy rescuing our woeful sound mix, we were determined to soldier on, although that may be doing an injustice to soldiers.

Three years ago, when still on the right side of thirty, I had drawn the short straw to become lead singer. With a leather jacket, my flat baritone voice and waves of shoulder-length brown hair, some drunks at our first gig had hurled Jim Morrison taunts. The incident cemented my place in the band even though our original songs were nothing like those of The Doors. They actually had some talent.

Despite our shortcomings, when things had gone well, particularly in our first year, the front man had been the first to lap up any glory. This evening, however, my fellow band members could take comfort that I was also likely to be the prime target for the door-bitch’s venom.

As we ground out the last convulsions of our second song, she activated. We paused and stared while she stomped her stilettos across the beer-crusted carpet to front us at the foot of the little band platform. We stood there as lamely as the five coloured stage lamps, strung above our heads, vaguely blinking in sequence.

‘Can it, losers!’ she snapped, in my face. ‘Why don’tcha, like, piss off and empty some other bloody venue.’

‘It’s not our fault *your* sound-tech can’t do his job,’ I snarled.

‘Whaddaya mean—’ she began, with a toss of her bleached strands.

I glared past her to the offender and yelled, ‘Hey, Einstein!’

The tech-guy’s head popped up from behind the audio mixing desk like an alarmed prairie dog squinting through his spectacles. Buckteeth included.

I waved my microphone menacingly at him. ‘When are ya gonna gimme some level on this?’

The keyboardist added, ‘And turn the bloody guitar down!’

With nasal self-righteousness, the tech-guy squirted back, ‘Bad workmen blame their tools.’

This was too much for our drummer’s fragile sensitivities. ‘Fuck you!’ he bellowed.

‘No, youse git farcked!’ the door-bitch belted back—obviously experienced in high-level debating.

The guitarist pointed at the paralytic figure slumped in the corner. ‘He’s paid his money. We’re playing for him.’

‘He’s fricken unconscious, ya morons!’ she shrieked, at such a pitch the drunk made burbling noises and shifted slightly.

‘No, he’s not. See-ee?’ the guitarist insisted. ‘He moved.’

‘Next song!’ I called, glancing down to our song-list which was scrawled in black texta on a sheet of paper taped to the floor.

At the same time as the drummer asked, ‘Whaddisit?’, the door-bitch screeched, ‘Don’t youse bloody daaarrre …!’

The bass player ignored her, wiped his sweaty right hand down the front of his Ramones T-shirt, then cheerfully slurred, ‘It’s me new one that I wanna try out for me brother’s engagement party.’

The drummer nodded, gave a count-in and we blasted into the world premiere of *Don’t Marry the Bush Pig, Brother.*

The door-bitch covered her ears and fled to the pavement outside her door.

## 2

The phone next to my bed was ringing. The blue glow of the clock-radio through the gloom showed it wasn’t yet midday. A crack in the curtains revealed there was still some morning frost on the front window of my flat. This had better be good.

It was Rochelle. She had been a passenger in my taxi a few months ago and, although she had stopped coming to see the band, she was technically still a girlfriend. ‘Marty, it’s them.’

‘Who?’

‘Quick, turn on *Video Chartbusters*.’

I did as I was told and saw some pimply-faced young band flouncing around my TV screen. ‘Yeah, and …?’

‘Isn’t that those kids you said were one of your support bands last year?’

‘Oh, shit!’ I spluttered. ‘You’re right.’

‘Thought so.’

Rochelle waited for my hung-over head-cogs to turn, probably expecting me to offer some meaningful insight into how this had happened to them and not to our band. My best effort was: ‘Those little pricks.’

‘Well, Mr Sour Grapes, when you—’

‘It is *not* sour grapes, it’s just that—’

‘You sure?’

‘Okay, okay, they’re *inspirations*,’ I said, trying not to choke. ‘If they can do it, so can we.’

‘It’s not a bad song, either.’

‘Was that all you were ringing about?’

‘And also whether you’d remembered about tonight?’

Rochelle was full of trick questions this morning. ‘Yes,’ I replied. And stopped.

She knew I was lying but gave me a way out. ‘Well, there’s no need to buy my mum flowers or anything—she doesn’t go in for the commercial side of *Mother’s Day*—she just enjoys the family taking her to a restaurant.’

‘It’ll be a good dinner,’ I said, as sincerely as I could. My own mother and father had retired interstate so I couldn’t use a double-booking of dinners as an excuse. ‘How many are going?’

‘Including you, twenty-three.’

Damned supportive family. This would be a test of mettle. Mother’s Day is a hard day to act cool on. Aspiring rock gods and goddesses should make a note in their diaries at the start of each year to stay in bed all day Mother’s Day and probably Father’s Day too. Even taking your mum to a Metallica Mother’s Day concert for a bit of a mosh in the ‘Snakepit’ couldn’t make it cool. Probably worse.

After Rochelle’s call, I clicked off the TV in disgust and wandered into the second room of my flat, the kitchen. I switched on the electric jug that was behind a pile of dirty dishes, then made my way to the third and final room, the bathroom.

I leaned into the mirror above the basin. A three-day growth, eyes bloodshot and dark rings underneath. My mess of hair couldn’t disguise the odd grey intruder. It had been too long since the last Jim Morrison comparison.

Under the shower, I began to toss over whether it was worth persisting with our band. It’s very difficult to confront the likelihood you don’t have what it takes to achieve something you’ve sunk so much effort into over such a long time. Band-hopping had become harder now I was thirty-one, and my hopes of making the big breakthrough in another outfit were dim. Perhaps if I’d started in bands earlier than twenty-four it might have happened. The best I could probably aim for at my age in the music business was a regular paying gig in a ‘classic hits’ or ‘tribute’ band. However, the fun of writing original songs was the real reason I put up with the grind of low-level live performance.

Begrudgingly, I admitted to myself that falling back on my arts degree could possibly earn me more money—it was still a degree, after all. Although, maybe I should have studied something more practical and less enjoyable. I could almost hear the echo of a thousand parental voices crowing: ‘I told you so!’ Bastards.

Returning to the kitchen, showered and shaved with a towel around my waist, I opened the window to pick some chives and parsley from the plantation box attached to the sill. These were the secret ingredients in my ongoing quest for the ultimate scrambled egg. Not a high goal by some people’s standards, but one that at least kept my stomach fulfilled, and, after climbing this mountain, I was sure I could expand into various lunches and dinners.

I laid all the other ingredients out on the bench: cherry tomatoes, mushrooms, onion, butter, cream, tasty cheese, black pepper, salt and three large free-range eggs from hippie hens. Picking up a sharp knife, I absent-mindedly flicked on the radio to be confronted by a jarring cacophony which I reacted to in a way that startled me: ‘That’s just noise!’

And this from an ex-arts student who had once seriously studied a concerto composed for a working jet engine accompanied by full orchestra. What the hell was going on? This was what an old person said or thought, not me. I stood transfixed, knife in hand, listening to what I soon realised was the rampaging end of *Smells Like Teen Spirit* by Nirvana. A song I usually enjoyed, but, suddenly and inexplicably, it grated on my ears.

I almost turned to a classic hits station, but then the Hunters & Collectors came on with their latest release for 1993, *Holy Grail*—a song suitable for serious egg-scrambling pursuits.

## 3

A welcome diversion from Mother’s Day duties was meeting the guitarist from our band, Sean, to watch a game of football at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. By the time the match started, the chill of the morning had cleared into a fine autumn afternoon. The stadium was nearly full, with 80,000 fans screaming to see goals kicked and blood spilt. Emphasis on each spectacle varied during the two hours of battle.

Halfway through the first quarter, during our second round of drinks, the football landed on the turf in front of the stand where Sean and I were sitting. One of the stars in the opposing team raced towards the ball, but it rolled over the boundary line and out of play before he could pick it up.

As if on cue, a whole pack of my fellow supporters rose to their feet and venomously screamed, ‘Too old!’ They followed with jeers like: ‘Yer past it, old fella!’, ‘Hang up yer boots, Timmy!’ and ‘Ya couldn’t get a kick in a stampede, y’old mongrel!’

I was about to yell some entirely different abuse, but these outbursts took the wind right out of my lungs. Next to me was one of the most red-faced and frothing-at-the-mouth haters of the ‘too old’, who looked to be more than seventy years of age himself. ‘Hey, pal,’ I called, ‘how old’s Timmy?’

‘Thirty-two,’ he hissed. ‘He’s a fucken has-been.’

‘Oh,’ was all I could reply.

The whole exchange kept playing on my mind as Sean and I watched the game gradually slip away from our team.

We left the ground and retired to dissect our loss at a jam-packed pub in the neighbouring suburb of Richmond.

After we had finished restructuring our team for next week, vindictively ending a few careers, I decided to come right out and say, ‘I wanna quit the band.’

Sean didn’t seem all that shocked, perhaps because of how much he’d drunk, or maybe I was missing something. ‘Well, that’s a bummer,’ he replied.

‘I don’t like letting you or the others down, but I don’t wanna go on.’

‘We formed it, we can break it.’

‘You’re not annoyed at me?’ I asked.

‘I’ve been offered a $120-a-gig spot in a Celtic band.’

‘Weddings and functions?’

‘Lotsa weddings, lotsa functions,’ he nodded slowly, trying not to sound cynical.

I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised, as well as a little deflated, that Sean had seen the writing on the wall. ‘Funny,’ I said, suddenly reflective, ‘how not a single recording company or even a manager wanted to sign us up.’

‘What—cos we were “Band of the Month” on that crappy Saturday morning kids TV program?’

‘Straight after “Mum of the Week”,’ I groaned. ‘Don’t remind me.’

Sean gave me a look. ‘Are you having your first mid-life crisis, Marty?’

‘My *first*?’

‘Yeah, I believe we’ve got plenty more to come,’ he sniggered.

That prospect took the wind out of whatever I was going to say.

Sean caught the eye of the barmaid. ‘Another two, please!’

After returning the shout, I found my way to the Punt Road pavement, then onto a bus bound for Fitzroy Street, St Kilda. Rochelle had booked a restaurant in what was the more tourist-friendly part of the main street in Melbourne’s red-light district.

When I arrived under the flashing lights at the entrance of the Top Pizza Palace, I was not in the ideal frame of mind for her big Mother’s Day dinner. But I was able to mind my manners while one of the waitresses escorted me through the front pizza parlour to the restaurant behind.

Rochelle bailed me up a few steps inside a wide room with mood lighting, black vinyl décor and Italian kitsch hanging around the walls. ‘Ohmigod … you’re pissed!’ she observed, shrewdly.

‘Nah, I’m not. Juz merry.’

‘There’s some water on the table, and, here, have some of these,’ she said, extracting a packet of lozenges from her neat but trying-just-a-bit-too-hard outfit.

‘What are they?’

‘Breath fresheners.’

I did as I was told and, with only minor further assistance, walked a fairly straight line to the never-ending table of Rochelle’s parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, their respective spouses, an uncle and a great aunt or two. Rochelle was not the youngest but the only sibling yet to be married. No pressure of course.

As I sat down, I smiled and waved at faces all along the table. At some point I called out ‘Happy Mother’s Day!’ in what I hoped was the right direction.

My seat was between Rochelle and her younger sister, Noelene, who liked to flirt but, unfortunately, was as homely as a wholemeal biscuit. Her solid and tattooed husband, Daryl, didn’t like the attention Noelene gave other men, but he made an effort to be friendly. ‘How’s the band, mate?

‘As a matter-a-fact, we juz broke up,’ I replied with false cheer.

Rochelle was shocked. ‘Why? What over?’

‘Um, well …’ I hesitated, trying to think of the least humiliating way to convey what had happened. An old phrase came back to me from music magazines: ‘We split up cos of “musical differences”.’

‘What’s that mean?’ Rochelle asked.

I could always count on Rochelle not to take a euphemism lying down. ‘It means, um, ah …’ I stumbled.

Fortunately, we were all spared the details by a sudden interruption over the PA system. ‘Ladies and gentleman,’ announced a deep voice above a drum-roll, as lights flickered around the parquetry dance floor, ‘the Top Pizza Palace, in association with Izzie’s Entertainment, is proud to present a very special floorshow for all you wonderful mums here tonight. Would you please put your hands together to welcome our very special Mother’s Day treat … Mister … Sandy … Rrring!’

The house band, who had been plodding away unnoticed in the corner, turned up their drips and pounded out the sprightly intro to *Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree.*

And out Sandy shimmied, oozing over-the-top enthusiasm and flashing a diamond smile of pure saccharine. He was spiffed up in a white suit with tails, white top hat, white shoes and cane, capped off with the brilliant thematic touch of a yellow velour bow-tie. You could almost hear the colostomy bags popping among the blue-rinse members of the audience—the demographic’s equivalent to the knickers showered on Tom Jones.

He would have been frightening enough sober, but through my beer goggles, Sandy Ring became the amplified horror of my likely future if I continued singing in dives. Unbelievably, Sandy had once been cool. In the early ’70s he had scored one or two national hits when tie-dye kaftans and handlebar moustaches were the height of hip.

A contemporary of Sandy, in the very broadest sense, was John Lennon. Apparently one of Lennon’s greatest fears was that he might end up doing a cabaret act in Las Vegas. I wondered what he would have made of the Top Pizza Palace? I hadn’t had any hits, so the Rock Bottom Pizza Palace or worse likely awaited me.

Rochelle misinterpreted my intense fixation on Sandy Ring. ‘Martin, would you like to ask Mum for a dance?’

I forced myself to speak. ‘But … there’s no-one on the dance floor yet.’

‘I know. Mum likes to kick things off.’

‘Tell me you’re joking.’

‘No-o-oh,’ Rochelle said, shaking her head as she became a picture of anal retention. ‘I'm serious.’

‘Oh, puh-lease,’ I said, rolling my eyes, ‘I can’t dance.’

‘Don’t be so precious. Mum doesn’t care if you’ve got two left feet, she’d just appreciate the thought.’

‘Why do you wanna publicly humiliate me?’

‘What?’

‘I mean, the next thing is you’ll be asking me to pose for a photo with your mum and Sandy Ring.’

‘She’d like that,’ Rochelle smiled.

‘That’s it! Hold it right there,’ I cried, suddenly feeling much more sober. ‘I didn’t want things to get ugly here, but that’s pushing your luck *too* far.’

‘Look, it’s Mother’s Day.’

‘Oh, right, so abandon all self-respect, ye who enter?’

‘Stop it,’ she said, threatening tears which were not quite believable.

‘Alright,’ I shrugged. I loathed this sort of manipulation, and should have been able to brush off the whole thing with good humour if it hadn’t been the end of such a depressing day. ‘I’ll dance with your mum for a coupla songs, but no photo with the Ring.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Oh, and you *will* make sure we’re not out there dancing by ourselves for too long, won’t you?’

‘Deal,’ she nodded, reaching for a tissue.

I knew I’d been gypped, but it would get Rochelle off my back, at least for the moment. Perhaps I should just follow Sandy’s example and repress my sense of shame until either I didn’t care or it simply didn’t hurt any more.

More alcohol would help. I took a swig from Rochelle’s glass then rose to take the hand of the table’s main mother. ‘Glenys, would you like a dance?’ I said, as soberly as I could. For a split second, I thought she might say ‘no’, and I’d be free.

‘I’d love to, sweetie, thank you,’ she said, with such warmth I was ashamed of myself.

I held her hand as she and her size-too-small dress with the size-too-big floral pattern accompanied me to the dance floor. Sandy had whipped himself into a lather of schmaltz, but his overly welcoming gestures betrayed his relief that someone had finally made it to their feet.

I entered the twilight zone, trying not to trip and carefully avoiding too much eye contact with Glenys. At least holding her hand and waist solved the problem of what to do with my arms while dancing. Only the feet to worry about now, and, as long as I kept my pelvis at a good distance from hers, I could probably shuffle around just enough to keep up with her steps—without causing any little accidents which might require orthopaedic surgery.

Sandy was leering at us and I was starting to sweat with embarrassment. No-one was rushing to join us on the dance floor. A number of elderly onlookers were smiling cheesily at us, bobbing their heads in time with the music. Why didn’t they come and join us? Did they think their Seniors Cards entitled them to a free ride at my expense?

Even worse were the male onlookers about my age, snickering that it was me and not them.

Fortunately, Rochelle was good to her word and led Noelene down to join us. I could have almost forgiven her. Then some other couples appeared and we managed to put some distance between us and Sandy Ring.

After three songs, I was able to pass Glenys off to one of her sons and retreat to my seat. Phew!

Daryl immediately quipped, ‘Tryin to get on her mum’s good side, eh, mate? Gees, you and Rochelle must be gettin serious.’

The thought of making any serious commitment to Rochelle brought home how I really felt about her. Despite her Mother’s Day demands, Rochelle was nice enough in her own way, and good in bed, but there wasn’t a mystique about her or a spark between us that made me feel compelled to be with her for years to come. To add insult, I’d technically be related to Daryl.

‘The beer’s gone to your head, Daryl,’ I replied, flatly. ‘I hope you’re not driving.’

Daryl laughed and I changed the subject to football. The footy babble helped me ride out the rest of the evening’s pleasantries.

Finally, I flopped into Rochelle’s car for the lift home. She couldn’t help but ask, ‘You didn’t really seem to enjoy yourself tonight, Marty.’

I grunted.

‘You were a bit short with Auntie Lily.’

‘Well, what do you expect?’ I grumbled. ‘She kept asking me about my career prospects.’

‘Oh, I see …’

‘You know I don’t like going to family functions.’

