

15. SHOWING UP

Zack Harrison wants a new lease on life. His band has put out the album *Stellar Attractions*. It has been a big seller. It is chock full of dance hits. It has been a success in the UK, and this has propelled bigger sales figures in the US and worldwide. Zack still is not happy. He feels that he is a serious musician. He has things to say. But he is being dismissed by the critics as fluff. He wants integrity. He wants something to give him respect. Zack Harrison wants a legacy.

I have been hired to help rehabilitate his image. I have found his songs catchy. But like the critics, I have found his vision of the world to be rather slight. My job will be to puff up his story. To make him seem more serious than he really is. Zack wants to be as cooperative as possible. Even if I am sympathetic to him, a wrong word in my band biography, and he will be seen in a bad light.

My manager tells me what a great opportunity this is going to be for my career. My recent novels have been sputtering. I need an infusion of excitement surrounding my writing. This seems like the perfect marriage. I need the publicity and Zack needs the respect. It's a match made in hell.

In a world of sleaze and trash where every man will sell himself for a nickel, I have to convince people that Zack is a man of letters, a humanitarian. I need to suggest that he is ready to save the world on a moment's notice. I can't even make those claims for myself. How am I going to get people interested in Zack Harrison?

I don't want to lie. If I am going to convince the world about Zack Harrison, I will need to convince myself. But I can imagine becoming sick when I attempt to transform his rather simplistic opinions into the reasoned pronouncements of statesman. Get your pens ready! Here goes!

Zack knows all about my assigned task. I think he also has figured out that I fit more with the critics than the fans. So it's going to take some work on his part to win me over. He also knows that I don't have to do a thing to come over to his side. All the effort has to come from the man himself. The task is daunting. After all, we have a person of limited social impact who is trying to tell humanity that the future rests on his next insight. Who are we kidding? His biggest decision in the day is whether to start drinking before or after breakfast.

"I think that the first thing that you need to realize is that I don't have a drinking problem. I do like to party. And I have gone on some real binges. But most of the time I'm sober. I need to be if I want to work. I can't get anything done in the studio if I'm blitzed 24/7. "

That is good to hear. I know that I am going to be working with a man who has his life planned out. That's blue coding for the days when he is sober and red coding for the days when he is blitzed. Why not just color the calendar red?

"I want you to like me. I really do. I know that I've done a few ugly things in my day. But I've got it together now."

Among the ugly things was a car accident with Lizzy Weitzel when he was zoned out of his mind. Zack claims that is all part of his past. And it was unfortunate.

"I think that forced me to take a long look at myself. It was a blessing that Lizzy wasn't hurt more than she was."

Some nasty cuts and a few broken bones. Just a few inches and she would have been killed in the impact. As part of the court settlement, Zack was forced to check himself into rehab. In a weird way, Lizzy got a burst in her career from all the publicity.

“It’s not like she hangs out with me anymore. Although I really did like her.”

I feel as if I’m in the presence of a real poet.

“So do you want a drink?”

“It’s eleven in the morning. That’s a little early for me.”

“Me, too. I’m having a blender health drink. Full of carrots.”

“I’ll pass. I think it’s a little early in the day for that too. I’ll just have a bottled water if you have one.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Do you want to hear a song that I just wrote? Do you want to go for a swim? We could watch a movie. I’ve got this one picture from the studio that hasn’t even come out yet.”

“No. That’s fine. You don’t have to go out of your way to entertain me. What would you usually be doing at this time?”

“Sleeping. Or doing an interview. Or appearing at an in-store with the band. My time’s always taken up with something.”

“The band is working on a new album.”

“Yeah, it’s great. I could play you some of the tracks.” Zack seems nervous. He is doing everything that he can to try and impress me.

I do my best to like what Zack is playing. It is nowhere near as catchy as the first album. And the songs don’t have the air of seriousness that Zack is looking for. He has taken the critics too seriously and destroyed his own version of success. I’m not sure what to say. I move my head up and down. I pretend to get into it. All the while I am just squirming in my chair.

“Do you like it?”

“It’s good. You’re trying to get away from the dance stuff.”

“Not completely. We always have that big bass beat. But I just wanted to do some better songs.”

He can tell that he hasn’t won me over. This is going to be a long day if he can’t figure out a better way to communicate his ideas.

