

Chapter 1

S-so. There's the life you want to live, which remains with you until the split-second after you open your eyes. That's when reality kicks in. Very few people inhabit that half-dreamlike world, and, after surveying the second different hot-pink bedroom in as many mornings, I was grateful to be counted with such regularity amongst the number living the high life. If you consider meals of vegemite ryvitas as 'the high life', that is.

Last night? Yeah, I remember it like it was yesterday. Sure, I'd woken up with the expected headache.

I swear, I will *never* drink that much, ever again, cross my heart. Only this time, I mean it. All the excess power that normally runs city office buildings from Monday to Friday gets re-routed to the light fitting above wherever I find myself, first thing of a weekend morning, focused through a great big fucking lens, straight into my eyes. Now I know how those ants must have felt, back when I was a kid with my first Sherlock Holmes magnifying glass.

Lo and behold, the expected pair of Siamese twins were luxuriating beside me. Pity I never seem to wake up with one on either side. Last night's beauty – let's call her Mona – who probably rated a seven (point five, perhaps) even before we'd got stuck into the fancy finger food and free frothy fill-ups. I couldn't remember her actual name, but the description – moaner – matched.

Would have loved to have charmed a few more of the chicks in the club, and lined myself up some temporary digs for the next two weeks. Reckon it would have been pretty easy to do, but then there's that jealousy thing you've got to deal with. Even if you both *clearly* only want a one-nighter, it's still considered poor form to

separately chat up two or three girls and plan it out in advance. I'm stuck without social networking either – not that I know the first thing about computers. Last time I checked my e-mail, my inbox was refusing to deliver new messages because it was overloaded; jam-packed full of the same stuff.

Perpetually pestering promotions, of potent blue pills and powerful pink potions, snake-oil and rare rhino-dick lotions, promising “lightning-fast delivery to my private box” – which, I'm sure is exactly what a man with premature ejaculative problems wants to hear.

Obviously Bill couldn't remember what skills I have down in my bio. He'd forgotten that I was funny. Perhaps his mouth was running too fast for his brain. It wouldn't be the first time.

I'll work on the evolving theory tomorrow, or when my head clears, at least. Being an actor slash stand-up comic slash male model and all-round entertainer, naturally I can improvise and think on my feet. There will be just twelve days left in my assignment by then, so it'll still rate as the easiest gig I've ever done; money for jam.

I should've talked my no-talent talent-agent into having the producers extend the show. A full month would've done – seems a more fitting timeframe for a documentary. Anyone remember that self-righteous super-sized seppo shithead? What was his name again?

Stirling Mortlock? Nah, sorry, he was the Wallabies captain, a few years back.

Morgan Spurlock, that's right. He did that documentary, where he ate nothing but Maccas for a month, and spent the entire four weeks vomiting, whingeing, and droning on endlessly about himself and those golden fucking arches. His research

comprised of finding doctors who'd appear on camera, Each gave him a lecture for being the most naïve and lazy turd in existence. Simultaneously and inadvertently proving how woeful the American education system clearly is.

All he did was drive home what the rest of the planet already knew about his country and countrymen. Newsflash, Sherlock, er, Spurlock! If your so-called kick-ass school system actually taught you a sense of irony, perhaps you'd get it then. But I wouldn't count on it.

"I'm getting fat, sick, and this shitty excuse for food costs an absolute fortune. My tree-hugging hairy-armed, vego girlfriend won't come near me and what's the point anyway since I can't get it up? Poor me." He'd snivel, blaming his lethargy on the sugar, salt and shit in the burgers he purchased, and put into *his own* mouth of *his own* volition. Boo-fucking-hoo.

Now, here was I, two full days into the shoot of the latest TV reality show; *Reputation Alone*, the sole proprietor of "Bill Patalanis Actors and Models" having hand-picked the top horse of his stable, Sylvestra Milton, as his natural first choice. *12.5% Calling*, my phone had flashed at the time, the intro to Pink Floyd's *Money* playing in a loop, confirming something I didn't need to read.

Fortunately for Neil Bidstrup, Sylvestra – an old flame of mine – was not available, so they re-cast for a bloke and I was in like Flynn. Who cared that it was reality television?

Principles won't pay the rent when you're broke. Face it, everyone's a whore. We all find something we can do relatively well, and peddle our expertise in that area for cash. Acting is just make-believe – it's all about how well you can bluff and convince the casting agents and studio that you're the ideal man for the job. Consequently a six-month long participation in their movie is worth a fee of more

money than the average schmuck will earn in their entire lives. (Of course, you convince the producers that the project will show a return – you’re a good draw for the advertisers).