‘But that’s what couples do—go to each other’s family functions and pretend to enjoy them,’ Rochelle explained, in her primary school sing-song voice.

‘I didn’t realise we were that sort of couple.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘I’m saying I don’t want to *be* that sort of couple,’ I answered, glumly.

Rochelle paused for a few seconds, took a deep breath, then tightened her mouth into a letter-box slot. ‘Well, I want to know right now if our relationship is going nowhere.’

‘Yes, you’re right,’ I said, with a tired wave of a hand. ‘You can tell your friends I have a commitment problem. Blame it all on me.’

## 4

My boss owned and operated sixteen taxis from a petrol station-cum-convenience store on the beach road in Elwood, just south of St Kilda. Permanently positioned behind the store’s counter was a fat, pasty-faced, forty-something guy who resented the depot deal that his boss had struck with mine. Behind our backs he called us taxi drivers ‘cockroaches’. Behind his back we called him ‘Death Breath’.

Before a twelve-hour night shift, I usually bought a newspaper from the store. Each time I was handed my change, it took a conscious effort not to say: ‘Thanks, Death Breath’. This particular evening I was so caught up in the headline I almost forgot to stop after ‘Thanks’.

The paper was trumpeting the ‘boost’ Sydney had received to its bid for the 2000 Olympic Games by gaining the support of certain international delegates. Although the 2000 Games were still seven years away, according to the article, the only serious competitor left was Beijing.

Back in 1990, Melbourne had been bitterly disappointed at losing to Atlanta in the bid for the 1996 Games. Our bidding committee seemed to have been under the illusion that the Olympics were still about sporting achievement and international goodwill. However, Sydney seemed to know that winning the right to host the Games was about persuasive ‘gifts’ and global market positioning.

Despite the long-standing inter-city rivalry, many Melburnians were hoping Sydney would avenge Melbourne’s loss and bring the Games back to Australia. After all, Melbourne had its turn in 1956.

I was born five years after those Games and felt I had missed out badly. So while driving around in my taxi that night, I started thinking about how to secure some accommodation in Sydney if it won. Unfortunately, I had no relatives or friends who lived there.

Business was slow, even for a Wednesday night, and the weather was cold and showery. While I was sitting in my cab, waiting at a rank, I ran through the suburbs I had visited in Sydney. Eventually I decided Bondi would be the best base. It had a surf beach, it was close to the city, and was well serviced by public transport.

The more I thought about Bondi, the bleaker my home city seemed. Melbourne might have been judged ‘World’s Most Liveable City’ a few years earlier, ironically at the very time its economy was going down the gurgler, but this did not translate into ‘World’s Most Exciting City’.

Then it hit me. Maybe this was my chance to start all over again. Perhaps it *was* time to look for a real job in which I could use my arts degree. That was a long shot. However, I was prepared to give nine-to-five another go if it meant I could jump into a warm Pacific Ocean with a surfboard after work. I’d be fitter and healthier, and could lend a sympathetic ear to any young women who lamented the high number of gay men in Sydney. I could be overstated, decadent and unfaithful, and no-one would notice.

Why didn’t I think of this years ago?

But rents would be higher in Sydney and I didn’t have much money saved. Although, what the hell, I still didn’t have a mortgage, a wife and 2·3 kids to tie me down.

By the time I returned to the depot at 5am, I had a plan worked out.

My boss was tallying the night’s takings at the side of Death Breath’s counter. I handed over my plastic snap-lock bag with the boss’s half of the fares from the night, minus tips of course. ‘Are there any extra shifts I could work over the next two weeks, Bruce?’

‘Have you “gone hungry” before?’ he asked.

‘Nah, I haven’t tried back-to-back shifts yet.’

‘Why now?’

‘Well, that’s the other thing, I wanna give two weeks’ notice.’

Bruce raised his big eyebrows. ‘You’ve hardly been here a year.’

‘I’m gonna move to Sydney.’

‘I hope you don’t live to regret this idea, Marty.’

Why was it that whenever I tried to make a positive change in my life there was always someone wanting to knock it? Was my boss really that concerned or just trying to avoid finding another driver? However, these weren’t discussions that I really wanted to have, so I pressed the point. ‘I’ll take my chances, but I need some extra cash to help with the move.’

He sighed. ‘I spose we can work something out.’

## 5

My landlord was surprisingly cooperative when I asked if I could have my security bond back after two weeks instead of the usual month’s notice. It turned out his wife had been neurotically fretting over the state of the oven in my kitchen because I never cleaned it.

It was early on a Friday evening when I walked out the front door of my flat in Elwood for the last time. I had a backpack, two suitcases and a bond cheque in hand. The last I saw of the landlord’s wife, she had her head inside my oven—scrubbing feverishly, dribbling slightly.

I bundled myself aboard the local bus which connected with a tram to Spencer Street Station on the western edge of the city centre. This busy station was the terminus for most interstate and country trains, but its yellowed tiles and worn bitumen walkways made it seem especially depressing that evening. It felt a suitable end of the line for me, but frightening to think it was the first stop for many who abandon rural Victoria to start a new life in the big smoke of Melbourne.

At least the station’s designers had not made the same mistake as those of the grander Flinders Street Station whose walkway walls featured tiles printed with ‘Do Not Spit’. Not surprisingly, they were the only parts of each wall splattered with the unspeakable evidence of people’s disdain of petty rules.

I tried to dismiss any doubts or thoughts that I might be making a big mistake, but couldn’t help feeling I was being a traitor by leaving for the old northern rival. Then again, *so what* if convicts had started Sydney and free settlers had started Melbourne? And all their differences, which had been stockpiled since, were there to be enjoyed as a contrast not a parochial competition.

I bought my ticket for the overnight train trip. One way.

Waiting for the train to leave the platform, I stared out from my window seat in economy class. This end of town seemed even duller at night. The scattering of nearby office lights silhouetted a defunct industrial chimneystack, a weed-covered vacant lot, and two ghostly buildings that were candidates for Whelan the Wrecker.

When the diesel engines eventually began to haul us out of the station, it wasn’t hard to say goodbye to my lacklustre love-life and dead-end in Melbourne’s music industry.

The promises of Australia’s ‘Emerald City’ lay ahead.

## 6

The backpackers’ joint I was shacked-up in at Bondi Beach claimed it was a three-star private hotel. However, after thirteen nights, I could say with some conviction that at least one of its stars was more than a little shaky. Fortunately, the mouldy bathrooms, noisy dormitories and general feel of decay were more than compensated for by the cosmopolitan colour outside on Campbell Parade.

This bustling main street swept around an embankment of grassy parkland that ran down to the arc of sandy surf beach for which Bondi was renowned. At either end of the beach were rock-slabbed headlands, bristling with blocks of flats, and in between were neon signs, bars, cafés, motels, tourist shops and take-aways.

Sydney’s early winter days were sunny and mild, if not warm compared to Melbourne. I had been bodysurfing before breakfast on most mornings and found the water temperature only slightly colder than Victorian ocean waters at the height of summer. I copped the odd snide comment along the lines of ‘must be from Melbourne’, but so did a rather slow-witted Norwegian couple who also enjoyed their morning dips. It seemed that publicly accusing someone of being from Melbourne was tantamount to stamping ‘Dickhead’ across their forehead. So I guessed that ruled me out of joining the old blokes at Bondi’s famous club for year-round swimmers, the Icebergs. A name Tasmanians must really scoff at.

Unfortunately, my refreshing morning starts had not helped me breeze into a job, despite some foot-in-the-door efforts and mailing out numerous resumés to ads in the newspapers. After two weeks of fruitless job-seeking slog, I was officially desperate because I’d discovered for myself how much more expensive it was to live in Sydney.

Early on the fourteenth evening, I hauled my sore feet and a bundle of hot chips into the backpackers’ communal TV lounge and foolishly offered some to my fellow guests. As I was trying to salvage at least a few chips from the bludgers, one of those current affairs shows fanfared onto the screen. No-one could be bothered going over to switch the channel, let alone replace the batteries in the remote control.

After the usual previews of melodramatic stories, which invited armchair voyeurs like us to pick over some scandal or other, the talking Ken Doll in a suit welcomed us to his desk. ‘Those reports later,’ he said, in earnest. ‘But first tonight, we take a look at the plum job which colourful former politician and ex-union heavyweight, Perce Harrigan, has landed at the new Oz Rock Foundation in Sydney. The Foundation claims to be a joint venture between the federal government and the music industry which promotes our home-grown Aussie rock talent. But is it really just a case of ‘jobs for the boys’? Belinda Carvington investigates.’

As the report started, there were a few meaningful comments from some of the backpackers around our lounge, like: ‘Bloody typical’, ‘What a scam’, and ‘I’m a boy—give me a job’.

There were some general camera shots around the Oz Rock offices as the voice-over explained the background to the organisation. A close-up of a woman in her late twenties, with long light-brown hair and captivating looks, inspired a round of wolf-whistles and hoots from the boys in our lounge. She was hot.

Next was some obviously staged vision of the boss walking across his office to sit behind a desk. He was wearing jeans and a black T-shirt with an Aboriginal flag near the top corner. He looked to be in his forties, with greying slicked-back hair, potbelly, a wily pair of eyes, and a face lined with character.

The reporter began her questioning. ‘Mr Harrigan, you lost your seat in federal parliament after an electoral redistribution?’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ replied Harrigan, his voice sounding like a growling gully trap as he spoke from the side of his mouth.

‘Is this job a kickback from your mates in government for taking the riskier new electorate and losing?’

‘That’s just the sort of slur and misinformation the opposition would have people believe,’ Harrigan shot back. ‘But I’d like to point out there were *fifty* other applicants for my position.’

‘Did they all have experience working in the music industry?’

‘Most did, but not all.’

‘Have you ever worked in the music industry?’

‘I know a lot of people in the industry and have covered music stories during my earlier days as a journalist.’

‘So why do you think the government appointed you to this role if you’ve never really worked in the music industry?’ the reporter asked with a discreet sneer.

Harrigan wasn’t at all fazed by this question, his persona was razor sharp. ‘Because this is a job for someone who understands how the political system works. The music industry has never been able to coordinate its voice at a national level. Oz Rock is going to advocate on its behalf and find ways in which the government can assist music exports and develop the industry.’

‘And in what ways will the Oz Rock Foundation develop the industry?’

This question invited Harrigan to open up like a spruiker. ‘This October we’ll be launching Oz Rock Week. It’ll be a week to celebrate our home-grown talent and we’ll be asking radio and TV stations to broadcast nothing but Australian music. We’d also like to hold a nationally televised concert linking major venues in all states—if some corporate sponsors will come to the party.’

The reporter skilfully used this blatant plugging to her advantage. ‘Indeed, but does a promotional week justify taxpayers’ money being used to set up a bureaucracy?’

‘Firstly, we are not a bureaucracy, we are a private company with a flat management structure. Secondly, Oz Rock Week is just the tip of the iceberg. We’ll be working directly with the industry on issues such as copyright, parallel imports and local content quotas for broadcasters.’

‘What about at the grass roots level for working musicians?’

‘Well, um …’ Harrigan appeared to fumble. ‘We’ll be, ah, conducting research on the number of live venue closures.’ The screen switched to a shot of the reporter’s face making her best ‘unimpressed’ expression as Harrigan’s voice continued, ‘And, ah … developing a whole range of music education programs for schools.’

‘Mr Harrigan, there are rumours you have a generous six-figure salary package. Is this true?’

‘Well, tell me, Belinda, what’s your salary?’

‘I work for a private company so I’m not required to disclose it,’ she said smugly.

‘Well, so do I,’ Harrigan grinned. ‘I’ll say it again—Oz Rock is a *private* company.’

‘But you’ve received government money.’

‘As has your company, at times. Oz Rock has only received seeding funding to kick things off. In the longer term we intend to generate our own revenue.’

‘Will that include revenue from a tax on blank audio cassette tapes paid for by the consumer?’

‘During the full course of time, we’ll be consulting the industry on a number of options to compensate musicians for losses due to unauthorised copying. But it is more likely to involve a token *levy* on blank tapes—not a tax,’ countered Harrigan, as he snorted little bursts of air from his nostrils while gently tweaking the tip of his nose with his fingers.

The interview ended in a way that seemed suspiciously abrupt. After all, a proposed tax opened up a whole new can of worms. We were returned to a shot of the host at his desk. He frowned and said pensively, ‘Not a tax? Hmmm …’

I’d heard enough. Oz Rock sounded like a government-sheltered workshop that paid good salaries to run motherhood projects like waving the flag for Aussie bands. And I had more music industry experience than the boss. This was just the sort of employer I’d come to Sydney to find.

I went to the public phone in the lobby and called up the TV station to find out where the Oz Rock Foundation was located.

## 7

The Old Arts College in Darlinghurst was a red-brick relic from the late 1800s, nestled only a few blocks down from the city’s modern skyscrapers. It hadn’t yet opened when I emerged from the peak-hour chaos at nine o’clock the next morning. I was a little surprised no-one else had beaten me to Oz Rock’s doorstep, but, then again, musicians traditionally don’t rise before midday. Only a has-been would go out in the morning sun.

I had been up half the night trying to anticipate how I might con my way into a job. I was tired and on edge, but ready to talk turkey or whatever I encountered.

After five minutes of pacing up and down in front of the Oz Rock sign emblazoned across the front door, I spotted the woman who had incited the wolf-whistles during the TV report. She was now walking along the pavement towards me. It was no trick of the cameras, she was breathtakingly beautiful. She had an aura of confidence and control. She made tight, brisk steps in her pencil-line skirt and heels. Her linen suit-jacket was buttoned over a tanned, bare chest. She was coolly checking out the stranger at her door. I loved Sydney.

When we were almost face to face, she extracted a set of keys from her handbag and flashed a practiced smile. ‘Can I help you?’

‘Hi, um, yes …’ I bumbled, realising I had actually stopped breathing for a few moments. There was a flirtatious undercurrent to her businesslike manner, but her royal-blue eyes had a depth that told me this was not a woman to be messed with—much as I would have liked to. ‘I’m interested in applying for a job with the Oz Rock Foundation.’

She tilted her head slightly. ‘What as?’

‘I saw a report on TV last night that mentioned you were developing some education programs.’

‘Oh, I see,’ she said, with a trace of snootiness, unlocking the door. ‘That’s Lynne’s area. She’s not here yet, but you can wait outside her office, if you like.’

‘Thanks. I’m Marty, by the way.’

She half-looked back as she stepped inside. ‘Pleased to meet you, *Marty*.’ She paused for effect. ‘I’m Ingrid.’

I followed her in. ‘Good to meet *you*, Ingrid,’ I said, in such a dorky way it was embarrassing for both of us.

Although the exterior of the old college was plain and block-like, its interior featured a large central space underneath a graceful cathedral ceiling of stained oak. Two antique skylights let in the morning sun through stained-glass depictions of gum trees, kookaburras and koalas. The old-world illusion was broken at eye level by four or five modern offices which bordered the central space. Originally the offices were probably classrooms and studios, but now they were decked out with music posters, personal computers, desks, phones and grey industrial carpet.

Making only cursory eye contact, Ingrid pointed to one of the rooms. ‘That’s Lynne’s office over there.’

‘Thanks.’ There was a seat near the door which I went to sit on. Ingrid walked off towards what looked like the boss’s office. It was hard to take my eyes off her.

I twiddled my thumbs for a few minutes, before a woman in her late thirties bustled through the front door wearing faded-blue tracksuit pants and a large, white business shirt hanging over her generous frame. She had a round face framed by a shoulder-length mop of dark brown hair in tight pubic ringlets. Juggling a load of books and papers in her arms, she beamed a welcoming smile. ‘Hi, are you here to see me?’

‘Are you Lynne?’ I asked, rising to my feet.

‘Yes—and you’re …?’

‘Marty.’

‘Here, Marty,’ she said, indicating with her chin a set of keys in the top pocket of her shirt.

‘Sure,’ I replied, pretending I wasn’t worried about miscuing with my fingers. Fortunately, I plucked the keys from her breast pocket with a clean pass.

‘It’s the big key in the middle.’

When I turned my back to open the door, I had the feeling Lynne was checking out my bum.

Ingrid poked her head out of her office. ‘Lynne, I see you’ve met Marty,’ she called over. ‘He’s looking for a job in one of our education programs.’

‘Yes, thanks, Ingrid,’ Lynne called back, without looking at her.

Opening the door, I decided to hedge my bets in case I was backing the wrong horse. ‘I’m definitely interested in the education programs, but there may be other ways I can contribute to Oz Rock,’ I said, like a big suck.

‘Go grab a chair,’ Lynne said, nodding for me to go inside.

She followed me in and dumped her books onto an empty desk in the middle of the office. ‘I don’t usually bring this much stuff with me, but these are books for our new rock music library.’

‘What a great idea,’ I said, like an even bigger suck.

‘I think so,’ Lynne replied, with a self-satisfied grin. ‘So tell me what you think about the current music teaching programs in schools?’

My only knowledge of school music teaching programs was through my own experience many years before, but I guessed things hadn’t changed much. ‘Well, I’d say music is probably the most popular art form in the world, but at school it’s one of the most boring and useless subjects you can do.’ After saying this, I wondered if my assessment might have been a trifle too blunt.

‘I couldn’t agree more,’ Lynne nodded. ‘I’d like Oz Rock to change all that. The music studied in schools isn’t what the kids are into.’

‘Yeah, instead of rock music, they’re playing *Mary Had a Little Lamb* on the recorder and listening to *Peter and the Wolf*.’

‘And if they get really daring, a music teacher might play a few selections from *Cats*,’ she joked.