“I’m trying.”

“Zack, it’s good.”

“Not great.”

“Is it what you really want to do?”

He nods his head.

“Then you need to be happy with it. I’m not the audience that you’re trying to reach.”

“I write music. I don’t see it as meant for this audience or that. It’s up to guys like you to figure out where it belongs. I just write what I hear in my head.”

He has painted himself into a corner. For a couple of years what’s in his head has been the exact thing that catapulted the band to fame. Everyone wanted a piece of that revelation from the heavens. Now he’s not sure if he’s blessed anymore. And he’s working to scrape together some new inspiration.

“You have to keep writing until you’re happy with what you’ve done.”

"I'm happy with what I've got. And we've got to get the new album out soon."

"You have to do what your heart tells you." I feel as if I am giving advice to a five-year old. Or maybe a teenager heading out for prom. I am sounding sappy. Maybe, it's something in the air here. I shouldn't be in LA.

"I am listening to my heart. Can't you tell?"

Maybe I'm not playing the part of the cooperative listener. I am doing what I can to accommodate. If this is what he's like on carrot juice, I don't want to see him drunk out of his mind.

I feel as if I need to hand Zack a book list. Then I need to get in some tutoring sessions on what he's read. I don't want this turning into a remake of *Born Yesterday*. They already got that wrong the second time.

We've just eaten some lunch together. We're hanging around in his entertainment room.

"You want to watch some movies."

"I'm OK for now."

"Do you want to get started? You got a tape recorder. How do we do this?"

"I'm usually pretty informal. I just observe. Talk a little. I'll make notes later on."

"You've got a good memory."

"Pretty good."

"Aren't you afraid of misquoting someone?"

"If it's important, I get it right. I can always write it down, or ask you to repeat it if I need to."

"Cool! What do you want to talk about?"

"I said it was pretty informal. Whatever comes to mind."

"I could tell you about my life. How I got started. I was actually born in Las Vegas. Then my parents moved to Alabama."

I'm mainly interested in the band stuff. But his family background has got to be an influence on it all.

"So you've got the performer in you. All those Vegas influences."

"I think that hardly made a big difference. We were only there for a little while. In the poorer part of Vegas. Not in the run down Northside. But pretty close. I think that's why my parents got out of there. They didn't want those influences on me. Although I think I found trouble wherever I went."

Zack is already giving me a template to work with. Growing up, he doesn't sound all that well to do. And he seems to have made his own way in the world. There seems to be even a little bit of resentment in his story.

"You grew up in Alabama?"

"I lived there for a while. In Birmingham. It made me a little wild. I was still a young kid. I remember that I used to stay out to all hours of the night. We never really did anything. I don't think that my parents wanted me out like that. They'd always be lecturing. But all us kids would just be playing some game. Roaming around like a pack of wolves and just howling at the moon." Zack laughs.

He continues, "I wasn't in a gang. It's just that Birmingham inspired me with that feeling that I could never be in any one place for very long. After that we moved to Richmond. I

remember that my parents would fight quite a bit. Nothing too major. I just think that they didn't want to move so much. But they never had very much money. They always had this vision of the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow."

"I was never really deprived as a kid. But I could always tell what a struggle it was. And that's why I was so rebellious. That's why I got into music. It kept me out of trouble. But it also got me into troubles of its own."

"I'm not trying to make excuses. It's not as if I'm apologizing for something that I did. Although that's a little part of it. I know that sometimes things went a little wacky. Or they just got all out of control."

I feel that it's great that he is talking freely. It's all pretty random. But he's opening up. I'm just trying to keep track.

"Have you even done anything that you couldn't forgive yourself for?"

I wonder if he has something specific in mind.

"I know that I messed up a few times. I always worked it out."

"I mean something so bad that you couldn't come back. You just couldn't deal with all the shit?"

I'm still wondering to what he's referring. But I let him ramble on.

"I've had those times. Just so fucking out there."

"You've never really hurt anyone."

"Not like that. Not physically. But I've just tanked personally. The whole drastic thing. Like I'm committed to some girl, and I end up with one of her friends. And it's not an occasional thing. I'm just running around behind her back all the time. After a while this kind of thing becomes a habit. I'm trying to outdo myself. Going on a bender for days. No limits."

"I think that people come to expect that from musicians."