For example, Eric Bana was doing stand-up and sketch comedy that no-one watched, then, he plays Chopper. Boom! Suddenly his acting skills are called into play as none other than Ridley Scott asks him what it’ll take for him to sign on for “Black Hawk Down”. Bana says, “Dunno. A couple of mill – give or take”, absolutely deadpan... and he gets it.

Don’t care who you ask, *that’s* talent.

Does money buy happiness? That’s what *they* say. The way *I* see it is: if you aren’t able to directly purchase happiness, money is able to provide both comfort and comforts. Being settled and comfortable often directly leads to these feelings of well-being. QED. Neil Bidstrup, graduate with honours, you little genius.

Still, you take what you can get. Sometimes, though, it felt like being on a hijacked Canberra-bound flight. Then your hopes get dashed as the terrorists announce they’re putting down... in Canberra.

What I’d regularly been given was a whole heap of regional fringe theatre, fashion shoots, catalogues, and tons of ads, including a series of commercials. The most famous of these was a long-running ‘soup’ opera, where I played the uncool older brother who always managed to spill the product. Because it was so delicious, I was always sprung, trying to suck it out of my shirt, the tablecloth, or the carpet. Hilarious. Still, back in the real world, it made life easier – I never lacked anything to dip crusty rolls into in winter-time, and people recognised me.

My ‘celebrity’, such as it is, is how I’d latched onto Erin, the night before last, and now this Mona chick, who was still shagged out – emphasis on ‘shagged’.

Don't get me wrong, my agent Bill and I have a great relationship, based on the values of give and take. I give him shit and he takes it. My last decent job, a promised 'pivotal role' in the number one soap opera spanning Australia, impacting the UK and much of the English-speaking world, had undergone about a million re-writes. New, contradictory pages arrived, some, while I was trying to crack onto that hot chick with the funny name during downtimes. You must know the one, with her famous pair of chesticles.

One day, one of the main stars, Locretia Thingummajig, had had a stand-up, blazing row with the director and stormed off the set in a huff, and threatened to take the rest of the cast with her, too. Caused a furore for the time I was involved – production shut down for a week. Three weeks of extra-long days ensued, once things resumed. The repercussions rippled throughout the entire industry, making all the newspapers, magazines and talk-shows. Talkback radio clambered on-board too, and everyone, not just those of us in the industry, took a side.

Diva? Using your celebrity and visibility to make a point (valid or otherwise)? When are we celebrities allowed some time to ourselves? *Are* we allowed 'us' time? Who made who?

Meanwhile, I scrambled, learning new lines, new positions and new scenes with old ideas, without being sure what would end up on the cutting-room floor, and which bits, if any, would eventually be used. Hard to deliver your best work in those situations, and it's *their* loss that I've not been invited back.

My character was nice as pie one minute, and a psychopathic prick the next. We even shot the same scenes a couple of times each. Myself and three different lead actors, each took turns at blocking a vicious 'murder', seeing how it turned out.

Continuity, shot to shit. It made no sense at all. They had no idea what the hell they were doing. I was operating under a strict NDA so I couldn't discuss anything with anyone. Not that I would, of course – telling Bill anything is like announcing it on the Greek News. Pretty unpro-fucking-fessional if you asked me.

Still, I couldn't complain. Cheques didn't bounce, the episodes hadn't even aired to Bill's or my knowledge, but they'd splice all my scenes in, one day when they ran desperately short of ideas and needed some added spice.

Neil Bidstrup, consummate professional, to the rescue. Again.

I tried hard to tune in a couple of times; I honestly did put the effort in, but couldn't see why it was so popular as a vehicle. Bubble-cars, another popular vehicle I can't hope to understand. Those pockmarked kids – stars, so called, made any of the fucking *Glee* brats look like Shirley Temple.

Never mind that I'm a full Ten. Toned, tanned, tuned, tended and ought to be *tinned*; dark wavy hair and eyes that, so says my portfolio, are as blue as the ocean, just as the storm arrives. I'm six-foot-three, or about one-ninety centimetres, 85 solid kegs with hardly a bread-stick's worth of fat and I regularly work out in order to keep it that way. Some kids emerge from the womb chubby, and a few short decades later, they still have more rolls than a bakery.

Sure, I'll hit the buffet, but spend due time on the treadmill, the bike and the weight-bench to balance things out. My taste-buds can easily distinguish between different kinds of vinegar and several types of lettuce in a green salad without me being anal and a poof about it. I could go on and on. Plenty of women can attest to that, too!