‘Schmaltz.’

‘Exactly. I need someone to write a series of educational guides on rock music so we can sell them to schools.’

‘Sounds good,’ I enthused, sensing the end of my nose turn brown.

‘And I don’t just mean how to play in a band, but how to set up a PA system, record a demo tape, operate lighting rigs—’

‘I’ve done all those things with different bands over the years.’

‘Any I would know?’

I knew from experience that if I mentioned the names it was an invitation to say ‘never heard of them’. Instead, there was a standard line I used: ‘You wouldn’t have heard the names, none were the Rolling Stones, but most played the pub circuit and a couple of our demos made it onto radio.’

‘Did you get as far as recording a single?’

‘Yep, we even performed one of our songs on national television.’ I didn’t add anything further about that little adventure on the Saturday morning children’s show.

Lynne became more enthusiastic as we talked our way through her plans for revolution. After ten minutes or so, and only a skim through my resumé, to my surprise and relief, she offered me a job as an ‘Education Project Officer’ with Oz Rock. ‘As far as I’m concerned you can start Monday morning,’ she said. ‘I’ve just got to confirm a few details such as your salary with the Managing Director.’

‘Is that Mr Harrigan?’

‘Yes, do you know Perce?’ she said, with a hint of concern.

‘Not until I saw the report on TV last night.’

‘Oh,’ she said, cautiously. ‘They edited that report like you wouldn’t believe.’

‘What did they cut out?’

We were interrupted by the roar of a powerful car engine from behind our building. Looking out the office windows, we saw a polished red Mercedes Sports throbbing up the driveway at the rear.

‘Speak of the devil,’ Lynne smiled, ‘that’s Perce now.’

‘Is Perce short for Percy?

‘Yeah, and occasionally his detractors shorten it to “Perk”.’ She seemed to realise, as soon as she had let it slip, that the boss’s nickname was too much information for a new employee.

I suppressed a grin. ‘Thanks for warning me.’

‘Anyway, *Perce* usually arrives a little later than us because he has to drive all the way down from Palm Beach.’

It was tempting to be facetious about an ex-union heavyweight living at Palm Beach because, even as a Melburnian, I knew of the suburb’s reputation as the jewel of Sydney’s North Shore beaches. It was home to movie stars, assorted entrepreneurs and multinational types. However, I thought of my lodgings at the backpacker hostel and diplomatically replied, ‘Yes, it must be more than an hour’s drive.’

The Mercedes’ engine fell silent, but another rumbling continued—Harrigan ranting into what must have been his hands-free car phone, as though still trying to talk over the engine throb. ‘I’ll stitch up that fucken bastard for slagging me off … don’t you fucken worry, comrade, I’ve got a mountain of dirt on that arsehole … yep, a classic pincer movement … no worries, gotta go.’

Lynne looked a little embarrassed. ‘That’s our boss.’

‘He seems like, um … a colourful character,’ I said.

‘He plays up to his public persona, but, believe it or not,’ Lynne said, shaking her head, ‘he’s actually a really decent, even sensitive, man when he drops the cowboy image.’

Harrigan burst in the backdoor, wearing jeans and a leather jacket over his potbelly.

‘Perce!’ Lynne called out. ‘I’d like to introduce Marty who’s just the sort of person we need to work on our music education programs.’

Harrigan bowled into Lynne’s office. ‘G’day, Marty.’

‘Hi, Mr Harrigan.’

‘*Maaate*, call me Perce,’ he gushed, as he shook my hand with such warmth and enthusiasm it was like he was my oldest and best friend welcoming me to a catch-up chinwag over Devonshire Tea. It seemed, as you’d expect from an experienced politician, Harrigan had mastered the art of maximising his first impression when pressing the flesh.

‘Sure, Perce.’

‘I’d like Marty to start on Monday,’ Lynne said.

‘You’ve already given him the third degree, then?’ he grinned.

‘Yes, would you like to look at his resumé?’

‘I’ll take your word for it, Lynne, since it’s you two who’ll be working together.’ He turned to give me a gentle nudge. ‘Better you than me writing those educational guides, Marty.’

‘It may not be as sexy as Oz Rock Week,’ Lynne said, with some indignation, ‘but it will generate a lot of credibility and earn us an income.’

‘It’d bloody better,’ Harrigan warned, good-naturedly. ‘I tell you what, Marty. I’ll chew the fat with Lynne this arvo, and we’ll give you a call if there are any problems. Otherwise, we’ll see you Monday morning. How’s that sound?’

I had the urge to click my heels in the air as I bounded out of the Oz Rock offices and back onto the street. Where else in the world but Australia could you get a job like this? Succeeding in any other country would mean you’d have to try just too damn hard.

## 8

Renting a one-bedroom flat in Bondi meant doing some serious damage to the plastic card which ran my life. My new home was a nice little art-deco dogbox with a circle of smoked glass in the front door, stained-wood skirting, picture rails, recycled floral carpet, and walls dabbed with standard landlord-issue cream paint. The real-estate agent’s much lauded ‘second-floor ocean views’ required a periscope to be enjoyed fully. Still, being a few blocks back from the main strip, it meant my new street was reasonably quiet and leafy.

I dumped my two suitcases and backpack on the living room floor. The absence of furniture stirred a sense of loneliness which gave me second thoughts about deciding not to share a house or flat with someone else. The high cost of renting in Sydney also made sharing a very practical option, but my backpackers’ hostel experience had reminded me of just how unfunny other people’s domestic shortcomings had become. Perhaps I was becoming more intolerant in my old age, and was destined to become a wizened old bugger who would bore strangers on public transport about the good old days before Bondi became a Surfers Paradise high-rise jungle. However, I was past finding anything amusing about: ‘Whose turn is it to do the dishes?’, ‘When can you pay your share of the phone bill?’, ‘Who didn’t flush the toilet?’, ‘Were the hairs on the soap definitely pubes?’ and the like.

By Sunday night, I was comfortably camped in my dogbox, chomping make-do scrambled eggs in front of a new secondhand TV, and generally psyching myself up for the big first day at Oz Rock. Sydney had proved it could indeed be an Emerald City for a new arrival. Now I just had to live up to the exaggerated expectations which a bit of seemingly harmless bullshit had created.

Monday morning felt like I was getting ready for my first day at school, aside from the shaving and showering, of course. I fronted the streets of Sydney with clean clothes, polished shoes, brushed hair, scrubbed teeth, washed hands, and a folder with pens and paper.

I caught a bus the two kilometres from Bondi Beach to Bondi Junction, which was probably slower than walking at that time of day, then ducked into the underground station to catch a double-decker train to Kings Cross. I sat on the top level and thought superior Sydney thoughts—*would Melbourne always remain stuck in its rut of single-decker trains?*

The usual gaudy sleaze of the main drag in the ’Cross was at a low ebb as commuters bustled past shopkeepers preparing for the day shift, while yuppies with mobile phones ‘did breakfast’ in the more salubrious cafés. I made my way across William Street and into Darlinghurst’s assortment of flats and renovated terrace houses which lined the roads to Oz Rock.

I arrived at the entrance before the office had opened and hoped it would be Ingrid who came with the keys. The first challenge was not to come across as too much of an eager beaver in front of such a cool-headed woman.

Right on nine o’clock, Ingrid appeared, looking mildly amused at finding me once again on the doorstep. ‘Morning, Marty,’ she said, noticeably friendlier than last Friday. ‘Looking forward to your first day on board?’

‘Yep, all ready to go,’ I nodded, hoping my enthusiasm didn’t sound like lust.

‘Well, I suppose you’d like to know where your desk is?’

‘That’d help.’

She led me in and opened Lynne’s office. I had to keep my eye activity in check.

‘There you go.’ Ingrid motioned towards the empty desk near Lynne’s.

‘Thanks,’ I said, stepping past her and enjoying a close sample of her heady perfume.

‘Lynne shouldn’t be too long,’ she said, with a mild smile. ‘And, ah … there’s a staff meeting at ten.’

‘Okay, I’ll get started and see you a bit later,’ I called after her, as she disappeared into her office.

I set about trying to look busy and turned on the fluorescent lights. There was an old black-and-white computer on the floor behind my desk, so I found a power point and booted it up.

Not long afterwards, Lynne lumbered through the door, juggling various books and folders. I asked her if she would like a coffee. This kicked a bigger goal than expected. Apparently, I was indebted to numerous chauvinists in her life.

She followed me out to the little kitchen towards the rear of the building, insisting on showing me where all the ingredients were. As soon as the kettle was on, she let go with a serve straight from left field. ‘Have you ever been in a prison before?’

I wasn’t sure what she might be driving at, so I cautiously answered, ‘Only as a visitor.’

‘Oh, sorry, yes, that’s what I meant,’ she blushed. ‘I know you’ve never been in trouble with the law.’

‘Did I tell you that?’

‘No, Ingrid did a background check on you.’

‘Oh.’ I didn't know what to say about this revelation. Sparks of paranoia fizzled around inside my head. What else had Ingrid found out about me? Could she do that without my consent? Was she a neo-nazi type who would soon be directing the police to where they could collect those unpaid parking fines from the last time I was in Sydney, five years ago? But perhaps it was all standard procedure and nothing personal between us. If only.

Lynne continued, ‘Do you think you could handle doing some work in a boys’ prison?’

I didn’t like manipulative challenges such as this. If I answered ‘no’ I’d be a spineless wimp—and a Melbourne one at that—if ‘yes’ then I could be committing myself to who knows what. I hoped I hadn’t been duped about the nature of this job, but I was also curious about what it would be like to work in a boys’ prison. Best to be positive but non-committal. ‘Yeah, I could give it a go.’

‘Good,’ she nodded. ‘One of Perce’s mates runs the Maninga Youth Correctional Centre.’

‘Like the camp commandant?’

Lynne laughed. ‘Not quite. The official title is “Youth Correctional Manager”.’

‘Of course.’

‘You’ll really like him, his name’s Adriano Priori. He’s quietly spoken and easy going, but very street smart.’

This was beginning to get a bit too much for me. ‘I thought you wanted me to write educational guides?’

‘I do,’ she replied. ‘I believe if you can develop music education guides that work for delinquents in prisons, they’ll work in any high school.’

I could see her logic, but still thought it a bit extreme. ‘What are they doing time for?’

‘Murder, rape, armed robbery, you name it.’

‘Great,’ I grinned. ‘And you want to turn them into musicians?’

Lynne remained straight-faced. ‘They’d probably work better as roadies first, maybe graduate to being musos later.’

‘A well-trodden career path,’ I chuckled, thinking she couldn’t be serious. Most roadies I’d met thought that changing a guitar string was akin to brain surgery. Perhaps a few could act like drummers, but the days of musos learning three chords (two good ones and a bad one) and conquering the world were over. Music had come a long way since punk.

Lynne either didn’t get my crack or wanted to ignore it. ‘Could you start by teaching them how to set up a small PA system for a band, and turn your lessons into a student guide and training video?’ she asked.

I could also show them how *not* to set up a PA system, but I imagined things could get pretty ugly in a prison. Even if the lessons didn’t degenerate into riots where wardens in helmets lobbed tear gas at the inmates to restore order before lunch, the language would probably not be fit for secondary school teachers. Then I thought of my bank balance and said, ‘Yes, I could do that.’

‘That’s great,’ Lynne smiled. ‘Of course we’ll hire a crew to shoot the video when the time comes, but you’ll have to help them put it together.’

‘No worries.’

She talked me through some of the project details while we finished our coffees.

It wasn’t long before Harrigan throbbed up the driveway at the rear, this time in a blue Mercedes saloon. How many Mercs did this guy have? Or were they company cars, leased to him under various shady arrangements?

While I was wondering what other cars might appear during the rest of the week, Harrigan waltzed into his office. As soon as he was behind his desk, Lynne trotted me off to see him about my employment contract.

When I tapped on the glass in his door, Harrigan looked up and flashed his politician’s pearly whites. He waved me in, not jumping to his feet as I half expected him to do after the enthusiasm of our first meeting before the weekend. Nonetheless, he maintained a diplomatic smile as he directed me to take a seat in front of his desk.

Harrigan took a piece of paper out of his in-tray. ‘I trust this is satisfactory.’ The paper he put in front of me was headed ‘Oz Rock Foundation: Employment Contract’.

‘Thanks, I’ll have a read,’ I said, struck by his courteous presumption of ‘trust’ and ‘satisfactory’ in such a short sentence. The contract was all contained within one page and comprised of five clauses which I suspected had holes so large that a lawyer could drive a double-decker train through them. I wondered whether former politicians were meant to be so trustworthy that contracts for their own employees didn’t need too many details?

‘Sure, take your time,’ he nodded. He clasped his hands on the desk, watching me.

I did my best to concentrate on the page, but I could feel his eyes on me and his sudden silence was unnerving. I looked up and met his stare. It was such an awkward moment that I felt obliged to somehow apologise for taking my time. ‘I make it a policy never to sign anything I don’t read first.’

‘Fine.’

More silence. It is amazing what sort of pressure a person can apply by saying nothing.

The clauses basically said I was on the payroll at $28,000 a year and there would be horrible consequences if I didn’t do what I was told. Even if the clauses claimed my first-born child, I was so chuffed about having an almost real job at last, what was I going to do about it now?

I signed myself into prison and passed the contract back to Harrigan. He was immediately more relaxed and started soft-soaping me about my supposedly important role in the allegedly bright future of Oz Rock.

I had trouble concentrating, distracted by a feeling like I had just driven a used car out of a lot and suddenly thought of all the questions I should have asked the salesman. I waited for him to draw breath, then asked, ‘When I watched your interview on TV last week, it seemed to end a bit abruptly or something. Perhaps I just imagined it, but what did they—’

‘Oh, *maaate*,’ Harrigan groaned, with some aggrieved shakes of his head, ‘the bloody journo tried the oldest trick in the book.’

‘Which is …?’

‘Hang on a minute, comrade, I'll show you.’ Harrigan reached for his briefcase and whipped out a videotape. ‘This is the unedited tape of the interview.’ From the top of his filing cabinet, he lifted a small TV with a built-in video player onto his desk. He inserted the tape and fast-forwarded to the spot where the on-air version had been cut. ‘So do you remember how I had to explain that the blank tape levy was not a tax?’

‘Yeah, I do.’

‘Well, have a look at what they *didn’t* put to air …’ he huffed, as he hit the Play button.

The vision showed Harrigan listening to the interviewer’s follow-up question coming from off-camera: ‘Some people say if the music industry really wanted the Oz Rock Foundation that it would fund it, without relying on the government or a blank tape levy. What’s your response to them?’

Harrigan bristled. ‘Look, Belinda, I know, as a former journo myself, it’s one of the oldest tricks in the book to use the phrase “some people say” when it’s really *you* who’s saying it.’

‘That’s not true,’ she protested. ‘There are a number of people saying it.’

‘Well, then … name three of them,’ Harrigan demanded, as he leaned forward and pushed his elbows across the desk.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘You heard me,’ he smirked. ‘Go on, tell me the names of just three people who are saying it.’

The camera swung round towards the interviewer. ‘I don’t have a list on me.’

‘Well—off the top of your head—can you tell me just *one* name?’

The camera pulled back to show them both. She began determinedly. ‘Look, the point is—’

‘Look, the point is,’ interrupted Harrigan, ‘your crafty bridging phrases like “look, the point is” will not work on someone who knows all the tricks of the spin doctors.’

‘I’m not a spin doctor,’ she objected, ‘I’m a journalist.’

‘There’s still a difference, is there?’

‘We keep the spin doctors honest.’

Harrigan shook his head and made one of his little snorts. ‘I’m really disappointed at the way the standards in my former profession have fallen in the past few years—and I betcha don’t put this last bit to air.’

‘I think we can leave the interview at this point,’ she seethed, as she pushed back her seat and gestured to the camera crew to pack up.

‘Already?’ Harrigan grinned with mock innocence. ‘Things were just getting—’

The vision on the screen cut to black, then turned to static. I wondered what Harrigan expected me to say about this piece. Was he testing me out in some way or was he just happy to have a captive viewer at hand while he gloated over his perceived victory? He reached across and turned off the set. ‘Fucken tabloid journos. Think they run the bloody country.’

‘Why did she have it in for you?’

‘Comes with the territory, Marty. She needs stories, we need exposure.’

‘I spose not being talked about is worse.’

‘Very true,’ Harrigan said, his smile broadening, ‘and there’s also nothing like beating the bastards at their own game.’ He smacked his lips together.

Ingrid put her head around the door to remind us about the staff meeting.

Harrigan ejected the videotape and put the TV back on its shelf. He seemed pleased to have shown a new employee how to ‘stitch up’ a journalist intent on undermining Oz Rock. His organisation’s survival—now *our* survival—was apparently a matter of winning the ‘spin’ war in the media. To the public, we had to *appear* to be doing something worthwhile with taxpayer dollars. I gathered that if we wanted to keep Oz Rock in orbit for the long term, then the reality of our performance should eventually match this appearance.

More coffees were organised before we all settled into Harrigan’s office. Naturally, he chaired. ‘I thought we’d better start having staff meetings like regular companies do,’ he began. ‘I want to talk about hiring a couple more personnel and also holding a national conference to induct various music industry representatives onto a board of directors for Oz Rock.’

‘I thought we were short of funds,’ Lynne said.

‘Not for essential things like a receptionist who can book gigs and a computer wiz who can design promo materials,’ Harrigan replied.

‘Okay, but how can we afford a conference and a bunch of directors?’ Lynne asked.