"Just because it's tolerated doesn't make it OK. Listen to me. I'm starting to sound like some kind of moral judge. I guess that's what it's all about. You just feel this need to escape your self. You don't want to come down. There'll be too many questions to answer. So you just keep pushing out in the night. And you want more night. Or you board up the windows, and it's a permanent night. Dawn never comes. I've been like that before."

There seems to be a deep poetry in his vision. I wonder why none of this comes through in his music.

"Zack, how has this affected your music?"

"That's the whole deal. When I was in my teens, I wanted to be this serious artist. I had goals. And I did well for myself. I had a record deal by the time that I was nineteen. But I could see myself slipping. I took the success to heart. I felt that I needed to live on the edge if I wanted something to write about. And I started to lose my promise. My songs sounded worse and worse. By the time I was 22, I'd been dropped by my label. I was going nowhere. That's when I got it together. I realized that I needed to take over my own career. I started to sketch out the songs for our present album. It took me a while. I needed to find the right group of guys."

"The new stuff was nothing like I did before. And it didn't really match this vision that I had for myself. But people liked it. It as entertaining. That's how I got on."

I can tell that he wants something more. But he also knows that if he gives in to his longing that he will drift down into a more destructive lifestyle. I feel that I have theme for my

book. But there is part of Zack that really wants to avoid this in depth exploration. He has spent all this time protecting himself from the really hard questions. It's as if he's said too much to me already. But that doesn't stop him from talking on.

"I try to tell people that I'm the same guy that I was. And it's all me. But there's something that's really changed."

Later that day, a friend of his comes over to hang out. It's Antonia the singer-song writer. Her career almost has more longevity than his. But she isn't coming off of the magic album. She also doesn't need a publicity boost. Sure her story is full of more downs than ups. But she never had these second thoughts about herself. She hasn't felt the need to give up so much to get where she is.

"She's a friend of mine."

She seems to hang out there most of the time. She just makes the house her own. It's really a great place. And she can lose herself here without anyone else knowing that's she's here. She can truly escape herself.

"Zack told me you're a writer."

"Yeah, I am."

"You're not that guy. Wait a second. You are that guy. What's your name... I remember getting into one of your books when I was fifteen. All that dirty stuff about sex."

"Fifteen. That sounds like it was a century ago. You're making me feel old."

"You don't look half bad. You want to get high?"

"No thanks."

"I guess I'll skip it for now."

Toni's just been through rehab. She finds it easier to come down when there's someone around. That's really why she's at the house.

"Are you going out with Zack?"

"Not now. A little. Not really. We're just too explosive personalities to get along for very long. He lets me hang out whenever I need to."

"That's cool."

"You writing on Zack and his band. You want some dirty gossip?"

I smile. "I'm not sure that he'd get a kick about you revealing his secrets. I'd have to ask him first."

"I was sort of kidding. But you could tell my story. I've had a fight just to stay alive."

I've heard about Toni living out of her car. But she also came from a well to do family. Totally the opposite of Zack. I know that some people might resent her whole spoiled girl gone bad routine. But I want to hear what makes her tick. It's all revealing. Every psychology. Every personal struggle.

She gives me a knowing look.

"I've read your books. I know the kind of things that you like. I can make you feel good."

"How's that going to make you feel?"

"Good for a while. Then rotten. But I just have to smoke a joint and I'll feel better."

She already feels old way beyond her years. It's as if she's lived a century. But she still has that little girl lost look that has captivated so many of her fans. That good look make it seem

that her lyrics are even more profound. It gives them a poignancy when there really isn't one there.

She keeps on almost ignoring the fact that I'm here. She's confessing to an imaginary tape recorder. "It's all rotten in a way. I guess that's what they've been trying to teach me. That I need to enjoy my lows. Not look for these big moments of revelation. I think that's what set me off. I wanted more than an explanation. It wasn't something that my parents could ever give me. And they did give me a lot. There was just a part of me that they could never see. And that part became bigger and bigger. It started to take me over."

"It was really my only refuge against them. It wasn't as if they tried to control. But there was this really subtle side to their teaching. And it took me a long time to face up to it. No matter where I went, there were these eyes staring at me. So I embrace this whole abusive side of my lifestyle. I sought it out because it made me feel more real."