Life of the party, that's me. Never have trouble getting my rightful share of the ladies. Brick shithouses are built like a Bidstrup. Though I prefer to think of

myself as ‘constructed’; ‘constructed’ makes you think that more thought has gone into the overall design.

Fortunately, us actors and models are never subjected to random tests for steroids or other substances; otherwise Kate Moss would be gone. Either shoved into gaol or stuck doing community service at somewhere like Maccas.

She’d marvel at mirrors being stuck vertically to walls. People paying for meals with their bank key cards, and others using knives to chop things up. But it’d be pretty tough punishment on her. Making her shove straws into massive half-buckets of flat icy brown water, then give it away.

“Here’s the Coke, Kate. We have plenty of it on tap. Make sure you dole out plenty of Ice too. Help yourself to a nice big fat straw to go with it. Ha, ha, ha.”

Like that’s not reminding her of the party scene and what she’s missing out on now.

Rehabilitation. It sounds like the worst thing in the world – *until* you’ve done it.

“I’m just popping off to rehab now.”

Nah. It has a physio connotation.

“I’ve just come *out* of rehab.”

Now, that’s cool.

Something Bill had said in describing the show had given me a devious thought. He’d generally land me a job on a tiny brief like this one – as small as Borat’s – s-strand me in hot water, then take the nearest random chick out for lunch with my fee. Bill spent more time looking for girls than finding me work. I can’t really hold that against him though. I also spent more time looking for girls than work.

“Hidden cameras, no phone or money, two weeks of living off my wits, you say?” My brain was starting to click into my favourite gear. Overdrive.

“Reputation Alone,” he confirmed. “That’s the name, that’s the brief. You will have a GPS marker built-in to your miniature microphone transmitter unit so the producers can keep track of you. Cameras will be sent to record you where you are and to replace batteries and tapes, and you will be disqualified if you return to the same place to eat or sleep twice.”

Different party, different bed every night, all meant a different woman I’ll be sharing it with. My brain’s hunch was right!

“Sorry, babe, part of the rules. It’s top secret, a need to know basis only, so unfortunately I can’t explain it to you. You can’t even screw the information out of me, though you’re more than welcome to try. Them’s the breaks. Won’t see you tomorrow, don’t even have a phone, so I can’t call you either. Thanks for the root, have a nice life.”

I’d hung up the phone without him even answering my question about how much the gig was worth. Screw it. It was an investment in myself, almost like training in a way.

Still, Bill’s not prone to huge flights of fancy. Exaggeration, yes. His “twenty-thousand dollar vintage classic sports car” boasted a nine-hundred dollar flame motif paint job, a half-missing roof (hence ‘sports’ car) and a stereo worth nineteen grand. The paint was the only thing holding it together when he first picked it up... with a tow-truck and hessian sack full of spare parts in the boot. But he’s spent too long in the game to trivialise, and this all sounded very ominous, and promising, too. Suspiciously like my long-awaited big break. I’m a real believer in fate.

Everyone on reality television acts like they have at least a master's degree in psychology once that camera's trained on them. They feel compelled to babble uninformed shit as they can't handle normal conversational silences and actually believe that people give a crap about *what* they think – or if they think anything in the first place.

Of course, I'm not like them. I, for one, at least would know what I was talking about in my monologues. I'm a trained method actor, and I take the necessary time to put in the research. That's the difference.

I *always* know what's going on inside my characters' heads. Especially when the character I'll be playing is the person I know best in the whole world. Me.

Any way you sliced it, it was promising to be the best two weeks of my life!

Schoolies? Fuck that little anti-climactic kids' party! That was one of your all-time greatest time and money-wasters, fumbling around with uptight spoilt rich private school hotties that teased and flirted endlessly, but wouldn't put out. They'd gratefully accept the drinks you'd kept plying them with, then they'd bugger off en masse back to their invitation-only soiree that no-one without old money, a hyphenated surname, or both, could attend. Without so much as a quick tonguey or a touch of gropey-gropey in the dark for poor old Lord Nigel Raymond Bid-Strup (the third), of the North Richmond Bid-Strups. Prick teasers.

Now I had carte blanche to do what I want, see who I felt like and go wherever I pleased. Push the boundaries and demand things because it's what my reputation and my brief dictated. Better still, I was actually contractually *bound* to get out of there the next day. The guy I aspire to be, lives and dies in the gossip pages. Once this show finally goes to air, I'll be the undisputed king of reality.