Harrigan did his best to strike the pose of a general. ‘We need to rally the industry to our cause, in case that TV report rattled any of them.’

‘Speaking of which,’ Ingrid said, spreading a newspaper on the table between Lynne and me, ‘have a look at this.’ It was a photo of a power-dressed woman with a cheesy smile, probably in her early fifties. She was tilting a glass of champagne towards the camera during the opening night celebrations for a ballet at the Sydney Opera House.

‘Who’s that woman?’ I asked.

‘We’ll pardon your ignorance because you’re from Melbourne,’ Harrigan said, with a smirk that was difficult to take offence from. ‘This is Nicola Cadby, Shadow Minister for the Arts and Oz Rock’s enemy number one.’

Ingrid added, ‘She thinks government money should only be spent on the “high” arts like ballets, operas and symphony orchestras.’

‘So I guess Nicola Cadby regards rock music as a “low” art form?’

‘Uh-huh,’ Ingrid nodded, ‘and in her mind the only thing lower than rock music itself is the arts administrator who supports it.’

‘Which is why,’ Harrigan continued, ‘she was behind the attempted TV hatchet job on Oz Rock last week.’

‘How do you know that?’ I asked.

‘I’ve got my spies everywhere, comrade.’

The others chuckled.

Harrigan came to the point. ‘So if you happen to answer a phone call from Cadby or someone from her office, make sure you keep your mouth shut and put her straight through to me.’

‘So I shouldn’t answer even her simplest questions?’

Harrigan shook his head slowly, fixing me with his wily eyes. ‘The first rule for survival in politics is to know when to keep your mouth shut.’

I couldn’t help smiling. ‘That rule must really cut against the grain of people who are genetically programmed to be blowhards.’ As soon as these words lobbed out of my mouth and onto the middle of the discussion table, I realised they implied my own boss was full of hot air. Of course he was, but this fact didn’t alter the reality it was my first day of relying on Harrigan to finance my rent and groceries. So I quickly rallied with, ‘Or should I say, most people might *think* politicians are blowhards, even though they’ve probably never stood up and had a go at improving things themselves.’

Harrigan seemed to accept this back-track. ‘It’s too bloody easy for armchair politicians to criticise and complain. It’s one helluva lot harder to actually run for office, beat your opponents and still manage to make a real difference.’

‘That’s what I mean.’ At this seemingly saved point, I decided I had better shut my mouth.

‘Good, I’m glad you understand that,’ he concluded. ‘Now, let’s get down to organising the new staff and national conference.’

## 9

On the edge of the western suburb of Bankstown, the Maninga Youth Correctional Centre’s perimeter was fortified with five-metre high red-brick walls topped with slippery, khaki-coloured metal piping of about one metre in diameter. Out in front of the main wall was a four-metre high cyclone-wire fence topped with six strands of barbed wire angled inwards. The grounds backed onto an open but swampy nature reserve along a saltwater creek. Neighbours included an electrical substation and a recycling plant, with a freeway churning away nearby. Inside the prison walls, I could see the roofs of nondescript buildings and strategically positioned floodlights. This place had more of an eerie and foreboding presence than I had expected. Bondi was a dream.

An overcast sky matched my mood as I walked across the asphalt car park and up to the visitor’s entrance. Two porky security guards checked me out from behind a screen of bulletproof glass in the reception area. Judging by their morose looks, they were likely summing me up as a social-worker type. I spoke through a slot at the bottom of the screen. ‘Hi, I’m here to see Adriano Priori.’

‘Your name?’

‘Martin from the Oz Rock Foundation. He’s expecting me.’

A brief phone call was made, a blank-faced nod, then the buzzer on the security door was tripped. I opened the way into the inspection corral where the other guard brusquely demanded I turn my pockets out onto the counter. His way of welcoming me to the criminal frame. It worked. I instantly felt guilty and began considering what my rights were if he wanted to strip-search me. I couldn’t remember anything in my contract saying internal reviews would have terms of reference this broad.

‘Take off your shoes,’ he ordered.

I was about to reply ‘Is that all?’, but realised he might interpret this the wrong way. I kept my mouth shut, took off my shoes and plonked them on the counter. He seized them, banged each shoe sharply on the laminated top, then dipped his thick, sausage-like fingers into their smelly hollows to probe for contraband. I could feel both my jaw and rectum tensing up. If he went for the rubber gloves, I would ask if Adriano could come out to the car park.

Fortunately, I mustn’t have been the guard’s type. With a wary look, he handed back my shoes and passed me a visitor’s tag. I signed his clipboard before he waved me in, minus my keys, wallet and pen.

I walked out into an asphalt yard and scanned the walls surrounding me. The piping on top was truncated about halfway down so it formed a semi-circular lip, presumably for youths undergoing correction to bang their heads into if they somehow managed to climb up that far. No doubt, one of the many sophisticated correctional experiences that guests could indulge in during rehabilitation.

Across the yard a door opened to a shabby, two-storey 1950s building with a flat roof, grey-rendered facade and meshed window screens. Out strode a clean-shaven Italian-looking man in his forties, wearing a navy-blue body shirt—which miraculously didn’t bulge in all the wrong places—and gold-rimmed spectacles.

‘Glad you survived the reception twins, Marty,’ he grinned, offering his hand. ‘Hi, I’m Adriano.’

We shook. ‘They weren’t too brutal, but let’s just say we didn’t make any plans for Saturday night.’

Adriano’s smile accentuated some distinctive character lines in his olive skin, but there was no posture of world weariness or hint of cynicism. I took an instant liking to someone who could work in such an intimidating environment and still offer a friendly welcome. It helped stifle my own urge to turn and run.

He ushered me inside the main building for the grand tour. We clopped through echoing corridors, peering into rooms that contained an assortment of teenage criminals and the odd whiff of stale urine.

Adriano anticipated what I was thinking. With a good-natured roll of his eyes, he told me the newly corporatised lingo from the Department of Correctional Services insisted all inmates should not be referred to as ‘prisoners’, and certainly not ‘criminals’, but as ‘clients’.

The home-boy style from East Los Angeles appeared to be very popular with Adriano’s ‘clients’. Or was it just that the Australian penchant for relaxed attire such as boggy-bum tracksuit pants, gym shoes and oversized T-shirts had recently become cool with our Generation Y thanks to fashion victims in LA? This left open the frightening possibility that a revival of moccasins and flannelette shirts in the States could delude Aussie bogans into believing they are cutting-edge fashion statements. And maybe ugh boot owners might yet have their day.

Nothing much was happening among the tables and chairs in the dininghall, but a basketball game was being aggressively contested in the well-worn gym. In the carpentry workshop, two youth workers were supervising a group clad in overalls who were learning how to use a lathe. The youth workers generally looked like older and slightly cleaner versions of their clients.

On the second storey there was a long corridor lined with pokey high-security cells. I was told how each cell had recently been made suicide-proof by eliminating anything a rope could be hung from. This had involved lowering the bed bases to the ground, rounding off all sharp points, and ensuring there were no straight edges around the washbasin or toilet.

We returned to the austere grounds to view the single-level, ’60s-era brick units where the medium- and low-security clients lived. There were five of these units, and they were connected to various utility buildings by concrete paths bordered by patches of weedy grass. The units were home to about seventy boys, security graded according to size, age and degree of threat. This way, the smaller and younger boys doing time for a few burglaries were not sharing bathrooms with older violent boys who were about to graduate to the ‘big house’ when they turned eighteen. The youngest were about fourteen, but most were sixteen or seventeen.

Some older boys were playing a game of volleyball in a space between two of the units. Most were hanging around indoors, watching TV, shooting pool or slothing about the furniture while video cameras monitored them from most directions. Judging by the graffiti around the units, AC/DC was clearly the number one band for Sydney delinquents. Others like Aerosmith, Guns n’ Roses and Black Sabbath also maintained a respectable following. An admirable selection from the ’70s through to the ’90s.

After the tour, Adriano led me back to his office for a coffee. This had to be the time to air my growing doubts about being able to handle a music workshop full of convicted teenage criminals. ‘What happens if they won’t do what I ask them?’

‘Find another way to ask them.’

‘And if they still refuse?’

‘Your first session is with some of the less feral kids who are more like your traditional western suburbs thugs.’

‘That’s a comfort.’

‘Don’t jump to conclusions,’ he cautioned. ‘For all their toughness, I think you’ll find they mostly understand the consequences of crossing certain boundaries and know their place in a pecking order.’

‘And the others?’

‘Unfortunately, certain others are prone to violent outbursts because they have little or no fear of any consequences.’

‘Why not?’

‘Mental illness, mainly.’

‘So why aren’t they in psychiatric care?’

‘Some should be, cos their medication’s not enough,’ Adriano sighed, ‘but the recession a couple of years ago gave the government an annual excuse to keep cutting its psych-care budget and selling it to the public as a “community integration” policy.’ Even when quoting this policy’s spin-doctored title, his tone was still not sarcastic, more like disbelief at his political masters.

‘Is that the only reason?’

‘No, things have been made worse by the flood of cheap heroin onto the streets.’

I nodded. ‘I’ve heard about the hike in overdoses.’

‘Throw into this mix a bit of economic rationalisation and family breakdown …’

‘And waves of new clients are washing up on your doorstep.’

‘It’s the reason why the Department has finally agreed to let us try music workshops that aren’t like bloody campfire singalongs.’

‘That would have been a sure-fire way to turn them into hardened criminals,’ I joked.

Adriano chuckled. ‘And it’s probably only because I’ve known Perce and Lynne since uni days that they were prepared to get behind this experiment.’

Or at least find some chump from Melbourne to do their dirty work.

## 10

Adriano treated me to a lunch of two meat pies and sauce from the prison canteen. Afterwards, he showed me where their PA system was stored. The speakers, amplifiers, mixing desk, microphones, stands and leads were stacked on a large trolley in a type of security enclosure. We wheeled the trolley to Maninga’s music room and started unloading the gear.

Outside in the corridor, we could hear a group of voices closing in on us. Seven lads sauntered in, grunting ‘yo’ to Adriano and checking me out with expressions ranging from vacant to hostile. They were from diverse backgrounds, but the home-boy look had an extraordinary capacity to standardise appearances regardless of whether your family came from Beirut, Ho Chi Minh City or Redfern.

Adriano did the introductions against some sceptical scoffs, then left me to sink or swim in the unfamiliar role of playing teacher.

I thought I had better start with the basics.

‘Okay … PA systems,’ I said with as much authority as I could muster. ‘Who can tell me what the letters P and A stand for?’

‘I know,’ someone called out.

So far so good. ‘Yes, what does it stands for?’

‘Pig’s arse?’

I could almost hear the earth rupture as the chasm of the generation gap broke open between them and me, their laughter pealing across. So this was the way it was going to be. Pearls before genuine swine. I wanted to walk straight out of the room, but giving up after thirty seconds wasn’t going to look too good after Adriano’s big build-up. I kept a straight bat. ‘No, PA stands for *public address* system, but thank you for playing anyway.’

‘I reckon pig’s arse is better.’

I ignored the bait and pushed on. ‘Setting up a PA system is not that much different to setting up a home stereo. Who knows how to plug a CD player into an amplifier and speakers?’

‘Oh, daaah-uuh …’

‘Great! Because that’s basically what we are going to do today, except we’ll be plugging in microphones and instruments as well as a CD player.’

Then came the first half-reasonable question. ‘What about all the knobs n stuff?’

‘Well, even though the mixing desk has lots of knobs and buttons and *faders*, they basically do the same job as the tone, balance and volume controls on a CD player.’

There were several grunts while they took this in. Next came the first stupid question. ‘Does it sorta work like a car?’

Was this another piss-take looming or was he serious? But perhaps his only knowledge of electrics was based on hot-wiring cars. ‘Well, ah, there’s no engine, wheels or seats but otherwise they’re quite similar. I’ll explain everything as we put the PA together.’ I picked up an extension lead. ‘First, can you please show me where all the power points are in this room?’

‘There and there,’ pointed a younger boy who seemed more amused than the others at how the workshop was unfolding.

‘And your name is?’

‘Johnno,’ he beamed.

‘Thanks, Johnno. Those points should do us.’

‘Hey, dude,’ said another, ‘if you need more power I can nail the fuse box.’

‘No, thanks,’ I said firmly. ‘That’s illegal.’

‘Yeah, but bands do it all the time.’

He was right, so what was I going to say—‘Yes, you’re right, but if you get caught you’ll end up in here’? There were a few chuckles at my hesitation and perhaps one or two more communication lines opened across the chasm.

The boy pulled a tubby little bolt from his pocket. ‘I got somethin for a real slow blow, if yer want.’

‘So how do you know about replacing fuses with nails?’ I asked.

‘Friend o mine in a band told me it was the only way to make sure ya could suck enough power for a gig, specially in the country pubs.’

‘Did he also mention you could burn the venue down?’

‘Well, yeah, but the show must go on, hey? If you’ve played in bands I bet you done it too.’

He had me in a corner and he knew it. A band was more likely to be lynched by the audience if there were power failures, rather than burnt by an overloaded fuse or two. ‘Look, fellas,’ I pleaded, ‘I hate to be a spoilsport, but I just don’t want to burn down this jail on my first day here, if that’s okay with you?

There was a collective ‘Ohhh-waar!’ of disappointment at my being so unreasonable. The chasm of the generation gap rumbled again. I was copping peer group pressure from fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds.

‘Right, any other questions before we start?’ I rallied.

‘Yeah, ya got any smokes, bro?’

‘No.’

‘You sure?’ said another.

‘I don’t smoke.’

‘They’re worth gold in here, bro.’

‘I’m sure they are,’ I said, trying not to lose patience. ‘Now, let’s get this PA system set up, shall we?’

They wanted to start by setting up the drum kit; a natural instinct for these lads, wanting to hit things. Their enthusiasm kept steadily building as we set up two microphones and connected them to the mixing desk. When we added the speakers and turned on the power, they almost killed each other trying to be the first to test the microphones with the roadies’ war cry of ‘One, ts-oo! One, ts-oo!’

There was an electric guitar and bass as well as a couple of old amplifiers in the room. I called for volunteers to play. Most of them immediately turned to an Aboriginal boy who looked to be about fifteen or sixteen. His eyes were deep, brown pools and his tousle of dark hair had a slight frizz. Someone called out, ‘Carn, Billy, show im yer stuff!’

A smile flickered across Billy’s face as he shyly walked across the room to pick up the guitar. He knew how to plug it into the amplifier. ‘What’ll I play?’ he asked me.

‘What about the *Folsom Prison Blues*?’ I didn’t expect him to take my request seriously. Although it suited the current ambience, it was unlikely he would even know who sung it.

‘That’s my favourite Johnny Cash song,’ Billy beamed as he launched into the twanging intro. He lowered his voice and started singing in the same key as Johnny. I was gobsmacked. The others began quietly tapping along, listening to the lyrics.

When Billy sang the line about shooting a man in Reno just to watch how he died, his inmates didn’t hoot and cheer—unlike during Cash’s famous 1968 recording inside Folsom Prison—they just nodded their heads or shrugged, as if to say: ‘Well, fair enough. *As you do* when you’re in Reno.’ And would if you could in Maninga.

It occurred to me that I might be watching the birth of another Johnny Cash or Paul Kelly. Where was a contract to nail a prisoner’s recording, merchandising and sundry licensing rights when you needed one?

I thought I better get the others involved, so in between verses I called out, ‘Who wants to join in? The song’s only got five chords and you can fake one of em.’

Three rushed for the drum kit, but young Johnno scrambled onto the stool first and, instead of picking up the sticks, began pounding the foot pedal into the bass drum to create a surprisingly steady beat. He did what he knew, and did it well. Never mind all that fancy stick-tapping stuff.

Before a fight broke out over the drums, I cried, ‘We need claps where the snare drum should be!’ and started clapping every second beat. The others caught on quickly and maintained enough of a rhythmic backbeat to allow me to stop clapping and plug in the bass guitar. I held it up and offered it to anyone who would take it. There were a few glances exchanged before Mr Fuse-Nailer sheepishly came forward to show at least he knew how to hold the instrument. I pointed out the four main notes, and by the last verse he was faking a simple country rock bass-line.

I returned to the clapping as a few hoots were breaking out. Someone shouted, ‘One more time!’, and Billy led us back to the start again, with more voices joining in.

🟑

It was surprising to see the time was only 3:30 when I went to sign out on Sausage-Fingers’ clipboard at reception. Amazing how draining a bit of delinquent taming could be. Thank goodness I would be back at Oz Rock for a while, writing up the student guide to PAs.

As I walked across the car park, heading for the train station, I looked back at the ominous prison walls and thought of the boys inside. I had no real conception of what it was like to be held against my will, especially in a place as intimidating as Maninga. Thank God some of those fuses we used to nail never caught fire.

## 11

There was a stiff morning breeze blowing up the main drag at Bondi. Whitecaps were effervescing over a moderate swell, and it was time for breakfast. Walking along Campbell Parade, I was toting up how far my day’s money would stretch if I went to a take-away shop and not a deli. My calculations were cut short by the sight of a large café umbrella jerking end over end along the pavement towards me. I dodged behind a convenient brick pillar just before the umbrella slammed down next to me.

A moment’s hesitation in its progress allowed me to reach out, grasp the canvas, and shuffle-hop a foot onto the pole. Still no sign of anyone chasing it. I found the metal pin under the frame and pulled it. The canopy heaved and smacked as it collapsed. Nearly 100 metres away, a waiter in a striped apron began jogging down. Not in much of a hurry for someone who should have had visions of lawsuits flashing before his eyes.