"I learned to live with that precarious balance. And I was always in danger of falling over. It was almost as if I wanted someone to push me over. And it started to get tougher in tougher."

"I felt that these voices were interfering with what I wanted to do. So I needed to do something more and more shocking just to stay alive. I'd be up all night doing coke. It would be 11 in the morning. I'd be locked in the dark, and I wouldn't know what time it was. It just wasn't enough. That's why I started shooting the stuff. First it was coke. Then a little heroin to give it more of a kick. Then I just became a junkie."

"It became the only thing that held me together. And it gave me this thin pallor that just seemed natural. No one seemed to know the difference. Or they just accepted it. And I didn't want to quit. I couldn't quit."

"I know that it was this stupid pose. I sang about it. I thought that it gave me credibility. Here I was this middle class white kid. And now I had something to scream about. I finally had a cause. All the vagueness of my youth became focused. Even if it was cheap and self-absorbed, it sounded so much more real than just singing about some guy that dumped me. The press loved me for it. I felt it was my duty to stay out there. And I did."

"I found all these people to hang out with who were also using. I want to call them friends. But none of us were really friends. We just propped each other up until we could get more stuff. You'd be surprised all the people that were using."

"I'd get sick all the time. Puking and shit. That never stopped. I just kept destroying myself. And every attempt to get it together only made it worse. It puffed up my ego. I thought that I was invincible. That would only get me on the cycle again. I always needed the reassurance. I needed Mother telling me that it was all going to be all right."

"It's great to have a purpose. The feeling that it all makes sense when you know it doesn't. And you keep thinking that you're going to make it up the river even as you're lost in the currents. That was my story. And I couldn't shake it."

"I was becoming a star on my own stage. That's all that I wanted to hear about. Simply because I couldn't escape it."

Toni is enlightening me about the source of her authenticity. Even her rehab seems like an accepted part of this tale. The public anxiously awaits her comeback. Then they'll wait for her again to slip and fall.

It's not as if Zack can do anything to change things for her. He has his own demons. And he's living the charmed life as if none of this heartache really exists. He wants to get down to the depths. But he's told himself to keep away.

Toni is Zack's reminder that there's more to his life than his success. If she can play the part of the artist, he feels that he can be equally committed. It's just that his binges never came from the same place. There was just too much energy about his partying.

"Sometimes when you're broken, you can't be fixed. I think that is the beauty about it all. I'm not going to ever be the perfect daughter."

But she doesn't have to be. She's carved out her own niche. In a way it is more perfect than her parents could have ever envisioned. Now the world lives off of her emotional highs and lows. She is a high priestess of this cool. Even her drastic moments only confirm this. The self may not be able to negotiate the hell hole of her existence. But the public is down there dredging the gutter. And if there's some sense to it down there, the public is ready to applaud her performance. That alone seems sufficient to keep her sliding down the spiral. When she wakes up, she's just fresh enough to get it going again.

I feel seduced just being this close to her. I can feel the magic. And she's not even doing a thing.

I hope that I'm not getting too distracted from Zack's story.

"Toni gave me that book of yours to read. The sex one."

"The long one?"

"No, the one about the pool guy. I like it. He's just like me."

"Zack. That's satire."

"I know. I still think that he's cool. That part where his dick wouldn't come down. Sounds like some stuff that's happened to me."

I'm not sure if I want to hear about it. But we press on. I know that this is going to be difficult. Zack still sees himself in the line of Dylan and Springsteen. He wants people to take him seriously. But his music has lost that provocative side long ago. There's some question if he ever really had it. Toni has a story. She has a magic. Zack has success. And he is living on that for the time being.

"I think that the key to the puzzle was when I began to forgive myself. I knew that I had a ways to go. I had to make up for all the shit that I caused. I was willing to do that the best that I could. But I had to let some of that go."

He talks about conscience as if he is haggling over the terms of a bank loan. I see that he has become very good at negotiating with himself. Toni's there to remind him that he's good. To make him feel that he isn't cutting corners when he knows damn well that he is.

I need to get out of the house for a while just to collect my thoughts. I'm accepting Toni's and Zack's view of life. I need to get a little distance.

The next day Zack invites me over for a recording session. His new music is filled with this false promise of love. It's such a candy-coated sentiment. I can't take it. Even if his first album was shallow, it still had these marvelous portraits of the obsessive and the conniving. In his new material, he lacks that insight. He is lulled by his own craft. And it just isn't there.