Right up until the waiter reached me, he didn’t say anything, just scowled. Any hope of a free breakfast over teary family thankyous looked slim. If there were to be no pleasantries, I’d get straight to the point. ‘Why didn’t you secure your umbrella?’

‘I did secure it,’ he barked.

Denial is a wondrous phenomenon. ‘Then why am I holding it here?’

He grunted, snatched it back, stomped off. No love lost. An experienced ambassador for Sydney. Why did I never seem to come across any of Bondi’s renowned dinkum Aussie knockabouts like Les Norton? They must have been forced out to cheaper digs.

The waiter was attempting to erect the umbrella again as I continued on my way past his café of yuppies who didn’t need the coffee. Insult wasn’t enough, he was hell-bent on injury too. Was it possible to buy moron insurance in this city? Although the premiums sure wouldn’t be cheap.

It was a relief to queue up at the deli. Still partly in shock, I turned my thoughts to work for the day. How should I start the student guide to PA systems—‘Contrary to popular belief, PA does not stand for pig’s arse’? At least the bit of teaching I had done the previous day made me feel slightly less fraudulent about pretending I was some sort of educational expert.

My daydreaming was interrupted by a familiar face coming into focus. It was Harrigan sitting at a table out the front of a nearby restaurant. He was talking to Ingrid and a paunchy man in jeans, mostly bald, with scraglets of grey hair falling about the shoulders of a cheap suit coat. Unusual for Harrigan to be on this side of town so early. Something must be on the go.

I bought a cheese roll then strolled over to the restaurant. It boasted chrome seats, uniformed staff and a menu full of expensive adjectives. Obviously Oz Rock’s budget wasn’t that tight.

The trio were more welcoming than I expected. Harrigan turned on his politician’s smile when he introduced Laurie Blight as a leading light with the government’s youth radio network, Triple Z, and soon-to-be first member of Oz Rock’s board. Blight did his best at a first-impressions smile, but he had a coldness that made me wonder if he was behind the legendary staff purges at the station a few years back.

Ingrid was looking dangerously good in a close-fitting black suit, a string of pearls across bare skin, and wearing her hair up—more Melbourne than Sydney. ‘So how’d you go at Maninga with Adriano?’ she asked.

Perhaps it was best to try understatement so as to imply things had gone better than I was willing to let on. ‘I survived.’

Harrigan cut in. ‘The boys give you a hard time, did they?’

‘It got easier as we went along.’

‘Any talented ones?’

‘Yeah, an Aboriginal kid called Billy could sing and play guitar.’

Harrigan leaned forward, suddenly more intense. ‘How well?’

‘*Really* well.’

‘Dya know if he’s written any original material?

‘I didn’t ask him. Why?’

‘Oh, just an idea.’ Harrigan was up to something, but wasn’t about to let on. ‘When’s your next session with him?’

‘Nothing planned,’ I said.

‘Could you ask Adriano to set you up a one-on-one songwriting session with this Billy?’

‘Sure, but you’ll have to offer a carrot, he’s a shy kid.’

Ingrid had a solution. ‘Lynne told me the next student guide we need is one on multi-track recording. Why don’t you offer to record Billy if he can come up with an original song?’

‘He might just go for that,’ I agreed.

‘Can you operate an eight-track recording unit?’ she asked.

‘Easy.’ I didn’t like her setting my next task, but wanted to sound like Mr Can-Do in present company.

‘Well, that’s your next project,’ Harrigan said. ‘And if Billy doesn’t have any original material in him, we might have to buy him some.’

Before I could ask him to explain, Harrigan neatly changed the subject to the radio interview he was about to do. Blight had arranged a friendly chat with Triple Z’s morning show host. I imagined Harrigan wanted to shore up his reputation with the demographic that rarely watches current affairs shows. He said I was welcome to tag along to the interview in his car.

It turned out Harrigan had been in his big *silver* Mercedes mood when he’d left Palm Beach that morning.

## 12

Radio Triple Z was housed in an unimpressive glass and steel box on the edge of the city centre. Inside, however, the producer’s control room had a Nasa-like appearance.

Ingrid and I were seated in a space between the producer’s control console and a glass wall through which we could see the announcer’s desk in the studio itself. Being able to watch the announcer sitting behind a single microphone, casually saying a few words, brought home to me the mind-boggling power of broadcasting. The everyday human sounds she was making, just on the other side of the glass from us, were instantly radiating the length and breadth of this sprawling city, the state of New South Wales and all over Australia.

Ingrid had a folder open on her lap with a notepad on which she had written the date, time and location of the interview.

The announcer switched to a pre-recorded station promo. The producer’s voice came across the intercom speakers in the control room. ‘Are you ready to go, Perce?’

‘Ready to go,’ Harrigan said, from his position on the other side of the desk from the announcer.

The red On Air sign lit up again. The promo ended, then the announcer began her introduction. ‘My special guest on this morning’s show is former MP, Mr Perce Harrigan, from the newly formed Oz Rock Foundation. Thank you for joining us, Mr Harrigan.’

‘My pleasure, Sarah,’ Harrigan said, warmly. ‘Call me Perce.’

‘Okay,’ she smirked. ‘*Perce*, could you please tell us a bit about your new organisation?’

‘Certainly, Sarah. Oz Rock is a not-for-profit company which is helping to build a better Australian music industry. We’re working with Aussie bands to develop new export markets and in turn creating more jobs here at home.’

‘Exactly how are you doing this?’

‘In two main ways. We’re promoting our home-grown talent here and overseas, and we’re running education programs so that successful musicians can pass on their skills and experience to the next generation. Just like the Australian Institute of Sport does with athletes, we’re helping our musicians achieve their full potential.’

At this point, listeners were probably half expecting a chorus of *Waltzing Matilda* or *Advance Australia Fair* to strike up in the background.

‘How do you come to be running the Foundation?’

‘I applied for the position along with *sixty* other candidates, and was deemed to have the appropriate skills and experience.’

The announcer didn’t question this figure and moved right along. ‘I see, well, we’ve already got some callers. We have Greg from Maroubra on the line.’

‘Am I on?’

‘Yes, Greg, go ahead.’

‘Yeah, look, I’m ringin up to say it’s bloody good to hear someone stickin up for Aussie bands so they getta fair go, mate.’

‘*Maaate*,’ Harrigan drawled in his broadest Australian accent. He was reflecting Greg’s voice without sending it up, which I guessed was one of Harrigan’s spin doctor tricks. ‘That’s what Oz Rock’s all about—giving our local bands a fair go because it would be a lot easier for the multinationals just to import all their talent into Australia.’

I had to hand it to Harrigan, the way he could come across as the battler’s hero, the people’s champion. Here he was, standing up to the evils of mercenary global corporations on our behalf.

‘Thanks, Greg,’ the announcer continued, ‘and now we have Marie from Chatswood.’

‘Yes, how are you, Sarah?’

‘Very well—what would you like to say, Marie?’

‘I just wanted to say I think it’s terrific there’s something like the Oz Rock Foundation to help young people get a start in the music business. My son’s in a local band, playing school dances and that sort of thing, and he loves it but he’s not quite sure what the next step is. Have you got any advice I could pass on to him?’

Harrigan was unlikely to have any useful advice beyond ‘Don’t play *Johnny B. Goode* too much’, so he fudged his answer with some skilful name-dropping. ‘That’s just the sort of thing I was talking about with a member of the Little River Band recently. And he said he would be more than happy to pass on to up-and-coming musicians what it took him more than fifteen years to learn in the music business. That way, young musicians don’t have to reinvent the wheel when they start out.’

‘Oh, that’s wonderful news, thank you. I’ll have to send him down to do one of your thingummies.’

‘Terrific, Marie.’

But before Harrigan’s caring and sharing could get any warmer and fuzzier, the announcer straightened her posture and said, ‘My producer tells me we have an unexpected call from the Shadow Minister for the Arts, Nicola Cadby. Good morning, Ms Cadby.’

‘Good morning, Sarah, thank you for taking my call.’ Cadby’s voice was forthright and cultured in a Sydney sort of way.

Harrigan immediately crossed his arms. I noticed Ingrid squeezing the biro she was holding until her knuckles went white. Her intensity was compelling.

‘You’re welcome,’ the announcer said, raising her eyebrows and nodding at Harrigan. ‘What would you like to say, Nicola?’

‘I’d like to bring some balance into this discussion about the Oz Rock Foundation and point out that it’s being funded at taxpayers’ expense.’ It was a fair point, but under the circumstances it came across like a party-pooping mother lecturing the kids about how much the chips and red lemonade cost.

Harrigan’s reply was cool and scathing. ‘So is your salary, Nicola, but Oz Rock is supporting music that people actually want to listen to, not just the opera companies and orchestras that your party used to patronise.’

To Cadby’s credit, this frontal assault didn’t throw her off the issue. ‘Well, Mr Harrigan, if the music industry *really* wants the Oz Rock Foundation, then why doesn’t it pay for it out of its own pocket?’

‘You could say the same about opera, too, but the music industry *will* fund Oz Rock in the long-term, the government has simply kicked in some seeding funding to get the ball rolling.’

‘So when will the industry fund you?’

‘Once the role of Oz Rock has been established through the building of the appropriate bridges and the forging of the necessary relationships.’

‘Which is when, exactly?’ Cadby’s tone was pure scepticism.

‘*In the fullness of time*, by the sound of it,’ the announcer chipped in.

Harrigan wasn’t happy about this sarcastic reference to *Yes Minister*. He waved for Ingrid to enter the studio itself. Ingrid instantly stood up, closed her folder and reached for the door. The announcer and producer exchanged glances, but didn’t intervene.

After only a slight pause, Harrigan continued while Ingrid quietly entered the studio. ‘Well, Nicola, if you can adjust your glasses for one moment to see beyond the end of your nose, you might be able to recognise the millions of dollars in taxes the music business pours back into the community. Do you know what the industry earned for Australia last year?’

‘Not the precise figure off the top of my head,’ Cadby conceded, ‘but I know it is quite substantial.’

Harrigan had neatly switched from defence to attack before Cadby could cry ‘blank tape levy’*.* He winked at Ingrid as he took the folder from her. ‘*Quite*,’ mocked Harrigan.

Ingrid did her best to conceal a smile.

Harrigan opened the folder so no-one in the studio or control room could see what was on the notepad inside. I knew the pages were blank except for the heading Ingrid had written. This didn’t worry Harrigan. ‘According to the report I have in front of me,’ he said, ‘music exports earned Australia $1.3 billion last year and the industry employed 200,000 people.’

‘I mean, really …’ Cadby scoffed, ‘where did you get those figures from? There’s only a couple of Australian groups who are making any real money overseas.’

‘That figure is from the Department of Industry and Trade,’ insisted Harrigan, as he made his idiosyncratic little snorts and tweaked the tip of his nose.

By now, Ingrid was sitting back next to me. She tilted her head my way and whispered, ‘That’s the department which actually funds Oz Rock, so Perce can technically claim to represent them.’

Cadby was becoming flustered at being caught out on what she no doubt considered a tangent. ‘Well, I, ah … that’s a different department to the Arts, and, um—’

‘You’ll have to do better than pleading ignorance.’

‘I am not pleading ignorance,’ Cadby foolishly denied in exasperation, ‘but, look, if the earnings are as high as you claim then I don’t see why the music industry needs government intervention.’

‘I’ll spell it out as slowly and simply as I can for you, using lots of single syllable words that even you will understand, Nicola,’ Harrigan sneered. Despite Cadby’s seemingly valid points, Harrigan was ridiculing her efforts with a brand of vicious patronising that I had never before witnessed between two public figures on air. ‘First. Oz Rock is a *pri-vate* company. Second, if the industry rests on its laurels now, then there’s a downturn later, you will probably be the first to jump up and down to crow the government should have done something to help sustain the industry’s growth while it was still in a strong position.’

‘But the reality is, the music industry will continue to thrive regardless of …’

The announcer interrupted, ‘I’m sorry, but we are coming up to news time, so we’ll have to leave it there. Thank you to all our callers and of course to our special guest, Mr Perce Harrigan.’

‘My pleasure, Sarah,’ Harrigan said, with all the authenticity of a tonight-show host.

The news headlines began reeling off from the speakers in the control room. In the studio, Harrigan eased back slightly in his seat, looked at the announcer and pointed to the microphone in front of him.

The news coming through the speakers was switched off. Over the intercom system we heard the announcer say, ‘And thank you, Nicola, for being on the show.’

 ‘It *would* have been a pleasure, Sarah,’ Cadby sniffed down the line, ‘if Mr Harrigan hadn’t resorted to personality politics and instead stuck to issues and policies.’

‘Grow up, Cadby,’ Harrigan teased. ‘Bullshit will always beat brains.’

‘How dare you, Harrigan!’ Cadby exclaimed.

The announcer broke in, ‘I’ll have to say goodbye now, thank you.’

We heard a choked squawk from Cadby before the plug was pulled. Harrigan took off his headphones, thanked the announcer with a gush of enthusiasm, then turned to gloat in the direction of Ingrid and me.

The producer added his thanks on our way out.

After we left Triple Z’s reception area, and were walking along a carpeted staircase towards the front door, Ingrid said, ‘Well, done, Perce. Cadby didn’t know what hit her.’

‘Like a duck in a shooting gallery,’ he replied, shaking his head. ‘I can’t believe Cadby thinks talkback is about well-balanced discussions and intellectual analysis. Still, it makes my job easier that she doesn’t understand blood sports.’

Ingrid laughed with him.

I laughed at him, but had to admit it was an entertaining way to gear up for a day at the office.

Back in the street on our way to his car, Harrigan and Ingrid were walking side by side in front of me. Harrigan was spouting something about ancient Greece philosophers and his own mastery of Aristotelian rhetoric. Oh, pur-lease. From my position behind them, I couldn’t tell whether *he* had his hand on it or Ingrid was doing it for him.

## 13

Adriano was waiting at the counter of the audio hire shop to sign his credit card receipt. We were in Strathfield renting an eight-track recorder for a session with Billy. It was a weighty unit, nearly as big as a suitcase, the console covered with lines of knobs, buttons, faders, lights and little meters that looked impressively technical. There was a sullen young muso in the corner trying out hire guitars by chopping out the *Smoke On the Water* riff. He seemed to be in every second audio or music shop. Perhaps one day he’d graduate to serving behind the counter.

Our sales assistant had a Greek accent and the late ’80s George Michael look: coiffured hair, three-day growth, gypsy earring, all swaggeringly capped off with shoulder pads in his denim jacket. His face carried little expression other than a sloppy pout while he chewed his gum. He slapped the receipt on the counter for Adriano to sign and we were out of there.

The two of us eased the eight-track into the rear of Adriano’s prison-issue grey Commodore stationwagon, then drove off towards Maninga.

Adriano lit a cigarette and opened his window a crack. ‘Can you imagine Billy being able to do what we just did?’

‘If he had a credit card … sure,’ I replied.

‘That’s a big *if*.’

‘Well, maybe after he gets out.’

Adriano persisted. ‘Even then, do you think that’d be enough?’

‘But the sales guy couldn’t refuse him, by law.’

‘It doesn’t take a mental giant to come up with a half-plausible excuse to refuse an Aboriginal, especially a fifteen-year-old one.’

‘There’s always the anti-discrimination people.’

Adriano exhaled a plume of smoke, dryly adding, ‘And bureaucrats would hold such appeal for him.’

‘I see what you’re getting at—his criminal record would come out and it’d all be over before it began.’

‘Billy’s in for car stealing.’

‘I didn’t think you could go to jail for that.’

‘You can if you keep doing it over and over.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Was he trying to sell them or something?’

‘Nothing that organised. His psych reports link it to his mother’s death.’

‘How’s that?’

‘She was run down for sport by a couple of rednecks one night in the bush past Dubbo.’

‘Oh, shit! How old was Billy?’

‘Five.’ Adriano shook his head. ‘He was found the next day shivering, crying and splattered with blood, clinging to her body.’

‘Christ.’

‘Seems she pushed him out of the way to take the full impact of the car.’

‘Did they get the rednecks?’

‘A family elder jumped up and down enough at the local police station to get a few blokes dragged in for questioning, but nothing ever came of it.’

‘Except Billy in jail ten years later.’

‘His grandmother raised him,’ he continued. ‘I wanted you to know all this before you start writing together.’

‘Thanks, I’ll tread carefully.’

‘I’d hate for this project to fuck up.’

Adriano certainly had a way of putting a colleague at ease. Billy better have written a few of his own songs. We hadn’t spoken since that first workshop. It was Adriano who had asked Billy if he had written any original material. He claimed Billy had, but maybe Billy thought Adriano was asking whether he would *like* to write his own songs.

We pulled into the car park and found there were more cars than usual. Apparently, visitors were more likely on a Friday than other weekdays.

Going through security at the reception area was happily uneventful in Adriano’s company. Despite carrying a large electronic device which could have housed all sorts of drugs and contraband, Sausage-Fingers barely blinked at us.

We were lugging the eight-track across the yard towards the main building when we heard Billy call out to us. He was sitting with a grey-haired woman on a bench outside the dininghall. Under my breath I asked Adriano, ‘Is that Billy’s grandmother?’

‘Call her “Nan”,’ he nodded. ‘Everyone else does.’

Not many grandmothers that I’d met wore running shoes with black football socks topped off by bands of red and green. Her generous black skirt wasn’t so unusual, but her baggy blue-and-white checked flannelette shirt hinted that fashion icon status beckoned in LA. Her skin was browner than Billy’s, her face was etched by age and experience—lines that resolved into an easy smile which gave the impression Nan was a survivor who had managed to maintain her humour and grace.

Billy stood up, eyes riveted to what we were carrying, taking a few steps in our direction. ‘Is this what we’re gonna record on?’

‘Hi, Billy. Hi, Nan,’ Adriano said. ‘Yep, we could record a whole rock band on this.’

‘See, what did I tell ya, Nan?’ Billy said, putting his hands on his hips.

We put the unit down on the seat next to Nan. ‘Hi, I’m Marty.’

‘I know,’ Billy replied, without taking his eyes off the recorder.

‘He means for me, Billy,’ Nan said, pointing at herself and turning to me. ‘Hi,’ she grinned, revealing a couple of missing teeth.

‘I’m looking forward to hearing some of the songs Billy’s written,’ I said.

‘He’s got some good-uns, real good.’

That was a relief to hear. ‘I’ve only heard Billy do Johnny Cash so far, but that was great.’

Nan seemed almost indignant at the comparison. ‘Billy’s songs’re even better. I made sure he listened to all the big names, then he wrote his own ones, better ones.’

‘Which big names?’

‘You know, Johnny, Elvis, Slim Dusty and Bob Marley, too.’

I wasn’t sure what to expect from this mix of influences. I raised my eyebrows, blew a little air out and said, ‘Hard acts to follow.’

She grunted.

Billy was starting to fiddle with the knobs. ‘We gonna start this after I say goodbye to Nan?’

‘Hey, don’t forget yer place, big fella,’ Nan said, waving a finger at Billy.

‘Don’t worry,’ he replied, ‘I’ll make you a copy, Nan.’

Although Billy hadn’t quite understood what Nan was getting at, she let it go. ‘You’d better.’

Adriano stooped to pick up the eight-track and lowered his voice. ‘Billy, spend a bit more time with your Nan. It’ll take us a while to set this thing up in the music room.’

‘Ahh, okay,’ Billy slowly nodded, shuffling back to sit down. ‘But I’ll come over right after I get cleared.’

Setting up the unit was only a matter of plugging it in and hooking up two microphones, but it was Adriano’s non-confrontational way of making sure Billy didn’t avoid the mandatory security pat-down at the end of a visiting session.

## 14

Billy stood in the middle of Maninga’s music room with his head bowed over the vocal microphone, guitar slung around his neck, waiting for the cue to begin his performance. Worry was an expression I hadn’t seen on Billy’s face before this moment of truth.

I wasn’t enjoying this either. All the pressure that had mounted from the strength of one initial performance. Perhaps it had been a fluke? I should have kept my mouth shut.

Billy needed to relax. We both needed to relax. However, *telling* him to relax would probably only add to the tension.

I loaded the cassette tape into the eight-track and racked my memory for a single joke that might work to defuse the moment.

Nothing.

I’d just have to pretend to be a producer and talk their talk. ‘While I’m cueing the tape,’ I began, ‘can you play a few chords and sing something into the mike so I can check the levels?’

‘What’ll I play?’

I was tempted to say ‘your guitar, you dork’. But, no … a diplomatic producer would save that for later stupid questions. It wouldn’t be the right crack to loosen him up. Something else was needed. I thought harder.

A few more seconds in limbo passed.

‘Play a bit of *Folsom Prison Blues*,’ I said, then switched to my best attempt at an American accent from the Deep South, ‘but do it lahk big Johnny’s got a goddam cornball up his ass.’

It had the desired effect. Billy broke up, banging his guitar into its microphone. I didn’t think it was that funny, but pressure can do strange things to a person. In between belly laughs, Billy squeezed out, ‘What the fuck is a cornball?’

‘Sheee-yit, ya tellin me ya dunno what a dang cornball is, boy?’ I suddenly felt like Bert Newton with Muhammad Ali. Would Billy let that one go through to the ’keeper?

‘Course ah know, boss, it’s one of dem balls o corn, ain’t it?’

Relieved he hadn’t taken offence, I kept up the schtick. ‘Lahk dem ones yer cousin Elmer keeps licken, ya eedjit.’

Billy laughed some more, then took up his position again to play the intro.

I couldn’t resist upsetting his concentration one more time. ‘Now do it cornball-like, Jarrnny. Ya hear?’

Clunk. Billy overbalanced with laughter, nearly knocking both the vocal microphone and the guitar microphone over.

It took him a few moments to pull himself together. But when he did, for the first time Billy told *me* what to do. ‘Man, will you bloody well shut up?’

That’s what I needed to hear—some assertion. I called over to him, ‘Tape rolling …’

Once again, Billy readied himself behind the microphones then struck up his guitar intro. He managed to keep a straight face as he launched into *Folsom Prison Blues* with his version of a Deep South accent.

He made it through two verses then, in the guitar solo which followed, he stepped out from behind the two microphones to indulge in some of the worst head-banging guitar clichés imaginable. This was a side to Billy that was probably rarely revealed at home, let alone inside Maninga, so I didn’t want to laugh at him—but it was hard. He exaggerated his moves with increasing abandon until his attempt at doing the splits brought him undone in a tumble of laughter. It was now okay for me to laugh with him.

We both had to catch our breath before he picked himself up and went back to his starting position.

Billy centred himself behind the microphones. He cleared his throat, shook his head, took a deep breath, then puffed at the curls around his forehead.

‘Do you want a count-in?’ I asked, with an urgency that suggested now was the time to get real.

‘She’ll be right.’ He wiped the palms of both hands down his face, seeming to click ‘On’. This was it. He called out into some imaginary distance, ‘Let’s go.’

I nodded. ‘Tape’s rolling …’

The intro to Billy’s first original song included some twanging guitar notes which worried me. Although he strummed soulfully like Archie Roach, he used hack country and western chords which would have appeased a mob of bottle throwers like those at Bob’s Country Bunker in *The Blues Brothers*. When he started to sing, the lyrics were unconsciously delivered with an American accent. Not the sort of accent we had been mucking around with, the sort that so many karaoke singers mimic.

Worse was to come. The song told a story about the joy of meeting his ‘little girl’, and the sadness of losing her after a fight. The lonely last verse could have included dog howls in the background as the hero sat with his old faithful mutt contemplating the world from his pick-up truck.

I didn’t say anything about the song when he finished. I covered my anxiety as best I could, and motioned for him to sing another one.

He slowed from the medium tempo of the first song to a ballad feel which suggested a Bob Marley influence, perhaps *No Woman No Cry*. This second song was better, except I’d have to think of something more constructive to say than the diplomatic insult of TV talent show judges—‘it has potential’. The guitar solo in the middle waffled so tiresomely that I thought I might look for a cigarette lighter to wave, but the mood for joking had passed. The banal lyrics drew on similar clichés to the first, rebounding in my head with thudding groans.

The sentiment of his third and final song was a clumsy attempt to echo Yothu Yindi’s hit *Treaty*. Although the song at least had a toe-tapping rhythm which probably would have been acceptable for a shearing shed hoedown after midnight. Well after.

We both avoided eye contact when he finished.

He took off his guitar while I rewound the tape.

When the first song started playing back, he shot me a nervous glance before studying the carpet near the bases of the microphones.

Maybe the best thing was to say his songs were great. Tell him his stories about girls, pick-up trucks and dogs were structured in the right order, and not to reverse his priorities. Maybe to avoid appearing too soft or unteacherly, I could suggest he may like to Australianise the pick-ups into ‘utes’. His Nan would have praised every one of his efforts. And why wouldn’t she? By Maninga standards, Billy was a genius without peer.

Billy spoke before I did. ‘They’re shit, aren’t they?’

I pointed him to a chair next to where I was sitting. ‘They’re okay, they just need some work.’

He sat down. ‘Like?’

‘I think the second one, the ballad, has the most potential.’

‘If you really know how to write songs, whaddaya doing here?’

‘Well, Keith Richards was going to come but—’

‘You know what they say …’ He picked at the thighs of his jeans, tensing his legs.

‘Who’s *they*?’

‘I dunno,’ he snorted, ‘but those who *can’t* do, teach.’

I remembered hearing this maxim in primary school and laughing. I remembered chuckling at university while reading the George Bernard Shaw comedy where it came from. Now I was annoyed with frustration about how to reply to a line that had so much truth in it. Good old Mr Shaw had created a high jump for teachers to straddle forever and a day. He must still be laughing in his grave.

What could I do, wave my BA at Billy? He’d probably heard the standard joke about the first words arts students say after graduation: ‘Would you like fries with that, sir?’ No—respect wasn’t going to be earned that way.

‘Maybe you’re right, Billy,’ I said, ‘but what have you got to lose by trying out a few of my suggestions?’

He grunted and thought for a while. ‘Orr-right.’ He crossed his arms and sank in his seat. His jaw jutted out. ‘What are they?’

‘You don’t have to tell actual stories with your songs, just sort of play around with an idea or a feeling. You can sing about sex, drugs or angst if you want to.’

‘What’s angst?’

‘A mixture of hormones and frustrated ambitions.’

Billy winced. ‘Huh?’

‘What I’m trying to say is: don’t think because you’re Koori you have to be political and write about treaties or stolen children.’

‘You saying I should hide who I am?’

‘Not at all. Be proud of who you are, but don’t fall into the trap of imitating Yothu Yindi or Archie Roach or anyone else because it worked for them. Be different. And start by writing about something—an event, a relationship, a place—that means a lot to *you*.’

‘Which is bugger all.’

The easy excuse. I hoped he wasn’t too convinced his life was boring. ‘Think about it for a while and, if you hit on an idea, give it a title.’

‘Why not the verses first, title after?’ he shot back.

‘That’s a classic beginner’s mistake. The title is much more important.’

‘Not always.’ Billy straightened his back a little.

‘How could you tell me about a song you’ve heard without knowing its title?’

‘By singing a bit of the chorus or the catchy bit.’

‘That’s called the *hook*, cos it has to literally hook in your listeners.’

‘Yeah, so I could sing that to ya.’

‘And, nine times out of ten, the words in a hook will be what?’

‘Okay, okay … the title,’ he shrugged.

‘If people are half awake, half listening or half tanked it’s about the only thing that’ll stick.’ I stopped short of telling him that some of my band’s past audiences were not necessarily conscious during gigs. The path to respect did not lie that way either.

‘But it needs a tune.’

‘We’ll work that out after you find a way of saying the title which has got a certain *ring* or punchy rhythm to it.’

‘Why not try singing it?’

‘Find a good rhythm for it first, that’ll help set the feel for the tune to follow.’

Billy stood up and walked towards his guitar. ‘Can I go now?’

‘If you arrive back next Friday with a title, a good one, you’ll have done your homework.’

‘Just a few words?’ he scoffed, as he picked up his instrument. ‘Man, that’s easy.’

‘Not just a few words, Billy,’ I said, resisting a sudden silly urge to call him Grasshopper, ‘a few *good* ones.’

## 15

Stepping inside the front door of Oz Rock on Monday morning, I was greeted by a new face behind an improvised reception desk plastered with music posters. In her early twenties and a short skirt, her teased mane was tinted pink—probably a reaction to the rash of blonde jokes doing the rounds in recent years. Her gouge-your-eyes fingernails and lubricious lips were painted in the same bright, bold colour that is commonly known in the trade as ‘cocksucker red’.

‘Hi, I’m Annelise,’ she bubbled. ‘Are you Marty?’

Things had been happening back at the ranch. ‘Yeah, a little late, but here.’

‘So you’re definitely coming next Thursday night?’

‘To …?’

‘Oh, sorry, I thought you knew about the national conference.’

‘*Our* national conference?’ The rest of the company sure wasn’t mucking around while I was caught up writing these student guides.

She nodded, smoothing one painted lip over the other. ‘Ingrid has given me a list of phone numbers to chase for RSVPs.’

‘Of course, I’m looking forward to it.’

‘You won’t believe the mega names who’re invited—INXS, Kylie, Midnight Oil, Crowded House, John Farnham, Jimmy Barnes—it’ll be awesome!’ She enjoyed a little bounce at the very thought.

I left Annelise to tick my name off the staff list and headed to the open space inside. Another unfamiliar face was helping Ingrid unfurl a colourful stage-sized curtain. Its deep blue material sported a brand new logo for Oz Rock: a guitar with a body shaped roughly like the outline of Australia, the neck extending eastwards, across which the company’s name was splashed in red, all sprinkled with multi-coloured musical notes.

The new face was male, although powdered and touched up with blush. Ingrid broke off from their conversation as I approached. ‘Marty, this is King, our new graphics designer all the way from Singapore.’

King flashed a big cheesy grin which I returned spontaneously—wondering if it was an ironic wag at the airport who had met him, thought ‘what a queen’ and suggested a good Anglo name like ‘King’ would assist his introductions in Sydney. We exchanged greetings as I offered my hand to shake. King extended a limp wrist to give my fingers a gentle toggle.

‘I’ve got a pile of text for you to make look like a book, when you’re ready,’ I said.

‘I look forward to it,’ he replied, with his Singlish accent.

Ingrid had other priorities. ‘Before King can start on the student guides, he’s got to design some promo materials that we need printed for the conference.’

‘I won’t hold you up, then,’ I replied, and made for the little kitchen at the back of the building.

Nearing the doorway, I heard Lynne and Harrigan inside the kitchen having the sort of full and frank discussion it might be smart not to interrupt. Far wiser to eavesdrop from the adjoining thin-walled toilet. They were too involved to notice me slip in there.

Over the sounds of coffee making, Harrigan sounded like he was at the end of labouring a point: ‘ … *because* it demonstrates our commitment to affirmative action.’

‘Bullshit,’ Lynne hissed. ‘You just want to appoint a couple of gullible starlets who you think might get drunk enough to bend over for you.’

Harrigan’s tone was measured and tense. ‘Lynne, it’s not protocol for you to be a director.’

‘That’s rich! *You* talking about protocol.’

‘It’s not like a fucken school council—general managers don’t normally sit on their own company’s board.’

‘What is normal about a board of ten directors, plus you, for a company with four, well—as of the moment—*six* employees?

There was some clinking of spoons in cups. Harrigan took a deep breath. ‘Look, if you can’t hold the line about Oz Rock being a national network then we’re never going to be seen as the industry’s peak body and the record companies’ cheque-books will stay closed.’

‘How can you be so sure all the state and territory industry associations are going to tow our “national network” line?’

‘There’s only one or two fucken recalcitrants,’ Harrigan said, making his little snorts, ‘but we’ll stitch em up at the piss-on after the board meeting.’

‘Well, then could I at least take the minutes?’

‘That’s Ingrid’s job.’

‘So I’m not going to have any input into our own board?’

The sound of their footsteps came closer to the toilet door, behind which I was eavesdropping. Hopefully they would both leave the kitchen without a bathroom stop. ‘Lynne, I promise you can make special addresses when needed, but not next Thursday.’

‘I’ll hold you to that, Harrigan.’

It was hard to believe Lynne swallowed that one. Holding a politician to a promise was challenge enough when *in* office, never mind out of it. I made the flushing and hand-washing noises needed for a plausible exit.

When I emerged, Lynne and Harrigan were in their respective offices. I grabbed a coffee and scooted to my desk in Lynne’s office.

I entered to find her obviously still annoyed as she picked up the receiver to make a phone call. ‘This could get ugly,’ she said.

‘Who’re you ringing?’

‘The education minister if she’s not too busy legislating against nativity plays in kindergartens.’

‘Good luck,’ I smiled.

‘Could you give me a few minutes, please, Martin?’ She gestured towards Harrigan’s office. ‘I know Perce wanted to see you.’

‘Sure.’ I left the coffee on my desk.

Harrigan’s office door was open, but I approached his desk with caution. His head was down, speed writing what appeared to be the draft of a large official document with numbered clauses.

For all his loud-mouthery, Harrigan could work. Not what might pass for work among his blue-collar sceptics, but the furious intensity of his concentration as he wrote would leave most in his wake. Despite his stone-like visage, a lightning storm raged behind. You could almost see the mix of razor-edged intelligence with the ‘fucks’ and ‘shits’ flying around inside his head, spitting out from a brew of political animal savvy and head-kicking experience that could only be guessed at. I’d hate to get into an argument with him.

He lifted the pen from the paper he was working over. ‘How’d it go with whatsisname at Maninga?’

‘Billy.’

‘Yeah, was Billy’s original material any good?’

‘One song has some promise so I’ve given him a few suggestions on how to improve it.’

He wasn’t happy with this each-way answer. ‘One is all we need.’

‘For what?’

‘Comrade,’ he said, with a poker face, ‘I’ll let you in on the big picture when I’ve got time, but let’s see if this Billy can come up with the goods first.’

‘I hope so.’

He looked down again at his document. ‘A fucken lot of things have gotta fall into place next Thursday.’

I took the hint to return to my office.

## 16

Lynne, Annelise and I arrived from Oz Rock by taxi about 5pm. The chosen conference centre was in Balmain, an inner suburb set on a generous tongue of land that poked into an especially charming part of Port Jackson. Yachts and ferries dotted the view across to The Bridge, the central cityscape and touristy Darling Harbour. Most of Balmain’s hills and coves were decorated with Victorian terraces and cottages, interspersed with blocks of flats and occasional postmodern architectural experiments. The underside of the tongue was lined with partly moribund container terminals, the strongest reminder of a proud working-class past. Like so many inner suburbs, the fancies of a younger gentry had priced most of the old wharfies and Labor Party stalwarts into outer suburbs. And, judging by our conference centre’s slick facade and water vistas, Harrigan was going to continue the trend.