It is remarkable how his producer gives him the veneer to make it seem as if there really is something there. The music has such intense swells of sound. The drama is ever-increasing.

But it's all pretty weak.

"Do you like the new stuff?"

"It's good."

"That hardly sounds like an endorsement."

I am doing my best to hide my displeasure.

"I'm not here to be a record reviewer. Do you like it?"

"I did when I wrote it. It seems like a good place to be in."

Zack just seems to be making an apology for something. It is too glib.

He wonders, "What am I supposed to do? Get drunk and hate myself. I can't go back to the way that I was."

I'm not his musical adviser. I was not hired to get his career on track. If his producer wants his new stuff to have that shine, so be it. I'm not here to get in the way. It's just that Zack realizes that something is wrong.

"I'd love to help you focus. I just can't do what you need."

"You've done it in your books."

"I've hit a dry spell. That's why they sent me here. It's my own form of rehab."

"So how are you doing?"

"Not so good according to you."

It sucks that things have got to this point. I feel pretty helpless even hanging around. But Zack is starting to need me. He needs something to power that engine.

"Let me take you out for a night on the town."

I feel a little like a stuffed shirt. I'm hardly the life of the party. I wonder what this is going to be about. A night of health clubs and a stomach full of carrot juice.

We end up going over to Toni's. It's not as if she's ever there. It seems like a fair exchange with her over at Zack's all the time.

"Now you can learn her secrets."

"How she gets her hair to that dirty blonde color."

"I haven't even figured that out."

Zack makes me blender drinks for the rest of the night. No alcohol. Just a natural high. We put in a DVD about car racing. I just sort of nod out.

I wake up the next day on her couch. Toni has come back, and she and Zack are making waffles for breakfast. I feel as if I've hit a wall. All these great revelations to start. Now I don't know where to go.

"You make some noises. You get some good sounds with a guitar. And your critics think that you've solved a major physics problem. It's not that big of a deal. You have harmony. You follow the rules, and you've got a song. It really doesn't make any difference what kind of nail polish that you're wearing or whether your parents were problem drinkers. It's all made up anyway."

I listen to Zack's diatribe. Toni laughs.

"See what you're turning him into. A regular philosopher."

I feel that I'll need a better angle if I want to keep on with the book. This is the all sunshine smooth sailing part of their lives. I need to push a little.

"You really don't like the new stuff, do you?"

“That’s not the real question anymore. Is it going to sell?”

Toni interjects, “I’ve always tried to tell Zack that he needs to write for himself. I’m not sure that he knows what that means anymore.”

“Zack, you’re starting to sound like this man in love. Like you’re tailoring your catalogue to wedding bands.”

“I’ve been writing dance hits. What do you expect?”

Toni joins in, “But if you’re going to write about love, you’ve got to really feel the ups and downs. You’re just singing along.”

“Is this an attack team?”

“You’ve asked for our opinion.”

“I think that I want you to tell me how good I am. Even if I’m not.”

“We’re trying the best that we can.”

Toni is not so prepared to go along, “You were writing crap, but that didn’t matter because it was selling. But now it’s just pure crap. What’s going to happen when nobody cares about Zack Harrison any more. What will you have left?”

“What side of the bed did you get up on?”

“I rolled out of your couch.”

“Maybe you got a crick in your neck from sleeping the wrong way?”

I want to keep away from this fight the best that I can. But Zack is ready to pull me back in.

“We wouldn’t even be having this discussion if you hadn’t showed up.”

“I’m not the one criticizing your shit.”

“But it’s not as if you’re telling me that it’s great.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“The truth.”

“I’m not a musician. Toni is.”

“But you’re the artist among the three of us.

“My muse is failing me.”

Toni chirps in, “Maybe you’re failing your muse.”

“We all sound like a bunch of spoiled brats. Let’s just finish our breakfast.”

Zack can feel the clock ticking. There is nothing that I can do to help. He needs to finish the album as long as he still believes in it.

“I know that people will think that I’m selling out. I just have to do it this way.”

“I’m not accusing you of anything.”