There was actually a strip of red carpet ten metres long running up to the front doors, cordoned off with tasselled gold ropes strung between chrome stands. Was Harrigan seriously expecting media photographers? Perhaps I’d spent too much time working the dull end of the company and was underestimating his pull. I had learned his political contacts ran all the way to the Prime Minister, but music celebrities were their own aristocracy.

Lynne and Annelise alighted onto the carpet, making nervous quips in a vain attempt to suppress a surge of airs and graces. Lynne had convinced herself an antique-bronze business suit in polyester made the right statement for the evening. Annelise had added an eyebrow ring, teased her mane higher and bared her pale arms in a blue sequined waistcoat above a long, black skirt split to the thigh. She made my effort of a black shirt over a clean pair of jeans look too understated.

Inside, the newly inducted board of directors were in a meeting room off from the main function area. Having begun at 10am, there were sounds of general bonhomie spilling from their room which suggested Harrigan’s scheme had worked.

King, in his black skivvy, had spent all day decking the function area with giant photographs of Australian bands and singers on the guest list. Flattery at its shameful best. From the ceiling he had hung half-a-dozen electric guitars, various drums from two kits and four small electronic keyboards. King’s Hard Rock Café touch.

At one end of the function area was a dance floor opening onto a harbour-side balcony. At the other end, across no less than twenty glitzy dining tables, was a low stage with a lectern. The new Oz Rock curtain formed the stage backdrop with a large video screen to the right-hand side. King was fiddling with the video and microphone control panels on our arrival, and only glanced up long enough to flutter a hand in our direction.

A waiter in a white apron and black bow tie materialised to take our drinks order, reminding us the first group of guests was not due until 6pm. These would be the reps from the state and territory music industry associations. The real celebs would be arriving at 7:30 for dinner at 8pm.

I joined Annelise and Lynne in ordering cocktails with oversexed names to ease into the Sydney party mood.

The directors were already in party mode when they emerged twenty minutes later. They were all male suits except for two starlets from yesteryear, fading yet still charismatic, whose faces I recognised but names failed me. Lynne eyeballed both as she led Annelise and me in for a mingle.

Drinks were poured and introductions made. Aside from Laurie Blight, there were CEOs from two of the big six recording companies, one from a big independent label, a band manager, a booking agent, the head of a music retail chain, the two affirmative action starlets and an older man who turned out to be one of Johnny O’Keefe’s ex-drummers.

After the small talk, it was disclosed the board had spent all day working clause by clause through the wording of a constitution for Oz Rock which had been drafted by Harrigan. With the exception of the band manager, who breathed into his beer that the draft was ‘a great piece of motherhood’, the directors seemed very pleased with the aims and scope of Oz Rock.

It wasn’t long before the reps from the industry associations filed in. I realised I’d better lay off the cocktails if I wanted to still be standing for the main guests.

As the *Australian Made* background music cranked up, Harrigan and Ingrid systematically worked the room with enthusiastic chatter, regular bursts of laughter and back patting. Masterfully, they broke the ice between the directors and the mixed bag of personalities from the associations who were mostly frustrated musicians, like me, or community organisers who wanted to be part of the perceived glamour of the music scene.

By the time the big names were swanning in, I had slowed down enough on the drinks to keep my slurring under control. At the venue’s entrance a single camera crew wielded a bright TV light along the walkway as a few curious onlookers milled around at a distance. Perhaps not the Hollywood buzz hoped for, but the celebrities played to the camera just in case. Sound effects of crowds could be dubbed in later.

The noise level rose steadily as more than a hundred famous and familiar faces—along with an assortment of industry low-lifes—gradually filled the room and the balcony. Most of the big names were there, although Kylie was rumoured to have videotaped a message from London for the evening. Unfortunately, King had been sworn to secrecy about what was to be screened after Harrigan’s scheduled speech. Although it was a safe bet it wouldn’t be a message of goodwill from Nicola Cadby.

I mostly talked to the association reps, the stars were more interested in sniffing each other. Ingrid had apparently predicted my social zone because when it came time to be seated, I found myself at one of the reps’ two dining tables, between Ms Northern Territory and Mr Victoria. Despite promptly forgetting both names after our introductions, I wanted to avoid comparing notes with Mr Victoria so I concentrated on learning all I could about the dynamic Ms NT’s drinking habits.

She was short, shapely, loud and claimed she was on her second wind after an all-night send-off before flying out from Darwin that morning. Not that it seemed to affect her current capacity. My first impressions marked her as a scene-maker who wanted to build her local empire, but she won me over with tales of her former life playing the lead in Darwin’s Madonna tribute band—Natural Blonde. Her sense of humour was stretched too far one night in Tennant Creek by some Neanderthal stage gropers, so she looked for another angle to earn a living in the music industry. To my own shame, with every sip of drink I came to better appreciate the Neanderthals’ likely point of interest.

Ms NT was returning the flirting, which I liked to think prompted Ingrid to happen by for a quick chat. However, it was probably just to check I wasn’t alienating the Top End from the new national network. Ms NT had dropped a few comments which made me think she was one of the recalcitrants.

After Ingrid breezed onward, I tried to pry into my boss’s background without breaking the mood. ‘Do you think Harrigan’s salary would be six figures?’

‘About a two-hundred-grand package, mate,’ she said, quietly, ‘plus all the perks like tonight.’

‘Wow, that’s about what the Prime Minister earns, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah.’ She picked up a book of Oz Rock matches from the centre of the table. ‘Not a comparison he’d like made public.’

‘Don’t the journos know?’

‘They suspect but have no proof.’

‘You have?’

‘Only that it’s Sydney’s worst-kept secret.’ She poured us another drink and changed the subject to the vacuum-packed sample of dried emu claws she had brought in her handbag from a Darwin deli. Almost enough to put me off the main course and sufficiently sobering for Harrigan’s spirited speech which followed.

The room noise subsided as Harrigan stepped into a spotlight trained on the lectern; background lights across the backdrop were subtly intensified.

No introductions. No MC. Straight into a growling burst from the side of his mouth. ‘Thank you all for coming tonight to Oz Rock’s inaugural national conference in this, the United Nations’ Year of the Indigenous Person or—as it has become known—the Year of the Patronising Bastard.’

He paused for the barrels of laughter which followed this opener.

A heckler called out, ‘I thought we were just here to see you in a suit.’

Without a blink, Harrigan fired back, ‘Don’t worry, Phil, I haven’t caught any social diseases like your born-again Christianity.’

One might be excused for thinking this a kamikaze line for a new leader intent on industry support. Several nervous giggles filtered through the guffaws. The antagonism spurred Harrigan on. ‘This is the first time the music industry has come together to set its agenda at a national level, and I can assure you the federal government is listening. Other industries have benefited from government export incentives and long-term development assistance. But despite the fact that the music industry, *our* industry, contributes $1.3 billion in exports a year to the nation’s economy, not to mention employing 200,000 people, it has not received similar advantages.

‘The rallying point for tonight has been music piracy. An individual music fan doesn’t see any harm in recording a few albums at home on blank cassettes. Because rarely would that person stop to think about the impact of thousands of other fans doing the same thing. But the music industry knows home recording is bleeding it of millions of dollars in royalties every year. Royalties that are legally the property of record companies, music publishers, managers and of course the artists themselves.

‘What can the government do about this theft? Realistically it can’t police domestic piracy or ban blank cassettes. However, it *has* heard your calls to introduce a ten percent levy on every blank tape sold in Australia. The vast majority of this levy will directly compensate the industry for its losses due to home recording and a small percentage will be ploughed back into long-term development of the music industry through the Oz Rock Foundation.

‘If the blank tape manufacturers try to challenge this levy in the High Court, you can be assured the Oz Rock Foundation will be there to voice your interests—our interests. And, with your support, we *will* win.’

There was a hearty round of applause at this call to arms. Ironic that an industry built on rebellion could be galvanised by the prospect of legal action.

‘And now the official announcement from Canberra about Oz Rock Week.’

Overhead beams of light projected a video of the Prime Minister onto the screen at stage right. Most of the scene was filled by the PM’s head and shoulders, but in the background was a section of steel truss with two theatre lights illuminating Picasso’s famous musicians painting. This PM wasn’t trying to impress us with a background of leather-bound books or warm us with a fireside chat. ‘It gives me great pleasure to officially declare that the last week of October, from this year on—in perpetuity—shall be known as *Oz Rock Week*. Seven days in which we, as a nation, can celebrate our home-grown musical talent. I strongly urge all sectors of the music industry and media to support Oz Rock Week because it is an initiative all Australians can take pride in. Thank you.’

This succinct but potent prime ministerial endorsement dissolved into a video montage of performances by Kylie Minogue, Midnight Oil, INXS, Crowded House and Jimmy Barnes. The audience rose to its feet with hooting applause. Harrigan had filled the room with more dreams and emotions than a life insurance salesman. You could almost hear the chequebooks opening.

As the music kept pumping, the man of the moment ambled to the left of the stage where a long table had been placed. Ingrid joined Harrigan behind the table. She placed a glass fishbowl full of dollar coins on the table and unfolded a poster-sized scroll.

Urged by rapid-fire banter from Harrigan, which I couldn’t quite understand, people at the front dining tables stood and moved towards him. The first person took a dollar coin, slotted it into a safe-box which Ingrid had produced, then signed the scroll.

Curious, I moved to the edge of those waiting to do the same. I stood behind a suit who was joking with a muso from Mental As Anything that, as a lawyer, he was distinguished by having been sacked by more stars than anyone else in the industry—sometimes more than once by the same artist. I liked his sense of humour and decided he might know what this part of the evening was all about. ‘What’s going on up the front with the coins?’ I asked.

‘For anyone who wants to sign up as a member of Oz Rock.’

‘What’s it get you?’

‘Voting rights to elect the board and change the company’s constitution.’

‘For only a buck?’

‘That’s it. No subscriptions, it’s a once-off,’ he shrugged.

‘There must be a catch.’

‘Not really, Oz Rock’s a non-profit company limited by guarantee so even if it goes belly-up all you stand to lose is your original dollar—which Harrigan’s providing anyway, as a goodwill gesture.’

‘Nothing else?’ I asked.

‘It also means the government has no voting rights.’

‘So the industry will genuinely control the company?’

‘And, after tonight,’ he dipped his chin towards me, ‘I’d wager some big names really will have a sense of ownership.’

‘You gotta hand it to Harrigan,’ I said, shaking my head, ‘he’s an astute operator.’

‘You going to join?’

‘Maybe I should.’ In spite of this lawyer’s candid revelations, I sensed he was urging me to sign. Part of me didn’t like being a pawn in Harrigan’s schemes, but perhaps it was in my best interests. He had plans for Billy, and that was probably going to be a positive. Still, I was thinking this may come to be regarded, in hindsight, as a lemming run I should have been smart enough to dissent from. Everyone else seemed too buoyant to care. It was free drinks and a three-course dinner with bonus A-list networking. I overheard someone joking that signing up was a way of ‘sharing the blame around’. But she waited her turn and went right on up to sign.

Despite the mixed feelings, I stayed in the queue.

Finally, it was my turn to take a dollar coin from the fish bowl and pop it in the safe-box. The document to be signed was an official declaration of Oz Rock’s role. I caught phrases like ‘foster the contemporary music industry’, ‘nurture grass roots talent’ and ‘advocate to government’. I signed away underneath some autographs that fans would have paid good money for. I hoped I wouldn’t regret this in the morning.

The dance floor was gearing up, led by a few show-offs—as you’d expect from some of Australia’s biggest rock animals. Ms NT wanted a partner so I bumped up against her for a couple of sessions before the clock struck one and her batteries finally ran down.

Throughout the evening, I couldn’t help noticing Ingrid didn’t appear to have any particular partner. She had been flirting with some of the suits and stars, but none was receiving too much attention. She knew how to tease and leave them wanting more. I wondered whether it was worth asking Ingrid for a late dance.

Interrupting my thoughts, Ms NT burbled into my ear that she wanted a nightcap at a Bondi bar. My decision was made.

## 17

Ms NT had to be poured into the back of the taxi, before finding her way under my arm. As we headed off, the driver asked us about some of the famous faces he had spotted around the conference centre. Ms NT replied with a mumble of incoherent words. It was a flashback to my taxi-driving days, only a month or so earlier, except this time I was one of the drunks in the back seat.

The driver turned out to be a good conversationalist, and the city’s night streets whirled by.

When the taxi rounded a corner into the top of Bondi’s Campbell Parade, I turned my attention back to Ms NT to whisper something vaguely romantic, hopefully not sleazy, about the lights over the ocean.

No response.

She was warm and still breathing, slowly and deeply. Almost snoring when I thought about it. I gave her a gentle nudge but her head fell backwards with a guttural inhale before letting out a loud snore.

Should I take her straight to my place? Maybe not. We’d only agreed to a nightcap at a bar. She might think I was pressuring her if she woke up at the entrance to my flat.

I asked the driver to pull over at a bus stop near the bar I had in mind. Ms NT could spend a minute or so composing herself before we went in. While the driver fiddled with my change, I tried to wake her with light shaking, words and pats on the cheeks. I wasn’t going to be cruel and yell in her ear.

The bus stop seat was directly outside the taxi’s door. I clenched the strap of Ms NT’s handbag between my teeth, hooked my arms under her armpits and hoisted her out, kneed the door shut, then dragged her up onto the seat.

I held on to her, trying to wake her, but she went right on snoring. Should I run her down the beach to splash her in the sea? No, too cruel. However, I couldn’t carry Ms NT into a bar. Even if we weren’t refused entry, I’d feel like Mr Excitement if my date was snoring over my company.

Her bum started to slip down between the seat and bus shelter wall. Panic started to set in. All sorts of crazed alternatives hit me. If I asked the police for help, they would either laugh at us or dump her in the lock-up for the night—perhaps both of us. What would my excuse be: ‘I was just minding my own business, officer, and this girl came right out of nowhere and fell fast asleep on me’?

An ambulance would be expensive overkill for a body which had plenty of pulse but was sleeping extra soundly.

Should I lay her along the seat and leave her to sleep it off? No, I could see myself in front of the judge in a few weeks time: ‘I just thought, Your Honour, that these days it was okay to let market forces take care of her.’

If I couldn’t leave her here, call an ambulance or police, take her to a bar or wake her up at the beach, the lesser of all these evils would be putting her up at my flat. After all, she was getting very friendly before she passed out. Maybe this was typical of dating in the Northern Territory? Maybe that’s where the foreplay jokes about ‘are you awake?’ originated.

Should I carry her over my shoulder, caveman style? No, my shoulder pressing into her stomach might make her vomit. And she was probably too heavy to carry across my arms even though she was short.

A sudden stench drew my gaze up to a derelict straggling towards us. Maybe we were in his spot. A piggyback would have to do. It’d take some tricky manoeuvring—probably worse than unfolding a deckchair.

I slipped her handbag around my neck and hung it over my chest, with those vacuum-packed dried emu claws rattling inside. Kneeling backwards on the curb in front of her, I reached behind to pull her right arm over my right shoulder, then the same with her left. With one hand, I held both of hers to my chest; with the other, I felt my way around to her back. She was definitely wedged behind the seat. I would have to heave her out quickly if I didn’t want derro dribble on us.

I gave myself a count, then jerked her onto my back, but, with the heave-ho to stand up, I lurched over the gutter and onto the road. In my condition and haste, I hadn’t checked for traffic. A car swerved, tooting and abusive.

The derro goggled at us as he sat down in the bus shelter, making some sloppy noises with his tongue and gums. ‘You got one of dem for me, matey?’

I apologised to him for my lack of forethought as I jiggled her head into the crook of my neck.

Once settled, the going wasn’t too bad along the pavement. Until an air horn carolled and hoons in a panel van yelled at us:

‘Looks like you’re in for a good night, Tarzan.’

‘That’s the way, buddy. Give her one for me.’

Oh, no. Suddenly every eye in the strip was on us.

Hamburgers, forks and drinks were being lowered to take in the spectacle. Although I noticed a few were raised in toasts. I gave a nervous smile, guessing they were probably expecting to read about a Bondi date-rape in the paper tomorrow.

True to form, there were no good samaritans on Campbell Parade rushing to our aid. While I was considering whether or not to bother asking someone for help, Ms NT let out a long, low groan. The resulting laughs and nudges undid any hope I had of calling for assistance without risking gang-bang jokes.

At least the ordeal of turning fifty shades of red distracted me from what a long hike it was up the hill to my flat. I was buggered by the time we reached the bottom of my stairs, but not too exhausted to realise that piggybacking her up could lead to disaster and spinal wards if I happened to stumble backwards.

Carrying her under the armpits seemed the most sensible thing to do.

It was, until the third step when both her heels bumped loudly into the base of the stairs. If this woke my neighbours they would probably jump to conclusions with less humour than those on the street. Taking Ms NT’s shoes off would have lessened the bumps which followed, but desperation persuaded me I could hoist her inside my flat before anyone got out of bed and opened their door.

Bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, bump—THUD. Had to get the key out of my pocket.

Flat number two opened his door. He was wearing a dressing gown and staring daggers up at me through wire-rimmed glasses. I sweated a smile and lunged to shut the door. What would I say to him next time we met on the stairs? Just discovering the caveman within? Get with the New Age, pal—beat more drums, do more chants?

Fortunately, he didn’t follow me upstairs and knock on my door. It was the last thing I needed while deciding if I should leave her on the couch or put her in my bed. I had only one doona and no blankets. We weren’t both going to fit on the couch. As long as she woke up with her pants on, she would have a hard time saying I took advantage.

I dumped her onto my double bed and pulled off her shoes. With some respectful handiwork I propped her into the coma position. She had earned it.