“You know the whole joke about me being born in Vegas. I mean life really is a crap shoot and all that. You learn the odds. You try to beat the game. But it’s always the same. All these unexpected things creep in. So it just comes down to that dice roll. Now I’m shooting 7’s. But the old snake eyes could be just around the corner ready to bite away.”

I go back to my agent to show him what I’ve got so far.

“You’re not really emphasizing the positive aspects of his life.”

“That is his story. I can’t embellish it. It’s the truth.”

“You could tell it differently. Maybe interview his parents.”

“This is a rock biography. People want a little danger. Some scandal.”

“If that’s what they want, you’re going to have to dig deeper.”

Now I’ve been challenged. They don’t want to hear about Zack’s exercise program. They want to hear about the time that Toni OD’d had his place.

“They said that you were shooting up with her. And you just left her in the room until another one of your band mates found her.”

“That wasn’t what happened at all. I wasn’t even using. Sure we’d all been drinking. And she wandered off on her own. She had all her stuff with her. I didn’t even know that she was running. I’d seen her doing lines of coke. But nothing as serious as was going on. And I had too much to drink, and I passed out. It was lucky that Rocky found her when he did.”

“Some people suggested that you just turned a blind eye to her problems. That you were chasing some other girl.”

“I was drinking heavily because she was treating me like shit. She’d been fooling around with Rocky. That’s why he went to find her. I really think that he was using with her.”

“You later threw him out of the band.”

“We didn’t see eye to eye musically.”

“But you worked with him from the beginning.”

“He started to call me a sell out. That hurt. He was my brother. And he’d just start these fights with me for no reason. We weren’t going to get anywhere if we kept on like that.”

I wonder if Rocky would tell the same story. It seems like my duty to track him down. But this project just seems like a distraction from my writing. I’ve been promised that movie deal, and I want to make it happen.

I hang on a couple of more weeks. And I finally track down Rocky.

“Of course, I wasn’t using. That has always been his story. He’s been a real shit to her. I don’t know why she hangs on. Maybe they do it together.”

I tell him that I’ve never seen that. And I was there all the time.

“You were like a conscience for them. That’s why his stuff suck so bad. He works a little then he gets high and tells himself that it sounds great. He’s got this producer who helps fill in the gaps. You’ve met Billy. He’s a wiz of a guitar player. The tracks are always going to sound great with him. He masks all the errors. Half the time Zack can’t even hit the notes. He’s got worse not better.”

Rocky has an ax to grind. He’s not going to cut Zack a break. But maybe he is right. He’s the only one around who wouldn’t suck up to Zack. He told it like it was. And Zack canned him for that.

I want to get a follow up. But Zack is becoming more close-lipped. Toni refuses to see me.

Zack say, “You’ve got your story. Now it’s time to do your job.”

“Do you want me to just write it as it is?”

“You’re going to do what you’re going to do. You had it in for me from the beginning.”

“I’m going to do what you want me to do.”

“I want the book done.”

“And I can say what needs to be said.”

“I don’t want you putting Rocky’s lies in there.”

“Zack, are they all lies.”

It's sort of the end of the line for Zack. He likes the fact that he's been able to maintain the illusion. Even if Rocky is exaggerating, he can't be completely off the mark."

Billy has never told me much. I want to approach him once more.

"I play guitar. It's not my place to have ideas."

"But musically, how have things changed?"

"Zack lets me do what I want."

"I thought that there used to be more give and take."

"I don't want you putting words in my mouth. That's just how it is."

I can see what is the basis for Billy's reticence. He knows that the ship is sinking. But he's not going to be the one to pull it down further. He's still the professional.

When I finally leave LA, I breathe a sigh of relief. I know that I'm going to have to come back here. But it really has got me down. I have no business with these people. They want to be entertained. I was great entertainment for a while. But when things started to get heavy, that's when the fun stopped.

I want to shelve the project. But I'm told that if I don't finish that I won't get the movie deal. I may have none of my future works published.

I don't whitewash the story. I put it all in there. A reader will be able to guess what's going on even from the things that I don't say. There's something that is positively brilliant about it all. I have paused him in full flight. There is a grace in his movement.

Zack Harrison could be more than he is. He started out with promise. But he let his early success go to his head. Since then, he's lived in this artificial world where his publicist keeps rewriting the truth until it resemble the fiction. I've only been brought here to touch up the edges.