If she woke up and wondered why I wasn’t on the couch, my alibi would be I was only making sure she didn’t vomit and choke herself. Not that I was actually hoping she might wake up with a third wind and want to go hell for leather.

I retreated to my side of the bed, catching my breath, ditching coat and boots onto the floor.

When my head hit the pillow, the evening’s events and alcohol swirled into a mental circus. Physically I’d had it, but my head wouldn’t shut off. Counting sheep was hopeless. I tried slowing my thoughts by imagining a spin-doctored news report about what had just happened: ‘Negotiations between Oz Rock and the NT Music Industry Association reached an impasse today when the NT side of the deal collapsed. It was an uncharacteristic turn of events, amid rumours that protracted preliminary preparations were to blame’.

## 18

The clock-radio next to my bed showed it was time for the reckoning. My hangover wasn’t too bad but I remembered there was someone I’d poured into the other side of the bed who was likely to have a gang of jackhammers in her head very soon. There was also the possibility of recriminations since we’d only agreed to a nightcap. She might jump to conclusions, especially if she doesn’t realise it’s a normal early morning thing for my boxer shorts to be raised like a little marquee.

Even though my mojo was still working after four hours sleep, I thought it better not to push my luck. Rather, I decided to make a final play for her using a more devious method of seduction. Breakfast in bed. What might a plate of super scrambled eggs do for a Territory woman? If there was a secret recipe to spark morning foreplay, surely it had to include the sensuality of whisking eggs with cream.

She didn’t stir while I threw on a dressing gown and snuck into the kitchen. All the ingredients were there, including fresh coffee. Perfect—no need to risk a trip to the shops and the possibility of her waking up alone. I worked quickly: dicing cherry tomatoes, slicing mushrooms, cutting onion rings, grating tasty cheese. Was she a two-egg woman? No, she was small but heavy boned—three eggs for her, four for me. Lucky seven. An extra-brisk whisk with cream and a dash of salt and pepper, then it was time to dob butter in the frypan and light the stove. Parsley and chives later. Toaster down now. Electric jug switched on for the boil.

Everything went swimmingly until the final moments when I was garnishing each serve of eggs with a sprig of parsley. ‘What’s that smell?’ Ms NT called from the bedroom, hopefully not referring to any aromas back there.

‘You mean that scrambled-egg smell?’ I called.

‘Mmm, thought so.’

‘Won’t be a second.’

When I returned to the bedroom with my offerings, she had propped herself up with a pillow and was rubbing her eyes. ‘I must’ve fallen asleep,’ she yawned.

It wasn’t the time to rake over old ground. ‘Thought you might like breakfast in bed.’

She blinked at me, wriggling her bottom to make herself comfortable. ‘What a spread, I should have booked a room here.’

This sounded promising. I might be calling in sick today. After retrieving my plate and cup from the kitchen, I nonchalantly slid back into my side of the bed. There wasn’t much talking between mouthfuls, probably a good sign. I was aiming to finish at the same time as her so we could turn to each other in unison.

Unfortunately, when she forked in her last mouthful, she didn’t follow my lead and put her plate on the floor. She left it in her lap, turned her head to me and said, ‘That was a real blokey version of scrambled eggs.’

‘How can scrambled eggs be blokey?’ I replied, a little annoyed, wondering what twisted rationale might be coming.

‘Well, have a look at em, they’re full of vegetables.’

‘That’s colour and texture,’ I said. ‘What’s so blokey about that?’

‘It makes the eggs too heavy and filling.’

‘But isn’t that, um, value for money?’

‘Is that the value you were really after?’

‘Well, I, ah …’

Satisfied she had called my bluff, she placed her plate on the floor and flopped back onto her pillow. ‘Let me give you a tip.’

‘What’s that?’

‘If you want to impress a girl, keep your scrambled eggs light and simple.’

‘You didn’t have to eat them,’ I said, trying not to sound too defensive about culinary criticism from a woman who carried dried emu claws in her handbag.

‘Don’t get me wrong, I enjoyed it, but now I’m so full I can’t move a muscle.’ She puffed out her cheeks, sinking down as she pulled the doona up to her chin.

My frustration peaked. I had to restrain myself from telling her that next time I would abandon her to market forces. Instead, I silently fumed as I cleared the plates, then jumped into the shower.

What a low point, being corrected on the fine art of seduction by Ms NT. Perhaps it was just a defensive thing to cover her ‘memory lapse’, or was I really that gauche? What should I take lessons in next—sophistication from Crocodile Dundee?

She could let herself out of my flat in time for her afternoon flight to Darwin. I had a bus and train to catch.

## 19

Adriano was in Maninga’s wood and metal workshop with a hippie and six inmates all clad in overalls, safety glasses and earmuffs. The hippie was teaching them how to use the bandsaw to cut out electric guitar bodies, the shapes of which they had stencilled onto blocks of hardwood. Through the noise and flying sawdust, Adriano told me the hippie’s name was Steve and he came from somewhere in the Blue Mountains. He was a master guitar craftsman who had made guitars for the likes of Eric Clapton and Mark Knopfler. Steve managed to nod a hello in my direction, but was busy juggling excited questions from the boys about how to paint their favourite demons on the guitars. Presumably, he had already dealt with the ‘does it work like a car?’ questions.

Adriano picked up a Super VHS video camera from a workbench and shot some vision of the bandsaw in action. He said he’d hired the camera to record each stage of construction, which was mostly woodwork and painting before the electrics, strings and frets were added. If this pilot project were successful, he wanted me to turn it into another student guide. These retraining programs were really starting to gather steam.

After Adriano had taken a few more shots of delinquents risking fingers around the bandsaw, he put down the camera and led me over to a corner of the workshop for an update on Billy. Apparently, Billy had been moody all week, only agreeing at breakfast that morning to meet me in the music room at ten o’clock. More diplomacy and patience was going to be needed despite my lack of sleep and other things.

Billy arrived at the music room on time, carrying his guitar, but didn’t say a word when he entered. His mood seemed even more on the edge than Adriano had warned.

The microphones for the recording were positioned in the middle of the room. I was waiting behind the eight-track recorder against the back wall. Billy remained silent as he stepped up to the microphones and hooked the guitar strap over his shoulder.

I was going to ask whether he had come up with a hook, but twigged it would be a stupid question. In this mood, his tolerance wouldn’t last long. I sensed this could be the first time I’d hear him sing something genuinely his own. The only thing to say was: ‘Tape rolling.’

He adjusted the position of his guitar, turned his eyes to the instrument’s neck and eased out some rich chords in an easy, soulful rhythm that reminded me of Creedence Clearwater Revival’s classic ballad *Long As I Can See the Light.* He drew in a breath, focused, closed his eyes.

Billy’s voice was smooth and resonant, the earthy tone of his lower notes swollen with feeling. As the intensity of the song built, his sounds began to stretch and fray at the edges, adding a sensual rasp. A plunging series of chords carried him into an upbeat passage where he soared into high, bluesy cries that pulsed with an unaffected sexuality. No girl would be safe.

His performance was so spellbinding that the meaning of his lyrics only started to dawn on me in the second verse. He was singing about the death of his mother. He was giving voice to the pain and sadness and anger that had been eating away at him for most of his life. He didn’t directly mention the rednecks running her down, he didn’t need to. The emotional fallout made it clear enough. He was pleading with bitter-edged words for rest and relief from his torment at her loss.

I could feel a lump forming in my throat, although it was saved from growing too big by some clutzsy turns of phrase which would have to be edited, not the least being the title *Rest My Feet.* However, the overall impact of the song was a tidal wave of emotion that transfixed me. As a rule, I didn’t like using the word ‘magic’ but it was as if Billy had tapped into something that could make the whole world stand still and listen.

Despite the exhilaration of the moment, a surge of envy welled up in me. I was ashamed at myself, but couldn’t deny the human consequence of recognising with painful clarity, that at half my age, Billy’s talents soared to heights to which I had aspired yet never achieved.

Fortunately, the practicalities of playing the role of teacher helped prevent the toxicity of envy from poisoning my elation at Billy’s breakthrough. There were controls to adjust and constructive criticisms to think up, not to mention finding the words to defuse the powder keg of emotion that was likely to remain at the end of such a performance.

My first response would be crucial. Lavishing him with praise would probably embarrass him; he hadn’t yet learned how to gracefully accept compliments. Plenty of lack of practice.

When Billy eventually strummed the song’s final chord, he allowed his right hand to drop from the strings, spent but still unsure. His head was tilted towards the floor so when he opened his eyes he studied the carpet for several awkward seconds while he waited for me to say something.

‘I think you’ve found it,’ I said.

‘Found *what*?’

‘What every red-blooded male in the music industry is secretly searching for.’

‘Which is?’ he sneered.

‘The chord that makes girls take their clothes off.’ A tool that would have been very useful a few hours earlier.

Billy twisted his neck sideways, chin down tight, and reluctantly let his smile break through underneath his watery eyes as he breathed out heavily. I waited for him to bring himself to look at me. The silence was excruciating.

Finally, all the anger and hurt in his eyes made contact with mine. I had to clear another lump in my throat before being able to say, ‘You have the makings of a truly great song.’

‘Yeah, sure.’

‘Work with me today and we can polish this song into something you and your Nan will be very proud of.’

‘Whaddaya wanna change?’ he asked defensively.

‘Musically the hook is brilliant, but were there any other titles you were considering?’

‘Nuh,’ he sniffed. ‘What’s wrong with *Rest My Feet*?’

‘Nothing, but what about trying a phrase like, um …’ Uh-oh. Minor panic. In my band experience I’d learned the dangers of criticising another person’s song without offering an alternative. It was also particularly foolish to put yourself in a position requiring you to think one up on the spot. ‘I don’t know, like, um, rest, ah … *Rest Me Here*.’

Much to my relief, he didn’t dismiss it. He played the lead-in to the hook and tried out this new title lyric over the music. ‘Here. Rest me … *here*. I like that better,’ he said, with a single nod. ‘Thanks.’

And while I was on a roll: ‘Are you sure you want to sing “got so fucken crazy” in the first verse?’

‘What else?’

‘I like the line,’ I said, ‘but has your Nan got a thing about swearing?’

‘She has, but bugger her.’

We both laughed.

I picked up the rhythm machine. ‘Let me try programming a drum beat similar to *Long As I Can See the Light* but with a bit more kick to it.’

‘Yeah, I like Creedence,’ Billy said, brightening up.

‘We’ll conjure a bassline from playing your chords over the rhythm machine, but I can also imagine an organ theme in there because the general feel reminds me of *No Woman No Cry*.’

‘I can’t play keyboard.’

‘I’ll do that. You come up with some vocal harmonies.’

Billy and I worked without interruption through lunchtime and into the late afternoon. Time evaporated while we cobbled lines of music together, rearranged sections and edited his lyrics. We were trying to fashion the song into all it could be, knowing poor musical production could ruin his inspired idea. There was no rulebook to follow, the guiding principle was to trust our instincts as to what worked best. A great song couldn’t be calculated.

I reflected on some of the academics I’d met at university who knew everything there was to know about great music except how to write it themselves. They were perpetually puzzled at how a grunting rock muso could get down and dirty to discover an original sound that generations might enjoy listening to.

As we played around with and fine-tuned all the instrumental and vocal parts before painstakingly layering each of them onto the recorder’s eight tracks, Billy started talking to me in a slightly different way. At first his words were all part of us getting a job done, practically applying ourselves to the task at hand. He could not, however, disguise how much he was warming to the process of collaboration.

It seemed that songwriting was something Billy now knew to be within his capabilities, something he could sink his teeth into, something he was being supported in doing. And note by note, piece by piece, I realised he was coming to trust me as a friend.

## 20

Typing on my computer at Oz Rock had never been so fraught with anticipation. I had been itching all weekend and most of Monday morning to see what Harrigan thought of the demo tape Billy and I had recorded. Unfortunately, he had phoned Ingrid to say he was working from home, grappling with the latest outrage from Nicola Cadby. However, he intended to drop into the office on the way to an important sponsorship meeting he had at lunchtime.

On the other side of our room, Lynne put down the phone after another marathon talk-fest with a bureaucrat. She was gradually wearing down the education system’s hostility and resistance towards accrediting the programs Oz Rock was developing with Maninga as a legitimate music curriculum to be delivered in secondary schools and TAFE colleges. Her cheerfully drawn-out emotional snow-jobs on Oz Rock’s doubters and knockers were the perfect complement to Harrigan’s sharp, abrasive style.

Her patience was extraordinary, but what I admired most was her imaginative nerve. She could make our fledgling efforts sound so concrete, so thoroughly researched, so expertly presented and generally bulletproof that I was starting to believe her hype. Mind you, my admiration was tempered by the consequences of some of her promises. Almost every hole a bureaucrat tried to pick in our programs would translate into another anxious priority for my in-tray. To make things worse, she was a chronic under-estimator of the time needed to research, write, edit, design and print a student guide.

Fortunately, this most recent conversation had left her grinning and shaking her head as she stood up to stretch. ‘I’m glad I’m not caught up in that debate.’

I stopped typing. ‘About?’

‘Whether to keep serving ham sandwiches in school canteens in case they offend various minorities.’

‘I get the basic point of political correctness, respecting differences and all that, but I thought that would mean more options not less.’

Lynne gave me a look. ‘All the more reason we should keep political sensitivities in mind with these student guides.’

‘Understood.’

‘We don’t need to give Cadby any extra ammunition,’ she said.

‘Speaking of which, do you know what she’s on at Perce about now?’

‘Something to do with parallel imports.’

‘What are they?’

‘Bit hard to explain,’ she replied. ‘Ask Perce when he comes in.’

That could wait. The demo tape came first.

It was nearly midday before he roared up to the back door in his red Mercedes Sports. He was in a whirlwind mood but nevertheless receptive when I strode into his office with the tape. Ingrid wasn’t so interested, she went to do something with Annelise or King.

‘Have you got time to listen to Billy’s original material?’ I asked.

Harrigan nodded and pointed to the cassette player sitting at the bottom of his bookshelf. ‘Just a coupla minutes.’

‘It’s a ballad called *Rest Me Here*.’

‘A ballad? A first song’s usually a rocker.’

‘True, but don’t worry, there’s plenty of front to this.’ I inserted the cassette.

Harrigan started the tape rolling. There were butterflies in my stomach. We waited to listen to Billy’s song played for the first time outside prison.

*Seen as much as I care to see, heard more than I care to say*

*Got so fucken crazy, wonder what I came here for anyway?*

*And now my light fades, but for the first time I see clear*

*So lay me down and rest me here*

*Time comes when there’s nothing left to feel*

*Can’t you see there’s just too many wounds to heal?*

*So momma don’t cry, so momma this time it’s for real*

*Take all my troubles and rest me here*

*No power’s gonna save me, no water’s gonna wash me clean*

*So no cure, no religion, I’ve come too far to believe*

*Just take all my troubles, I will take, I will take my leave*

*Night comes, everybody’s got a bolted door*

*Seems, nobody seems to pray for nobody anymore*

*No, no, don’t ask why, this time just hold me near*

*Blow out the candle, search your heart*

*Take all my troubles and rest me here*

*No power’s gonna save me, no water’s gonna wash me clean*

*So no cure, no religion, I’ve come too far to believe*

*Just lay me down and … rest me here.*

Harrigan stopped the tape. ‘Maaate, that’ll be Billy’s first single.’

‘You like it?’

‘It’ll need a real drummer, some better backing vocals and he’ll probably need to repeat that “No power’s gonna save me” bit at the end, but nothing a good producer can’t fix.’

‘Ah, right.’ I didn’t like admitting it, after all the hard work Billy and I had put in, but the bastard was spot on. I had underestimated Harrigan’s musical sensibilities and I had also let him get away with not revealing his intentions for too long. ‘So will you let me in on this “big picture” of yours?’

Harrigan looked over my shoulder as though he imagined somebody could be eavesdropping, then must have decided it was safe enough to reveal his plans. ‘The board decided the first Oz Rock Week should tie in with the Year of the Indigenous Person by launching a new Indigenous artist.’

This idea was sufficient for me jump to the conclusion that he might want Billy to perform at a big community concert or similar. ‘Do you think Billy’s good enough to be involved?’

‘If we land the corporate sponsorship deal I’m working on, Billy could feature in a televised link-up of live concerts around Australia.’

I was stunned. ‘From inside Maninga?’

‘Preferably not,’ Harrigan grinned. ‘When’s he get out?’

‘Dunno.’

‘I’ll talk to Adriano about daytime-release if Billy isn’t eligible for full parole yet.’

‘He’ll be over the moon if you can pull that off.’

‘Especially if he walks out of prison and into a record deal.’

‘On the strength of one original song?’ I hoped my tone didn’t sound envious.

‘That’s all it takes to break into the charts if you’ve got the right people behind you.’

I nodded to appear just as knowledgeable. ‘Sure.’

‘But first he’ll have to sing live to show the talent scouts he’s no studio fake.’

‘Do you know a band he could sit in with?’

‘Yeah, I’m thinking about a band who do a Sunday arvo session at a pub in Paddington.’

‘He’s fifteen,’ I said.

‘Then we’ll have to make sure he doesn’t drink alcohol, only raspberry bobo.’

Ingrid interrupted us to remind Harrigan of his lunch date.

To my surprise, Harrigan asked me to join him. Ingrid was also going to the lunch, but as soon as she realised I was coming along, she immediately volunteered to take her car as well. She was likely thinking it might be a bit cosy for all three of us in Harrigan’s two-seater. Pity.